
A History of AEE

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AS THE FLIGHT ATTENDANT ANNOUNCED OUR ARRIVAL IN ST. LOUIS, I AWOKED from a not-so-sound sleep, gathered my personal belongings from the overhead compartment and floor space in front of my seat, and shuffled off the plane into the airport. Another annual AEE conference! Could this possibly be number 16 for the association? My thoughts drifted back to previous gatherings of the association, and as I made my way to the baggage claim area, I privately reflected on these yearly get-togethers and the wonderful memories created during a brief four days every fall.

This conference will be different, not only in the way that all conferences take on their own character, but because my role within the association has changed. This year (1988), instead of arriving with one piece of carry-on luggage, I have arrived with three suitcases (actually, trunks would be a better word), because this year I come as the executive director of the association. In addition to several changes of clothes, these trunks contain most of the important records of AEE: minutes of previous board meetings, bylaws, ballots for the board election, and an assortment of other documents and office supplies.

Driving from the airport in St. Louis to the conference site at the Touch of Nature Environmental Center in Carbondale, Illinois, I attempted to piece together the history of AEE and found I couldn't even be sure of which years conferences were held in certain locations: Was the Portsmouth, New Hampshire, conference in 1978 or was it '79? Placing conferences with their dates was less difficult than attempting to put significant activities of the association within a historical context.

This paper is an attempt to write a brief history of AEE. I have not said "The History" because I expect others who have lived through the development of the association will continue to deepen our understanding of the activities of the past 16 years. In researching this paper I have attempted to read whatever I could find about

the Association for Experiential Education (AEE). Of particular help has been the compilation of board minutes pulled together by my friend and former association officer, Betsy Dalglish. In addition to the "written word," I have also had formal and informal interviews with Joe Nold, Dick Kraft, Tony Richards, Keith King, Peggy Walker Stevens, and Jim Kielsmeier, each of whom has played a significant role in the birth and/or continuation of the association. There are many others, to be sure, who could/should have been contacted to gain insight and factual information. I hope this paper will serve as a beginning, and I encourage all who read it to offer their version of history for future updates.

AEE is a member-supported, international organization made up of approximately 1,300 individual and 120 institutional members. The association is committed to the practice and promotion of learning through experience, and to the collection and dissemination of information related to the broad topic of experiential education. One of the major foci of the association has been in the area of "adventure education." Since many of our members are involved in the use of experiential techniques in wilderness and adventure settings, the association has maintained a strong commitment to the development of safe practices for adventure programming. In 1980, the Adventure Alternatives Professional Group was formed within AEE. This group has been a powerful collective of practitioners interested in the application of experiential techniques with populations in corrections, mental health, and groups with special needs.

AEE publishes the *Journal of Experiential Education* three times per year, eight books specifically focused on the topic of experiential education and its application in a variety of settings (including the Directory of Adventure Alternatives, edited by Michael Gass, which identified 137 organizations and agencies "providing programs that link therapeutic strategies with experiential practices"), periodic newsletters, and the Jobs Clearinghouse, a listing of positions available throughout North America. In addition to publications, the association also convenes regional and national conferences to help practitioners upgrade their skills and provide a meeting time for like-minded people to come together to exchange ideas and renew friendships. Within the association in 1988 there are four professional interest groups: Adventure Alternatives, Programming for the Disabled, Schools and Colleges, and Women in Experiential Education. The AEE office is within the School of Education at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

THE FORMATION OF AN ASSOCIATION

The story might begin by placing the birth of AEE within the context of the "progressive" education movement, as has been described by Albert Adams and Sherrod Reynolds (1985). The purpose of my paper is to recognize the rich history of experiential education and to focus more directly upon AEE as a relatively unique

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adaptation of this educational philosophy. During the late 1970s, Outward Bound began to focus upon teacher training as one way to help influence the direction of the American education system. The apparent success of Outward Bound programs on previously disinterested students was well documented, and a small group of colleges and universities began to explore the idea of including these techniques within their formal teacher training programs.

In 1968, the Colorado Outward Bound School (COBS), under the direction of Joe Nold, began to affiliate with the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley in offering teachers practice. The goal of these "Teacher's Courses," as noted by Hawkes and Schulz (1969), was to produce a different type of teacher by addressing the criticism that "... methods classes, certification requirements, and eight-week teacher-training courses, have failed to produce quality educators" (Hawkes & Schulz, 1969). Another program was located at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. In 1971, Keener Smathers, an assistant professor of secondary education, began to offer a summer teacher training program that included an Outward Bound course at the North Carolina school.

The success of this program and interest shown by other colleges and universities led Smathers to write to Henry Taft, president of Outward Bound, Inc., seeking his assistance to help organize a conference that would bring together members of the academic community with staff from the various Outward Bound schools to discuss the value of Outward Bound-type activities at the post-secondary level. Taft responded by sending John Rhodes, program coordinator at Outward Bound, Inc., to work with Smathers at Appalachian State, and the two of them planned a conference for February 1974 (Minor & Boldt, 1981). The First North American Conference on Outdoor Pursuits in Higher Education was convened February 10, 1974, at Appalachian State University. One hundred and thirty-six people preregistered for the conference, and over 200 attended. One of the attendees, Keith King, who was running his own program at Keene State College in New Hampshire, vividly remembers this first gathering: "I always took students with me to conferences, so I guess there were a dozen or so with me. When I heard about the conference, I just knew I had to go. There wasn't much support for what we were doing, most of us weren't sure if anyone else was trying to teach students this way." Dave Hopkinson, a student of Keith's recounted to me that he was "blown away by the experience of being with this exciting group of people at this first gathering."

Henry Taft delivered the keynote address, "The Value of Experience." He ended his talk with the following statement, "Finally, I would hope that some sort of national organization on outdoor experiential education at the college level may evolve from this trailblazing meeting. You are in unexplored territory, and about to be impelled into experience. Good luck" (Taft, 1974). A group of conferees, headed by Alan Hale, presented an outline for a possible national association as a follow-up to the conference. One of the recommendations included the formation of a national

steering committee to oversee the development of a future conference and the possibility of a larger association. This first steering committee consisted of Bob Godfrey, University of Colorado; Don Kesselheim, University of Massachusetts; John Rhodes, Outward Bound, Inc.; Richard Rogers, Earlham College; and Keener Smathers, Appalachian State University.

The second conference was held 8 months later, in October, at Estes Park, Colorado. The organizer of this gathering was Bob Godfrey. The Estes Park conference was noteworthy because of the wide variety of educators who were in attendance. Unlike the previous conference in North Carolina, where Outward Bound staff had come together with college faculty, the Colorado conference was attended by "regular classroom teachers."

Reflecting upon this stage of what was to become AEE, Tony Richards suggested that this inclusion of educators from outside the outdoor pursuits area had opened the conferences to a diversity of participants, and had helped ensure that "you didn't have to be vaccinated with an Outward Bound course to be a member of this group."

Perhaps the most vivid memory of those in attendance at the Estes Park conference was the address delivered by William Unsoeld, which he entitled, "The Spiritual Value of the Wilderness." In this speech, Unsoeld provided a well-articulated rationale for "adventure activities." The effect upon participants was profound. Again quoting Keith King, "We came out of his speech 45 feet in the air, and we didn't come down until we hit New Hampshire."

The 1975 conference was convened by Alan Hale, at Mankato State University. The use of Outward Bound activities on university and college campuses was gaining popularity, and the need for a more formal organization was solidifying. Following the 1976 conference, hosted by Bob Pieh at Queens University in Kingston, Ontario, a group of interested participants met and finally pulled together this rather loose group of affiliated individuals and institutions into the Association for Experiential Education. Rick Medrick authored the Articles of Incorporation, which were filed in the state of Colorado on June 17, 1977. The stated purpose of this new association was to "promote experiential education, support experiential educators, and further develop experiential learning approaches through such services as conferences, publications, consulting, research, workshops, etc." (AEE 1977). The registered agent for the Association was Maria Snyder, who was working as a secretary with Joe Nold in his "Project Center" at the Colorado Outward Bound School in Denver.

This was the beginning of AEE. The need for college faculty using experiential methods to affiliate, and the financial and emotional support from Outward Bound combined to form a lasting bond that helped create this new organization. Though most of the early members of the association were "cut from the same cloth," AEE would soon move from its university focus to a much broader appeal to mainstream

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF AEE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

A movement starts out with dedication and then, if it is to survive, faces success with noble resolution to deal with discomforts of size, with the need for professional recognition, with the issues of recruitment, training, the development of curriculum, the business of doing business and the insurance and management expertise this requires. (Shore, 1978)

Thus, Arnold Shore aptly described the development of AEE from 1977-84. The formation of the association was a concrete example of what a group of committed individuals interested in starting a movement within education could accomplish. Having created AEE, the next question facing the leaders was, "What should this association do?"

The administration of AEE was the responsibility of the newly organized "Coordinating Committee," which held its first official meeting on April 15-16, 1977, in Denver, Colorado. In attendance at the meeting were John Rhodes, Dan Campbell, Ron Gager, Rick Medrick, and Maria Snyder. The group discussed the need for increased member services and the production of the *Journal of Experiential Education*, which was scheduled to be published soon. In an attempt to more fully use the talents and energies of other interested members of the association, the Coordinating Committee created four standing committees: 1) membership and promotion; 2) networking, services, and publications; 3) conference; and 4) administration and finance. Much of the current organizational structure in AEE was established during the initial stages of these committees' efforts.

The founders could not rest on their laurels. The 1978 conference was held in St. Louis, Missouri. The choice of this site created substantial difficulties for many of the members, since Missouri had not been one of the states to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment. During the Annual General Meeting at the conference, a resolution, submitted by Linda Chin representing the Women's Issues Special Interest Group, was unanimously adopted by the membership. This resolution notified the Board of Directors that a boycott of the conference was taking place, and called for the following action:

1. That the location of subsequent conference sites be chosen in states that had ratified the E.R.A.
2. That the content of future conferences includes concerns particularly relevant to women more extensively than has been done in this year.
3. That efforts be made to eliminate sexist language in the presentations and publications of this association and its AEE conference (AEE, 1978).

This resolution called attention to the fact that AEE had an obligation to conduct its activities consistent with the values of its membership. Despite the contributions of several women such as Maryann Hedaa, Sherrod Reynolds, Gruffie Clough, and Maria Snyder in the early development and leadership of the association, AEE was primarily a male organization. Of the 130 people preregistered for the first conference in North Carolina, 17 were women. If AEE was to grow and fulfill the dreams of a broader representation of educators, it would have to address the problems presented in this resolution.

The next serious attempt to change the composition of the association occurred the very next year, at the Portsmouth, New Hampshire, conference. In the closing moments of the Annual General Meeting, Arthur Conquest was recognized from the floor and addressed the issue of minority representation within AEE. He urged the leadership of the association to seek ways in which those who have been participants in Outward Bound programs, often minority students from urban areas, could also be members of AEE. Conquest's comments resulted in a 27-point plan created by the Board of Directors to help increase the participation of minorities in AEE. Maryann Hedaa assumed responsibility for this endeavor.

One of the more significant problems to face AEE was looming on the horizon—financial solvency. As the association headed into the 1981 conference to be held in Toronto, there was a \$6,288 deficit projected, with \$7,531 remaining in the fund balance. The need for a financially successful conference was not apparent to the leadership.

When most of the expenses from the Toronto conference were calculated, the association was deeply in debt. President Rich Weider reported the following budget summary to the Board of Directors during their 1982 gathering: "In the 1981 budget it was planned to keep \$8,000 in a fund balance in case of emergencies. Expenses were cut by \$8,000, the Journal publication was deferred, bills weren't paid, and the Colorado Outward Bound School wasn't paid, so that with the \$25,000 over budget of conference debt and \$8,000 in administrative bills, the organization entered 1982 with a \$33,000 debt" (AEE, 1982). In addition to the financial problems facing the association, Stephanie Takis, the executive officer resigned, stating her belief that AEE could no longer afford to pay someone in her position.

Faced with a substantial debt, the resignation of the executive officer, and the lack of funds to operate or rent an office space, the association was near collapse. Minutes of board meetings from this era reflect the tension and obstacles facing this group.

While no single person could claim to have saved AEE, the imaginative and dedicated activities of Jim Kielsmeier, Peggy Walker Stevens, and Dick Kraft certainly contributed to its rescue. Without the efforts of these individuals, and the other members of the Board of Directors, the association would certainly have floundered and collapsed. Kraft, a faculty member at the University of Colorado,

offered space with Colorado Outward Bound as an appropriate response to its history of cooperative Education Programs (which had been adjunct faculty instances), or the members at CU.

The account of a group of determined people, including Peggy Walker, on their journey from New York to Kraft established the operation of the association expanded its yearly board membership to include a host member.

The efforts of the conference at Fort Collins, Colorado, allowed for relief. At the time, people in attendance had "come to the success of 1983). The financial process for the association to grow. Despite the Toronto conference

From the time it was determined that the question has been shouted from the certification wilderness to help bring some help from Jed Williams' group, termed the wilderness le

offered space within the Education Department for AEE. The move of AEE from the Colorado Outward Bound School to the University of Colorado was, in some ways, an appropriate relocation. COBS and the University of Colorado had enjoyed a long history of cooperative activities, including the formation of a jointly run Master's in Education Program. In addition, many of the dominant forces within AEE had either been adjunct faculty in the Education Department (Bob Godfrey and Joe Nold, for instance), or they had studied with Kraft, John Haas, and Stan Ratliff, senior faculty members at CU (Jim Kielsmeier, Rocky Kimball, and Tony Richards).

The accounts of the board minutes from this period detail the dedication of a group of determined individuals who were resolved to keep the association alive. Peggy Walker Stevens arranged her vacation time so that she would be able to journey from New Hampshire to Boulder and work in the office. Kielsmeier and Kraft established the equivalent of martial law regarding the expenditure of money and the operation of the office. The other board members helped subsidize association expenses by covering phone charges and copying costs. The number of yearly board meetings was reduced, and when they met they slept on the floor of a host member's house to help save the costs of hotel rooms.

The efforts of these board members, coupled with a small but well-run conference at Humboldt State University in Arcada, California, convened by Mike Mobley, allowed the leadership and membership of the association to breathe a sigh of relief. At the Annual General Meeting in 1983, Dick Kraft reported "there were 554 people in attendance at this conference and the break-even point was 350." He said he had "come to the conference prepared to declare the organization bankrupt, but the success of the conference made that unnecessary" (AEE, "General Meeting," 1983). The financial scare of the early 1980s led to a conservative budget-planning process for the mid-'80s, so that the financial stability of the organization continued to grow. Despite the relatively healthy status of the budget, the last of the debts from the Toronto conference was only finally retired in 1987.

THE CERTIFICATION ISSUE

From the very first meeting in North Carolina, the question of how one determines the relative competence of outdoor instructors has been debated. This question has sometimes been whispered by the membership and at other times shouted from the floor of a general meeting. All discussions concerning the topic of certification were viewed by different factions within the association as biased. To help bring some order to this controversy, the board turned to the expert advice of Jed Williamson, Karl Johanson, and a small group of interested practitioners. This group, termed the Safety Committee, forged a near-consensus regarding the direction that should be taken by AEE in its efforts to help create and maintain safe wilderness leadership.

In 1984, the Safety Committee published *Common Peer Practices in Adventure Education*. This document was the culmination of endless hours of negotiation and hard work by the people involved. In addition, it brought the association together in a united effort to determine those techniques and practices that could be mutually agreed upon as contributing to the safety of adventure activities. This publication is perhaps the best compilation of standards in adventure programming available.

CURRENT TIMES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF AEE

AEE entered a period of growth and maturity marked by a strong financial base and stable leadership. Questions concerning the board and the membership were ones of direction rather than existence. Discussion at Board meetings focused on concerns about how the association should be managed. The Association began to reach out to like-minded organizations in an attempt to broaden the base of support for mutually agreed-upon agendas for educational change. The 1983 conference at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, was a joint project of AEE, The Council for the Advancement of Experiential Education (CAEL), and The National Society for Internship and Experiential Education (NSIEE). In 1985, AEE became a member of the Forum for Experiential Education, a group of 12 organizations that shared a common commitment to the goal of improving education through the application of a wide variety of experiential education techniques. These outreach efforts, coupled with a more vigorous recruitment program, resulted in a dramatic increase in the individual and institutional membership of the association.

At the January 1985 board meeting, Dick Kraft submitted his Executive Director's report: "With this report, I believe that you will agree with me that the association is now again on solid grounds, so I hereby tender my resignation as executive director, effective on June 30, 1985, or at such time as a new executive director has been appointed" (AEE, Board of Directors, 1985). The board accepted his resignation and moved to hire Mitch Sakofs as the new executive director. Mitch had worked in the office as associate director with Dick for the past year and was a natural choice to fill the position. During the next years, Mitch computerized the records of the association, improved the publication of books and resource materials, and generally systematized the activities of the Boulder office. All of these activities were consistent with the major theme of this period: "the professionalization" of AEE. In 1987, Mitch resigned his position to take a job with Outward Bound, Inc., and was succeeded by Eileen Burke, who assumed the newly created position of association administrator.

The resignation of Mitch Sakofs resulted in a series of prolonged discussions regarding the long-term leadership of the association and the proper role for the board of directors. The result of these discussions was to begin the process of hiring a full-time, executive director. Throughout the history of AEE, there had been several

discussions regarding the association had recommended. Finances had a position to hire a search for an executive in 1988.

One would have expected the nation's educational system and parent involvement implemented to help demonstrated by me

In the past, those connected to the educational highly creative classroom education that is possible educational change corporations are successful experiential education, writes in college affirms that the purpose are these: Are colleges offer the opportunity service before completion educational purpose individuals but also an example and an integral part of experiential Bound credo: "To serve

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discussions regarding the possible merits of a full-time executive director, but the association had never been in a financial position such that this could be recommended. Finances had improved to the extent that, in 1987, the association was in a position to hire a full-time director. Rita Yerkes, for the board, began a national search for an executive director in November 1987, and I was hired in August of 1988.

One would have good reason to be optimistic concerning the future of AEE. Our nation's educational system is suffering from a lack of resources, a lack of faith by students and parents, and a lack of clear direction for viable alternatives that can be implemented to help recapture the interest and intellect of our youth. The success demonstrated by member organizations of AEE has much to offer this ailing system.

In the past, those who comprised AEE were, in large measure, only marginally connected to the educational establishment. Outward Bound instructors and the highly creative classroom teacher have provided a model for many regarding the education that is possible, but they have not been in positions to effect broad-based, educational change. Today we are witnessing a new alliance. Large multinational corporations are sending their top executives on training programs that use experiential education approaches. Ernest Boyer (1987), former commissioner of education, writes in his recent book evaluating the college experience: "A good college affirms that service to others is a central part of education. The questions we pose are these: Are students encouraged to participate in voluntary service? Does the college offer the option of deferring admission to students who devote a year to service before coming to campus? Are the service projects drawn into the larger educational purposes, helping students see that they are not only autonomous individuals but also members of an intentional community? And does the faculty set an example and give leadership to service?" Service learning has long been an integral part of experiential education, and is one of the major tenets of the Outward Bound credo: "To serve, to strive, and not to yield."

The members of the association are not alone in their view that the educational system is in need of significant change. Conservatives and liberals are interested in listening to a voice that has, for many years, only been heard by a small group of progressive educators. AEE, and the educational philosophy it represents, will not be a panacea for the ills that have overtaken our educational system, but it may present sound alternatives for some of the problems.

The specific accomplishments of the association are less important than the fact that it exists and supports a different view of educational practice. AEE has evolved from the basic challenges of surviving, to solving problems of effective management, and finally to a position of leadership in educational innovation. I hope the next person to write the history of AEE will view it as a group that went far beyond an ability to support its members, to an organization deeply involved with supporting change within an educational system that sorely needs it.