



# A Long View of CAEL

*A Conversation with Diana Bamford-Rees about Her History with CAEL, the Passing of Its Founder, and the Future of Adult Learning*

*This article presents highlights from a July 2014 interview with Diana Bamford-Rees, Associate Vice President of CAEL, and the organization's first employee. Bamford-Rees has been with CAEL for all of its forty-year history and was CAEL's first employee. When CAEL was funded in 1974, it was a research project of the Educational Testing Service. For the first three years of CAEL, Bamford-Rees worked on the CAEL project as an employee of ETS. When CAEL spun off from the project and became a freestanding organization in 1977, Morris Keeton took on the Executive Director position and asked her to come along. Since then, Bamford-Rees has held numerous positions at CAEL, from Executive Assistant to managing CAEL's South Africa initiative. Currently, Bamford-Rees is an Associate Vice President at CAEL, with responsibility for CAEL's annual conferences, as well as special events and workshops.*

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**CAEL: When you first started working on the CAEL project in 1974, what were the issues and challenges facing the adult learner at that time?**

The challenges weren't so very different from those that face adult learners today. There were obviously no online programs and very few weekend and evening options, so there really wasn't much flexibility for a working adult with a family. I myself was an adult learner at the time, and the only option was to take evening classes.

In the mid 1970s, the women's movement was very active, and there were a lot of housewives who had some college credit and wanted to complete their degree once their children left for college themselves. Having to sit through classes that covered information they already knew, these women became disenchanted with higher education, and they put a lot of pressure on schools by refusing to take classes for things that they had already learned experientially.

Schools were not eager to serve adults at the time, but they saw the adult learner as a solution to declining enrollments of traditional age students. There were at most two dozen schools with flexible options suitable for adult learners, and

these were some of the first members of CAEL.

**What were the highlights for you of CAEL's early years?**

There were a lot more schools interested in assessing prior learning and serving adult learners than we anticipated. At the very beginning, our membership goal was to get 50 institutions involved in the first year, and instead we got 254 members. The first conference in 1974 was in Chicago, and we planned for 120 people. We had over 200.

Getting the conferences off the ground in those first years was also a highlight for me. At the early conferences, the research being done on PLA was disseminated and discussed. Innovative group conversations led to further research. In the first three years, there were 54 papers and books published out of this research project, and some of them were the forerunners of the publications we have today.

However, the greatest highlight for me was the people who were involved. This was a group of like-minded people who were very enthusiastic about what they were doing, and they were trailblazers. The work they were doing was on

the fringe of higher education, and they wanted to come together with people who were like themselves. Through those early years at CAEL, I became acquainted with some of the people who are my best friends today.

**Morris Keeton was CAEL's founder and its first president. Morris died earlier this year at the age of 97. What do you remember about Morris Keeton's leadership in the early days of CAEL, and how did his work contribute to the field of adult learning?**

Just last weekend I attended a memorial for Morris, which was one of the most moving experiences I've ever had. Morris was a hero; he was my mentor, my teacher, and my boss for 15 years. He was truly a visionary, and also teacher and mentor to many in the higher learning field.

He was well known for his work in experiential learning at Antioch College, which uses a cooperative education model based heavily in experiential learning. He contributed greatly to the experiential learning movement during that time. He was lead author of a book called *Experiential Learning: Rationale, Characteristics, and Assessment*, a definitive text on experiential learning.

**CAEL expanded its focus in the mid-1980s to include employers and their education programs for the workforce. What was that change like for the organization? How important was that change in the history of the CAEL?**

It was major—a significant expansion of CAEL's work and our reach to adult learners. There was a time when our members resisted this change, and many felt that we were turning away from our mission. Pam was very supportive of this change, and she made the very convincing argument that this was not a *departure* from CAEL's mission but rather an *expansion* of our mission. Working with employers greatly increased the number of learners that CAEL's work could affect. Once other leaders in the field started thinking that way, the resistance fell away, and people realized that our work with industry was just another avenue for delivery of services.

Our first joint venture with employers and

labor unions was in the auto industry. It was a very unique program of labor and management working together, not as adversaries but as partners. CAEL's *Returning to Learning* workshop was first developed for this project—that workshop has been revised and used in many industries like telecommunications, manufacturing, and financial services, as well as in our work in South Africa.

**The work in South Africa was a Ford Foundation project that you led from 2000-2004, as the country started its new history after the fall of Apartheid. What did you do there, and how has that experience shaped your views of adult learning?**

The project was designed to take the CAEL workforce development model, develop it for South Africa, hire and train people there to deliver it, and then to come home. I was housed with a sister corporation called the Joint Education Trust (JET) in Johannesburg. I was charged with building a staff in that division and developing a comprehensive learning and support system modeled on CAEL's principles. By the summer of 2004 when I left South Africa, more than 1,000 workers had acquired new skills through the program. We redesigned CAEL's signature workshop, *Returning to Learning*, and renamed it *Dipaakanyo*, which is a Tswana word meaning "planning and preparation." Our team set out to find examples that were relevant to the workers and the school system there so that the workshop would make sense to the adult learners of Johannesburg.

In my work there, I learned to better appreciate the struggles of adult learners. I realized that adult learners everywhere face the same issues and the same barriers. It's a completely different culture, but the obstacles are still time and money, juggling work and family responsibilities,

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and school. The difference is really just a matter of degree. In South Africa, we worked with learners that were very poor; working adults were responsible for feeding 10–12 people, and if students were expected to give up paying work to spend time unpaid in a classroom, their families would go unfed. Because of this, the grant had to pay these learners to go to trainings and workshops in addition to paying the schools.

Another big challenge was the AIDS pandemic which, in 2004, infected 24% of the population. We lost some of our own students, but another side of the challenge was that they would miss school because they had to take care of a sick or dying family member.

**What do you see as the most exciting developments in higher education today? What innovations seem promising for the future of higher education and for serving adult learners?**

In higher education, the most exciting development is, of course, more accessibility as a result of online learning. This is particularly relevant to adults with busy schedules due to balancing work and family.

In the arena of serving adult learners, the increased awareness and use of PLA is very promising. This has been greatly assisted by the fact that President Obama has said that we need more people to complete their degrees in order to be globally competitive. Because the President has presented this challenge, governors are now joining the cause, and there is interest in statewide PLA policies that help adults accelerate their degree completion. Several states have set up very visible systems for prior learning assessment.

Also exciting is the new and increased emphasis on competency based education (CBE) and moving away from seat time as the sole way to measure student progress in their learning pursuits. We are just starting to crack the nut of what CBE means and how assessment can be done well.

Many of these exciting innovations are based on those ideas that CAEL began with forty years ago. Now, there is renewed interest in PLA and CBE, and acknowledgement that what is important is what the person knows and not where or how that learning occurred.

