

## CAEL Honors Virginia B. Smith with the Morris T. Keeton Award

*By Bernadette Dubs*

This year, CAEL honors Virginia B. Smith with the Morris T. Keeton award. CAEL established the award in 1989 in honor of Morris T. Keeton, the founding president of CAEL. The award recognizes a person who has made a significant contribution to the field of adult or experiential learning. Each year, CAEL's Board of Trustees members choose the Morris T. Keeton Award winner from member nominations.

In announcing Virginia B. Smith as this year's award winner, CAEL President and CEO Pamela Tate notes, "Virginia has led a distinguished career as a leader in higher education, which includes the role of founding head of the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) and countless other contributions that are known by people throughout higher education. Her dedication to adult learning can be observed in her achievements as an educator, foundation director, public policy scholar, and in every part of her career."

Smith's distinguished career reaches into several sectors of experiential learning. She is President Emerita of Vassar College, founding director of FIPSE, and former Associate Director of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education. She served as Senior Advisor to the California Higher Education Policy Center and on the Board of the Higher Education Policy Institute. She has also served as a member of Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior Accrediting Commission and Chair of the Board of CAEL.

Her own pursuit of lifelong learning is reflected in her receipt of several advanced degrees and her work directly with higher education. Dr. Smith received her J.D. and M.A. in labor economics at the University of Washington and did graduate work in economics and law at Columbia University and Boalt Hall, University of California, Berkeley.

In her own words, Dr. Smith shared with the *CAEL Forum and News* her perspective on the Morris T. Keeton award and her contributions to the field of adult learning.

### **CFN:** *What does receiving the Morris T. Keeton Award mean to you?*

**Smith:** I have been an admirer of Morris Keeton for over four decades, so receiving the Morris T. Keeton Award is indeed a great honor. To have been selected for the award by colleagues of mine makes it an even greater honor.

Morris has contributed significantly to adult education but one of the things I admire most about him is his broad involvement and concern for all of higher education. He is a generalist in the best sense. I never had a conversation with him, on any aspect of education, in which I have not come away with some new insight or some new question that needed to be considered.

### **CFN:** *What do you think is your most important contribution to adult learning?*

**Smith:** No one individual thing immediately stands out. My career has been unusually varied, but, as I look back on it, many aspects of it were related to adult education. Even my first college teaching job could be considered adult education. I was teaching economics and business law at the College

of Puget Sound in 1947. I soon realized that about two-thirds of my students, who were veterans attending college on the GI Bill, were older than I. And in some important ways they differed from the students who came directly from high school. They were often more focused, more demanding of the instructor, and, to some extent, more purposeful. While they were in high school, many of these new older college students had not anticipated going to college.

Several years later, one of my positions at the University of California, Berkeley, was adult education in every sense of the term, but it was never labeled as such. I designed, directed, and taught in the public programs for the Institute of Industrial Relations. This included many conferences, workshops and a certificate program for management and labor personnel who were eager to learn more about all aspects of labor-management relations.

I am not suggesting these activities were significant contributions to adult learning but they were significant contributions to *my* learning about adult students and programming for adult learners. It was quite natural that when I moved into positions that had more impact on higher education generally, adult learners would be included in policy and program actions. Reports and recommendations, which I prepared for the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education where I served as Associate Director, and grants given at The Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), where I was the founding director, included adult learners because of those early experiences I had.

If I were to pick out what I consider to be my most important contribution to adult learning it would have to be the work I did with CAEL, first as an evaluator for the Kellogg Foundation of one of CAEL's major projects, and then as Board member and later as Chair of the Board for CAEL. CAEL is and has always been one of the most dedicated, effective and innovative organizations in the field of adult learning. Anything I have been able to do over the years to help the organization and its excellent leadership is a significant contribution to adult learning.

**CFN:** *What do you see as the biggest challenges facing the adult learning field today? What are the biggest challenges facing higher education in general?*

**Smith:** One of the problems is how to view the adult learning field. In the past, and still to some extent today, we talk about it as a nontraditional field, with colleges and universities serving recent high school graduates as the traditional field. The distinction is not very useful these days. The typical student today has many characteristics in common with what we used to call adult students: they often work off-campus many hours a week in order to meet college costs, they are often older because they have taken time off between high school and college, and they frequently move from college to college with or without time in between. Many of the new college students, of whatever age, are more concerned with immediate career education rather than with providing a base for broad lifetime needs. Educational approaches to the two types of students are becoming more similar with the recognition of technology, community learning, and learning assessment techniques as important aids for both types of students.

Perhaps a big, largely unmet challenge with either student population is to increase the understanding of the importance of education in their lives and the life of the nation. We may have to find ways to re-introduce students, particularly adult students, to education with little cost or risk and high degrees of

gratification. This may involve having introductory workshops about returning to learning, about tying the further education to their employment ladder, or re-introducing education to them in sites other than colleges or schools. CAEL has done important work in all of these areas.

At LaGuardia College, a public college in New York City, we established an Exploring Transfer program that created an interest in many students to go on to four year colleges. It was a six-week summer program at Vassar for 2<sup>nd</sup> year LaGuardia students who were jointly taught by Vassar and LaGuardia faculty. This clearly broadened the educational horizon for many of the participants who had not considered extending their education. It actually motivated them to continue.

**CFN:** *What do you see as high priorities for public policy that could make a real difference for adult learners today?*

**Smith:** I suppose the first thing that always comes to mind is greater financial assistance for programs that would recognize the needs of all students who should continue their learning. These grants should not be limited to established schools and colleges but should be made available to all types of educational providers.

In this nation, we face a looming problem in adult education. If current policies continue unchanged, we are likely, certainly by 2020, to have a less educated workforce than we now have. When the baby boomers retire, the most highly educated generation in U.S. history, they will be replaced by a less well educated workforce. We will not only need to work on this problem through the K-16 schools, but there will clearly be many adults who need additional education if we are going to compete effectively in the global market place.

**CFN:** *Part of your life's work has involved educational policy. What work in the educational policy area are you most proud of? How do you think policy can affect institutions' structure for the better?*

**Smith:** My most recent work in the policy area was with the California Higher Education Policy Center, which I helped develop and then worked with its Board and some of its committees. When this program ended, I was one of many who worked on the plans for development of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. Both of these agencies have had significant impact on public policy for education.

Earlier in my career, I consider the policy work I did with the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education very important. One of its reports, for which I had a primary responsibility, was its first report, *Quality and Equality*. Among many other proposals that report called for a student aid program that would go directly to students rather than to institutions, for continuation of the veteran's education grants including adjustments for inflation, and for a National Foundation for the Development of Higher Education. It was this last proposal that subsequently helped lead to the creation of FIPSE, of which I became the founding director.

**CFN:** *What are you working on now? What are your future plans?*

**Smith:** Although I am restricted from much travel I try to keep up with the work of the National Center and CAEL through reading and telephone conversations. The National Center and CAEL make an