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Reflections, Thoughts, And Concerns for The Future of Adult Education

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Edgar J. Boone

I begin my remarks by reminding you that I am one of you. My journey as an Adult Educator spans a period of almost 60 years beginning as a County 4-H and Youth Development Agent in the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service and extending to my retirement as the William Dallas Distinguished Professor of Adult and Community College Education and Director of the Academy for Community College Leadership, Advancement, Modeling, and Innovation (ACCLAIM) at North Carolina State University and the past 10 years of my retirement.

Beginning with the founding of our great nation, Adult Education in its many form and formats has played an important and critical role in the education and empowerment of its people. Its contributions to an enlightened and motivated citizenry to pursue, practice, and maintain a democratic way of life is well known and admired by the peoples of the world community. A corollary and critical contribution has been the continuing education of the nation’s workforce and hence an economy that allows for a quality of life for the people that is unparallel in the history of humankind. Support for Adult Education has been forthcoming from all of the public and private sectors. We can celebrate who we are and what we have accomplished as a community of professional Adult Educators. We have a rich legacy of service to humankind.

Reflecting on my journey and the experiences that define who I am and sizing up what appears to be trends and signals that characterize our professional field today in which I cast my lot nearly sixty years ago, I have concerns about signs on my radar that point to the gradual dismantling and demise of Adult Education as a profession and a professional field of practice. I am particularly concerned about what is happening to Adult Education as a distinct and defined field of study and practice in the nation’s Colleges of Education and indeed, the total higher education community. I am one of you and I am going to speak to you about these concerns in a frank manner.

To put it bluntly we(Professoriate of Adult Education) seem to have fallen asleep and lost our way in keeping the people with whom we interact daily and particularly those to whom we report informed about the impact that Adult Education has had and continues to have on the economy of the nation and the quality of life of its people from all walks of life. We have lost sight of the big picture and the ability to see and articulate where Adult Education fits into the bigger picture. Adult Education as a profession and professional field of practice is not an end or island unto its self-- it has to be viewed and seen in the scheme of education as a critical component of the continuing education of humankind. We have to be at work continually in garnering solid evidence that will prove to the decision makers (Administrators and particularly Dean of Education), state legislators, and members of Congress that Adult Education is critical to the continuing education of people, the maintenance of a well prepared workforce and the empowerment of people with the
knowledge and skills required to cope with their changing environments and hence the self improvement of their quality of life. What we are experiencing today is a lack of support and especially in the higher education community for Adult Education as a distinct professional field of study and practice. The trend is for Deans of Colleges of Education to lump Adult Education with Elementary and Secondary Education and School Administration Faculties thus beginning the demise and the gradual death of Adult Education as a distinct profession and professional field of practice. Unfortunately many of our Heads of Departments of Adult Education and Chairs of Adult Education lack the vision and political skills needed to defend and advocate for the preservation of Adult Education as a distinctive profession and field of practice. I grieve when I think about and can name the Nation’s premier programs of Adult Education that have been eliminated or merged with teacher education programs because of ineffective and poor leadership among our professoriate and the inattention given to demonstrating through hard evidence that Adult Education has had and is having in improving the nation’s economy and the quality of life of the people. Adult Education is the first program in Colleges of Education to be singled out for downsizing, merger with and subordinate to other program specialties, and or elimination when the Economy sours. Those among us who are supposed to be leading and advocating for our professional field are often too concerned about protecting our personal agendas and turfs. Unfortunately we lack the fire to rise up and defend our hard earned reputations in Adult Education. We have little or no hard evidence to prove to these decision-makers that Adult Education Programs are making a difference in advancing the Nation’s economy and hence the quality of life of its people.

As a Professional Field of Practice, we (Professoriate) have lost sight of, become complacent, and given little or no attention to our Adult Educator Provider Organizations. Somehow we have acquired the impression that Academic Program(s) are sacred and separate and apart from the field-based organizations engaged in the practice of Adult Education. We hide behind the guise of our greatness as scholars in the production of knowledge. Frankly I see little evidence for this claim to fame. Unfortunately to discover new knowledge generated by the Professoriate about the practice of Adult Education and that is being used to improve the practice of Adult Education in the field is likened to that of trying find a needle in a hay stack. Our mission and indeed goals should be on the preparation of Adult Educator Practitioners and Administrators for these Adult Education Provider Organizations. I venture to say that many members of our Adult Education Professoriate have not had a single day of experience in most of the Nation’s Major Adult Education Provider Organizations. I would go even farther out on the limb by seriously questioning whether our Professoriate today can find the time to go into the field and observe firsthand the actual practice of Adult Educators in the trenches and on the front lines. I liken Adult Education to the practice of medicine—how can we as the Professoriate prepare Adult Educators without having engaged in and experienced the actual practice of Adult Education. A lesson that I learned in my Adult Education Journey is that a practicum or internship (Clinical Experience) ought to be required of persons pursuing the Master’s and Doctoral Degree programs in Adult Education as well as of the Adult Education Professoriate. I want to emphasize that knowledge and scholarship generation is critical to building and strengthening Adult Education as a Professional Field of Practice However, I want to also emphasize that this knowledge production dimension of our role as Professors that we value above all else cannot be separated from the actual Practice of Adult Education and the preparation of Adult Educators who are or will engage the practice of Adult Education.
Further I am convinced that Departments of Adult Education and or Adult Education Faculties must define as their major constituency, Adult Education Provider Organizations and establish strong and lasting linkages with them. If our graduate programs are to remain on the cutting edge and be relevant as judged by these Provider Adult Education Organizations they (leaders and practitioners) must be helped to see the value that Graduate Programs are making to the actual practice of Adult Education and the preparation of Adult Education Practitioner and Administrators of Provider Organizations. In a word these provider Adult Education organizations and their leaders must become our strong advocates if our programs are to survive. Our Adult Education Faculty must be visible and be perceived as credible in terms of their knowledge and sincere commitment to the actual practice of Adult Education by the leaders of these major Adult Education Organizations. Sadly, most Adult Education Programs and their faculty have no advocates in the field. Most practitioners in the field engaged in the actual practice of Adult Education do not identify with and view Adult Education as their profession and professional field of practice. A question is why have we let this state of affairs develop and continue to exist. The lack of attention to this serious matter by Department Heads is obvious. The demise and dismantling of the American Adult Education Association with its Affiliate State Adult Education Organizations/Association and its user friendly publications on good practices that could be applied by practitioners was the beginning of the disconnect of practitioners with the profession. The employment of leaders who lacked the vision and savvy political skills to lead the American Adult Education Association during the 70’s resulted in its losing the financial resources needed to maintain its viability. Unfortunately—although there are some signs of its potential recovery, AAACE is not viewed by the majority of practicing Adult Educators and their parent Adult Education Provider Organizations as having much to offer them in their professional development and the advancement of the field of Adult Education. There is little or no evidence that research findings being generated by the Professoriate and Graduate Students are useful to the practice and management of the Adult Education Organization.

Our research programs in Adult Education lack focus. There is little or no evidence of research agendas and thematic research among the Adult Education Professoriate in the University Community. Further the financial support being generated for research in Adult Education in the University Community is small and almost non-existent. While the research findings being generated and mostly by graduate students in their dissertation research is relevant and interesting—the findings are not additive and are often lost in the maize. A critical concern is the lack of research that focuses on discovery and the generation of substantive research findings that can be packaged and put to use by Adult Education practitioners in the improvement and enrichment of practices being used to help people grow in their intellect and use of effective life coping skills.

Graduate Programs in Adult Education need to have a continuing infusion of external funds to embrace creative ideas and innovation to make them relevant and reflect the best in state of the art with respect to content, instructional strategies and instructional technology. Funds generated through delivery of FTES are not sufficient to sustain dynamic and effective Graduate Programs. Those programs that depend on resources provided by their respective University will eventually die. Very importantly, external funds are needed to fund fellowships and assistantships and to support faculty members’ participation in continuing professional education opportunities. An observation and a general overview of grants and external funds generated by Adult Education Faculty during the past three years indicate that a severe drought exist in this critical area. Faculty need to be helped to identify
potential funding sources, the areas of focus of these funding sources, and taught how to 
make contacts and prepare proposals that have a high potential for funding. Our current 
Department Heads and or Adult Education Administrators have poor track records in 
resource generation.

Most of our Professoriate in Adult Education would be hard pressed to identify and define 
most of the career opportunities in Adult Education today--thus severely hampering major 
initiatives to recruit the best students for graduate study and careers in Adult Education. 
The marketing and promotion of Adult Education as a career choice has been and remains 
an elusive goal.

In conclusion I am positive about the future of Adult Education as a profession and 
professional field of practice. I believe we can and will reverse the trends that are 
consuming and destroying our Graduate Programs in Adult Education. It is on this note that 
I share with you my thoughts about areas that need much study and decisive decisions and 
action.

Candidates for Department Head and Administrator Positions of Adult Education Graduate 
Programs need to be carefully screened to discover their capacity to lead and to determine 
whether their interpersonal skills are sufficient to generate motivation and teamwork 
among the Professoriate to obtain maximum results. Those selecting the person for this 
position should drop personal agendas, understand what is sought of the person who will 
be selected to fill the position, and willing to spend the time need to check and double check 
credentials of the candidates being considered. While the Department Head is expected to 
be a scholar—the critical need is for leadership, vision, advocacy, ability to communicate 
and listen, ability to persuade through thoughtful dialogue and without invoking the power 
of the position, and a track record in generating external funds. We must find and recruit 
the best among the field to lead us out of the situation in which we find ourselves today.

The curricula of Adult Graduate Education Programs need to be critically evaluated to 
assure that they are relevant to the professional practice of Adult Education. Providers and 
employers of Adult Education Graduates need to be involved in this evaluation of curricula. 
We need to be assured that our Graduate Programs in Adult Education are not overloaded 
with courses that have an ED prefix. Students’ Plans of Graduate Study should not be 
confined to ED courses—minors in another educational specialty as a part of these Student 
Graduate Plans of Study should be prohibited. The major in Adult Education should be 
interdisciplinary with cognate courses being drawn from the behavioral and social sciences. 
We should not sentence the graduates of our program to a life of recipes, trial and error and 
mechanical steps by not providing them the opportunity to acquire a strong conceptual 
base derived from the social and behavioral sciences. Unfortunately some our Professoriate 
who are leading our Graduate programs are products of Programs in which the total 
emphasis was on mastering the content encompassed in a barrage of Ed Graduate Courses. 
Thus their advising of students is patterned after what they experienced in their graduate 
study. This is a serious matter and we must have leaders among the Professoriate that will 
commit to and engage in Curricula renewal.

All of the faculty members in the Adult Education Graduate Program should be required to 
intern annually in a Provider Adult Education Organization. The Department Head must 
possess the skills need to negotiate with the Provider Organization for the funds needed to 
cover the faculty Member’s expenses while participating in the internship experience. 
Unless faculty members are grounded in the practice of Adult Education and kept informed
about new developments and strategies being used by Provider Adult Education Organizations their teaching and the content of their courses may become irrelevant. Every faculty member should be known by their first name by the administrators and significant others in the Adult Education Provider Organizations and importantly, be viewed as credible and have something to offer in the enrichment and improvement of the practice of Adult Education.

My wish for you and the field of Adult Education is that a renaissance will occur that will restore Adult Education to its glory and splendor as the Nation’s lifeline to its evolving future. I have confidence in you and your potential to arise to the occasion in doing what needs to be done to bring new life and direction into our profession.