



# Pioneering a Movement

*A Conversation with George Pruitt, President of Thomas Edison State College*

*This article presents highlights from an April 2014 interview with George Pruitt, President of Thomas Edison State College and Chair for the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE). Dr. Pruitt served as CAEL's first Executive Vice President in the early 1980s. After he left that position to assume the presidency at Thomas Edison, Pruitt continued his relationship with CAEL by serving on its Board of Trustees as both a trustee and as the board chair.*

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

You don't often get to be in the beginning of a movement, and CAEL really was a movement. Prior to CAEL coming to the scene, the expectation was that higher education was the exclusive purview of 18-year-olds. When adults came into the marketplace, they followed the GI Bill after WWII, and the expectation was that the veterans would go to college after the war and then leave. That didn't happen; adults continued to come in larger and larger numbers. Adult students were disrupters, and traditional colleges didn't know what to do with them. Adult learners were more consumerist, they had expectations about the quality of instruction and services they got. Many were paying their own way through veteran benefits or their own resources, and they were confronting a policy context that was designed for 18-year-olds and didn't fit the needs of adults.

CAEL was at the forefront of a national movement because the notion that adults brought learning to the enterprise that was college level and college quality was a revolutionary idea. However, it is now widely accepted throughout higher education, and that would not have happened without CAEL.

CAEL also either sponsored or catalyzed a national effort to do research on adults and adult learning. If you look at every important researcher that's ever written about adult

learning—Bud Hodgkinson, Pat Cross, Art Chickering, Urban Whitaker, Win Manning, and others—pretty much all of them were somehow involved with Morris Keeton and with CAEL. A whole field of literature has been created around adult learning; a solid research basis for the changes that needed to take place to accommodate adults. The whole paradigm has shifted now. When CAEL started, the majority of students were 18 to 22 years old, and now the majority of students are over 25 and going part time. This is an important contribution to American higher education, and it was led by CAEL.

It is also important to recognize the importance of Pam Tate's assumption to the presidency and the transition that she led after Morris retired in 1990. While CAEL has never walked away from its adult learning and PLA focus, it was clear at that time that the foundations which had funded this innovation and saw it established were moving on to fund other things. It was Pam who led the shift to broaden CAEL's focus into workforce development, and that was a hugely important thing. CAEL would not have survived without her entrepreneurial leadership during that transition.

## **THOMAS EDISON**

**CAEL: You have been president of Thomas Edison State College since 1982—more than 30 years. How have the challenges facing adult**

## learners changed over the past 30 years? And what challenges are the same?

Thomas Edison State College (TESC) is an institution that was born out of the same movement that created CAEL. There was a series of Carnegie Commission reports in the 1960s that talked about traditional education and the need to create a policy context exclusively for adults. Out of that work, several institutions were founded with the mission of solely serving adults—Thomas Edison was one such institution. We built ourselves around the two primary characteristics of our clients. First, adult students bring considerable learning to the enterprise, and we should be able to recognize this learning by awarding credit with a valid, reliable assessment technique. Second, adults have barriers of time and place, and they can't put their lives on hold to sit in a classroom three mornings a week.

We had to figure out how to serve students where they were instead of where we were. All of the processes we started were asynchronous in that there was no time requirement; our students could be anywhere and study with us. One of the most powerful tools arrived in the 80s when the technology became available to do what we eventually called distance education. In the 80s, it was video. In the 90s, computer courses and online learning emerged. When one of your problems is how to serve learners where they are instead of where you are, this technology is enormously empowering. TESC jumped in with both feet. We were one of the pioneers of distance education and still one of the premiere exemplars of how to do it well.

Today, we are the second largest college in the state of New Jersey, with 21,000 students. We never wanted to be the biggest of our kind, just the best of our kind.

We also have felt an obligation to maintain our contribution to a field that we established. Back when CAEL expanded its focus to workforce development, TESC wanted to make sure there was a robust source of faculty training for PLA. TESC created the

National Institute on the Assessment of Adult Learning. We have it every summer in cooperation with CAEL. We assemble faculty from all over the country with some of the best faculty available to participate. Morris was one of the founding faculty members of this institute, along with some very important people in early CAEL.

**TESC is often referred to as a “degree completion” institution where students can have their learning from a wide range of sources recognized and count towards a degree.**

**To what extent has the support for the TESC approach changed over the course of your tenure?**

When I came here, TESC was 10 years old. It was an experiment in higher education, and people were skeptical. They were unsure, and there was faculty resistance. Now, however, the things that we and the other institutions pioneered are widely and broadly accepted.

President Obama recently called for the U.S. to regain its lead in educational attainment because we used to be number one in the world, but now we are 17<sup>th</sup> and going in the wrong direction. In 2012, the National Commission for Higher Education Attainment was established and led by college presidents to turn that statistic around. I was one of the vice chairs. That commission issued its report and said that if the nation is to achieve its degree attainment goals, we need to embrace things like prior learning assessment—things that CAEL and TESC pioneered so many years ago (<http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/An-Open-Letter-to-College-and-University-Leaders.aspx>). This kind of attention to strategies for supporting adult learners is a huge change.

The world is coming to us now; there's some good in that and some complications in that. The good news is that the kinds of things that adults need to achieve a positive outcome are now broadly available. The bad news is that there are entities that have been drawn

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to higher education for economic reasons—to expand the market—and they haven’t done it as well as we would have liked to see them do it.

**TESC has been a leader in prior learning**

**assessment—both as a pioneering practitioner and as a field builder through its National Institute on the Assessment of Adult Learning. From your vantage point, what have been some of the most positive developments for PLA in the last 10 years in terms of policy, research, or innovative new approaches?**

One of the positive developments has been CAEL’s early and continuing work on quality assurance. If you look at the work that the accreditors do, their quality assurance regarding PLA relies heavily on CAEL’s Ten Standards for Assessing Learning. When prior learning assessment was first starting, the first people that raised questions about PLA were the accrediting bodies. We did a lot of work in the earlier years with the accrediting bodies so that they could understand “valid and reliable assessment,” and we had to fight a battle with people who said that we give credit for life experience. No credible institutions give credit for experience alone. Anyone who says that they do does not understand what PLA is all about; you give credit for competency or learning that can be assessed through a valid and reliable assessment technique.

## MIDDLE STATES—ACCREDITOR ROLE

**CAEL: You were recently named the chair of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. What are some of the ways in which accrediting agencies like Middle States can do more to support the adult learner?**

For too long, accreditation was very input driven and focused too much on institutions in ways that weren’t relevant to the experience that students

were having. Middle States is undergoing a revision of all of its standards around the premise of offering an effective learning experience for our students, and I think that’s a very important shift.

One of the biggest frustrations I have is the current regulatory culture. The biggest impediment that the country faces in meeting the President’s objectives of regaining our role in educational attainment is, ironically, proposals from the U.S. Department of Education. New regulations will limit the use of technology and make it more expensive. We have students in every state in the union; and under these new state authorization rules, we would have to get licensed in every state. That’s ridiculous and very costly, and the cost to do it would be passed on to students.

Also, the notion of the credit hour rule, which ties credit hours to seat time, just doesn’t make any sense at all, and neither does the notion that the government should start rating colleges and universities. The strength of our system is the diversity of the institutions and the diversity of the populations we serve. It’s not possible to come up with a rating system that adequately reflects and accommodates that diverseness. Any sort of standardized appraisal will hurt and punish institutions for serving diverse populations, and it will reward institutions for serving smart, well-prepared 18-year-olds.

**As you know, there has been growing interest in competency-based education (CBE) at the postsecondary level. HLC and SACSCOC have provided some guidance to their members on competency-based education. How is Middle States involved with ensuring the quality of CBE programs in its region? What do you see as the role of the accreditor with CBE?**

Part of the problem is that we come up with these tag lines that no one can define. No one can define CBE. It’s a variety of very good practices, but they are all different. Middle States is trying to say that accreditation is not that complicated. There are two components. One is objective third party review, and the other is simply asking one question: “How are we doing, and how do we know it?” That’s really what accreditation is about. We get in trouble by trying to get in the



weeds and micromanage individual processes. Middle States is trying to back off. We've gone from 14 standards down to 7, and we are being less prescriptive. Institutions have an obligation to provide a high quality experience, to define what that quality is, to generate evidence, and to substantiate the claims. It's a process-centered and outcome-centered approach. We want to give institutions the freedom to decide how they get there.

The federal government has made accreditation no longer about quality assurance but about compliance, and there is a significant difference. The government wants to will replace peer review with the federal process, and it will do harm to what used to be the best educational system in the world. It's a fight, but it's a fight worth having.

## **CURRENT CHALLENGES OF THE ADULT LEARNER—AND THE VIEW FORWARD**

**CAEL: What do you see as the most exciting developments in higher education today? What innovations seem promising for the future of higher education?**

It's always dangerous to try to predict the future. One of the pillars that both TESC and CAEL were founded on is that we value learning and the ability to demonstrate it without regard to the form in which the learning takes place. We don't care where or how the learner learns, as long as they can demonstrate the ability that's been acquired. In that regard, we have never had more opportunities for people to learn things than we have now, through technology and multimedia. I think that's exciting, liberating, and empowering.

Another thing is that it's been assumed that people learn in lockstep and in the same way, but we've always known that isn't true. The institutional culture requires that we operate that way, but now we are trying all kinds of ways to accommodate learning and in a variety of formats. The need to provide students a menu of options that are available at an affordable cost has never been higher. I love watching this take place.

**The question of “Is College Worth It?” lately seems to be a topic for a lot of higher education stories making the news. In your opinion, why is a college degree worth the investment? Are there important reasons beyond those related to employment?**

Someone did a survey of college graduates five years after graduation on the value of the experience. The overwhelming response was that it was a very high value; that it was worth the money; and that if they had to do it over again, they would. There is a disconnect between the people that go through education and the media and politicians that attack education. If you look at our customers, they are very satisfied with what they did and feel that it was a worthwhile investment. There is a problem with the public narrative, and it's troubling and destructive.

The vocationalizing of higher education is a mistake. It's true that high capacity people will out-perform and out-earn low capacity people, and higher education is the capacity building engine of the country. While federal data indicate that earnings are higher and the unemployment rate is lower for people who have high levels of education, it is important to acknowledge that earning a college degree does not automatically mean you will command a higher salary or get a promotion. To expect an 18-year-old to decide what they are going to do for the rest of their life is idiotic. Most students change majors two or three times, and most learning that takes place in college, as far as content, will be obsolete or forgotten five years after the students are out of school. The purpose of education is to build the capacity of learners and the capacity of citizens, and that's how it should be measured.

There needs to be a candid discussion about saving public K-12 education, and not just in the urban areas: the data that I'm citing is national. This isn't about the inner city, it's

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about everybody. Higher education has to try to figure out what to do with smart kids that are totally unprepared. It's not about jobs—the stakes go way beyond jobs.

One of the things that makes this country unique is that it's built around a series of concepts and ideas that we all buy into, and those values are described in the constitution. If you go back and read Thomas Jefferson, who is the father of universal education, he said that the reason we needed to have education is that there is a difference between a citizen and a subject. No other country had ever turned over the reins to its citizens. Democracy won't work if you don't have a well-educated, sophisticated population that's capable of acting out and

carrying out the responsibilities of citizenship, and I think that's really what's at stake here.

**Are there any other messages that you have for CAEL members and people that have been working on adult learning issues?**

The thing that I've enjoyed over my long association with CAEL is watching the influx of new practitioners and the excitement that happens when they discover things. The need for CAEL is as important now as ever. The principles that CAEL has advocated at last appear to be broadly accepted by the country and by the higher education community. CAEL needs to be the lighthouse for this area in terms of good practice, how to do it properly, and what quality assurance looks like. CAEL has evolved as the country has evolved, and I don't know of any organization in the country that's more important if we are going to have the kind of future that we want.