

# **NSEE HERITAGE TALKS**

## **A CONVERSATION WITH GARRY HESSER**

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**Garry Hesser**

*In this latest installment of [NSEE HERITAGE TALKS](#), NSEE Pioneer Garry Hesser talks about his first encounter with NSEE in the 1980s; about the circumstances that drew him into leadership roles at NSEE; about several of the seminal NSEE conferences of the 1980s and 1990s; and about how NSEE's Principles of Good Practice contribute to the effectiveness of high-impact teaching practices, essential student learning outcomes, and faculty development. This interview was conducted by Jill Burya, Scott Blair and Jeremy Geller on April 16, 2014.*

**Hello, Garry, and thank you for joining us today from your home in Minnesota. Please tell us how you first learned about NSEE and about your early affiliation.**

In the early 1970s, I was serving on a faculty advisory committee for the Philadelphia Urban Center which was led by Steve Brooks, who became one of the early founders of NSIEE [National Society for Internships and Experiential Education—the original name of the merger of two previous EE organizations]. Steve asked us how he should respond to an invitation from a colleague, Jim Feeney, to attend an organizational meeting regarding experiential education. “*Should I do it?*” he asked. At that time, I was on the faculty at the College of Wooster, chairing the Urban Studies program and living in a student-faculty community service residence experiment. That inquiry by Steve was my first introduction to what turned out to be NSIEE and later NSEE. For the next decade or more, I advised other folks to participate in NSEE and, through Steve Brooks and Nadinne Cruz, heard occasionally about NSIEE’s activities.

In addition, it was through my teaching at Wooster—where my wife and I lived with students—that I became even more engaged in experiential learning. Twenty-four students, my family and I created a community service house and designed an embedded course on “community.” I was also overseeing the Urban Studies program which had five urban semester settings from which most of our students were alums. This included the one in Philadelphia and others in Portland, Detroit, and San Diego all of which included internships and what we would now call “service-learning.”

In 1977, Augsburg College invited me to join them in institutionalizing their redesigned campus-wide curriculum that embraced experiential education. Like Columbia University, Temple, Drexel, Depaul, and others, Augsburg is a college in the middle of a city. I was recruited to replace the retiring EE pioneer, Joel Torstenson, who had led their curricular change and co-created HECUA—the *Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs*. That involved overseeing urban studies, internships, and urban semester programs. Replacing Joel led to my serving on the Board and later as President of HECUA. Here I worked closely with Nadinne Cruz, who became an early board member of NSIEE and was HECUA’s Executive Director. However, I was still an “outsider” to NSIEE.

**So, what persuaded you to attend your first NSIEE conference—in Pittsburgh—and what is your memory of that event?**

In 1984, Augsburg received a five-year cooperative education grant and I was asked as a faculty member to direct it. The grant provided travel and membership resources. As a result, I had the funding to go to Pittsburgh to attend the NSIEE conference in 1985. In addition, I was wearing a new hat as the Director of a Cooperative Education program, along with still being the Director of Urban Studies, and sociology’s internship supervisor. In that context, I walked into NSIEE in Pittsburgh and immediately found a home. Philosophically and ethically its community service commitment also lined up with my personal background in civil rights and community service.

For example, Bob Sigmon was a prominent leader in NSIEE’s role related to Service-Learning. Bob had been a seminary classmate of mine in New York City in the 1960s. I also met Jane Kendall there, who quickly concluded that my mix of positions and background were very appropriate for NSIEE, i.e., someone who was a tenured faculty member, interested in Service Learning, and Director of a Cooperative Education Program. That was a major organizational year for NSIEE. The FIPSE Grant was being reported on and the Cornell University faculty led an all-day immersion workshop for the entire conference. In the morning they introduced us to the Cornell approach to EE and then sent us out into the community in the afternoon. As I said, I had found a home and a framework for my college and my work. So to end this saga, it was somewhat of an accident, as this series of opportunities fell in my lap. I was very lucky at how the stars aligned.



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**What circumstances led you to take on a leadership role at NSEE? We’ve heard they were quite unusual.**

Barbara Baker and Nadinne Cruz, two Minnesota colleagues of mine, were on the NSIEE Board then, and they recommended me for a one-year position on the Board that needed to be filled. Briefly and oversimplifying the process, I walked into my first Board meeting in Seattle and discovered that none of the leadership, including David Moore, Sharon Rubin, Bob Sigmon, et al, felt that their current commitments allowed them to undertake more leadership responsibilities, including the open position of Vice-President who would soon become the next President.

So literally, at my first NSEE Board Meeting, my new colleagues turned to me and said, “Would you consider it?” I said yes.

So that’s how I got as involved rapidly as a leader of NSIEE. It is important also to note that I was able to say “yes” to the leadership invitation because my own institution, Augsburg College supported experiential education strongly well before I ever got there and the Dean and President were fully supportive. Furthermore, I was now more in an administrative role and could take on this role as the Coop Director, further supported with travel money to attend Board meetings.

To recap, I joined NSIEE in 1985, became its VP in 1986 and President from 1987 to 1989. I then served on the Board as immediate past president for two more years beyond that. My Augsburg colleague, Lois Olson, joined the Board and Executive Committee, as well, as did Jenny Keyser, HECUA’s Executive Director, and they often consulted with me. And I have closely followed the organization ever since.

**What role do you think your faculty status played in NSEE’s leadership invitation?**

During that same Pittsburgh meeting, I went to the Faculty Special Interest Group. There were seven of us there and four of them were non-faculty who hoped to talk to faculty because no

faculty members on their campuses were particularly interested in talking to them about EE. At that time, not very many people at NSIEE had faculty status or were tenured as I was. And this was critical. Jane Kendall and other colleagues realized that our future impact as an organization depended significantly on our ability to engage faculty, the disciplinary associations and other Higher Ed organizations. This led to our ongoing conversations with AAHE [The American Association for Higher Education] and the FIPSE grant work. In other words, my quick elevation within the Society was partly because other people were not able to take on the responsibility. But it was also because Jane Kendall and the NSIEE Board concluded that more faculty members with tenured status on the Board and in leadership positions would more effectively and conspicuously communicate a message to Higher Education: *Take us seriously*. That is a bit sad, I think, but in a credentialing world, this seemed to be a strategic way to proceed at that time and subsequently.

### **Was it also at this time that you began formal NSIEE training in Experiential Education?**

The FIPSE grant had gone through its first stage with Jane Kendall and four other consultants. That produced the first NSIEE book—*Strengthening Experiential Education within Your Institution* (1986). The four co-authors along with Jane Kendall had been the major consultants who worked with the twenty colleges and universities in Phase I. They were ready, I discovered at the Pittsburgh meeting, to train a second group. They had already chosen them but because I had co-op money and could travel, I contacted Jane Kendall and said: *"If I paid my way to go to the training and had as my project an internal strategic assessment of our own evolving experiential education program, could I help you add one more consultant trainee?"* And she said: *"Of course, if you can pay for it, we'd love to have an extra one."* So, that is the wonderful and serendipitous manner in which I obtained EE training and mentoring, along with my move onto the Board and into leadership. One outcome over the years has been the opportunity to consult with over 60 colleges and universities since 1986 as part of the second generation of FIPSE consultants.



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### **What were some of the major innovations and achievements of those early years?**

Two things come to mind. First, Jane Kendall and many of us had the foresight to initiate advanced training in experiential education at NSIEE Conferences. At the 1988 conference, we had our first pre-conference workshops *and* devoted a half-day of the conference to EE101, a precursor to EEA [the Experiential Education Academy]. A colleague from the University of California system led the pre-conference workshop on Service-Learning. Before the 1988 conference, we never really had a sustaining format by which a new colleague in experiential education could come to the conference and receive what we called EE101 in a workshop format. Cornell University staff took the lead on this and made it happen for those who were new to the field or wanted to learn from them as we had in Pittsburgh. Certainly we have made this format more sophisticated with the current EEA curriculum of experiential education courses. My colleagues in Minnesota, who hosted the 1988 conference, shared my vision and supported us in these innovations. So, with Cornell's help, we created a half-day EE101 where a new person at NSIEE could get training in the early stages of his or her profession with appropriate theory and effective practice. This approach was also reflected in the contents of the first edition of *Strengthening EE*. The chapters of that book framed the next stage of pre-conference workshops that led to the development of the EEA.

Another big event for us was to co-sponsor, along with ICEL and with CAEL, the 1994 annual conference held in Washington D.C. It was the largest conference in our history. It brought

together over 2000 educators. Paolo Freire was our speaker, and David Kolb led a process of training small group leaders who transformed that large gathering into a transformative experience. It was a high-water mark and NSIEE, then led by Allen Wutzdorff, made it happen, putting us further at the center of what was going on in experiential education in K-16 overall.

**Let's talk about more recent events. What complementarities do you see between NSEE's work in experiential education and AAC&U's current work in learning outcomes?**

In the new edition of *Strengthening Experiential Education: A New Era*, I as editor and joint author underscored the importance and salience of AAC&U's *Essential Learning Outcomes*, stressing the experiential pedagogy that is behind all four of the four learning outcomes. Notice what AAC&U puts into italics after each outcome. In every one of the four categories, AAC&U asserts that you cannot achieve these learning outcomes *without teaching experientially*. What is meant by this?

Well, look at the first essential learning outcome: AAC&U affirms that liberally educated students must have a "*Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World*." So, how are they going to accomplish that? Well, you do that, they assert, by "*engaging people with big questions*". This is Paolo Freire revisited, namely, problem-posing education. You place students in problem-solving situations, and we at NSEE know a lot about how you frame questions for such inquiry. Then, look at the second AAC&U outcome: "*Intellectual and Practical Skills*." Again, AAC&U recommends a pedagogy that is "practiced extensively and developmentally" across the curriculum. Similarly, how do you achieve the third outcome: "*Personal and Social Responsibility*"? Well, you "anchor it through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges." This means doing so "experientially." Demonstrating the fourth outcome—*Integrative and Applied Learning*—comes through the continual "application of knowledge, skills and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems." Again, this comes through the kind of effective experiential practice NSEE has promoted since its beginning, i.e., Dewey was right.

In short, AAC&U's *Essential Learning Outcomes* and their *Theory to Practice* initiatives align closely with NSEE's *Eight Principles of Good Practice*. And furthermore, AAC&U draws attention to the strong assertion we make at NSEE that experiential pedagogy is essential to the achievement of their four learning outcomes. Good practice is what counts. This we already know through the learning assessment work of Peter Ewell, as well as through our own history in experiential research here at NSEE. So, that's our job as professionals in experiential education: to help faculty members and faculty development colleagues operationalize essential learning outcomes experientially.



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**Related to the goal of learning outcomes, what role does NSEE play concerning the use of high impact teaching practices?**

When I look at George Kuh's ten *High Impact-Educational Practices* which AAC&U promotes heavily, I am also reminded of Bob Sigmon, David Moore, John Duley and others' insistence that experience alone is not enough. Learning requires careful planning, support, and reflection. Or, as Myles Horton put it: "You only learn from the experiences that you learn from." Dewey reminded us often that experience can, as well, be "mis-educative" if not undertaken in the context of what NSEE has come to see as "Principles of Effective Practice." We must promote and equip higher education to utilize these more sophisticated pedagogical processes. So-called high-impact learning strategies can take you down a blind alley if they are not achieved through effective and theory-grounded practice. I am very passionate about this topic.

I would say, therefore, that NSEE's role is to affirm that high-impact practices, such as those identified by George Kuh, are indeed validated through both research and anecdotally. However, we should also point out that such practices can, as is often the case, be undertaken poorly. If not rooted in experiential learning theory and effective practice, they may not be as educative as they might be, or worse, such experiences can become "mis-educative". So, while it's exciting and affirming that we now have AAC&U and the higher education communities saying that Kuh's high-impact practices are essential, I would submit that they are not sufficient unless undergirded by effective experiential education pedagogy. To repeat, that list of ten high-impact practices can be either educative or mis-educative depending on how well—how *experientially*—they are applied. And *that*, I remind my colleagues in the Academy, is what renders NSEE and experiential education so important "now more than ever."

### **Can you provide an example of how NSEE can help faculty members "operationalize" high-impact practices?**

Well, start with David Kolb's Experiential Learning Model. It dates from the early 1980s, and some now regard it as an outdated model. In response, James Cone, who used to direct the community-based service learning programs at Southern Cal, wrote a piece a while back that updates the Kolb model. I now use his work in my own EEA workshops. It's a nicely elaborated version of Kolb that includes important additions, such as pre-reflection. In addition, from the Reflection stage of the learning cycle, he draws from the work in "situated learning" and insists upon processes associated with "mediated learning." This adaptation appeared in the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*. My point is that if we develop the Kolb model in an even more sophisticated way than Kolb's original presentation, we provide faculty with guidelines and practical processes that operationalize Kolb in line with recent research. Our colleague and NSEE's first President, John Duley, also proposes a learning model from Lee Shulman and Russ Edgerton as a more well-rounded model that also attends to the affective domain. You can see his Prologue in our new edition of *Strengthening EE: A New Era*, 2013, which is available as a benefit for all members of NSEE. Others find versions of Paolo Freire useful and I can recommend the recent book by our colleague David Moore: *Engaged Learning in the Academy: Challenges and Possibilities*, 2013. In short, we need to do more than simply repeat David Kolb; we need to keep refining the model.

### **What about NSEE's *Eight Principles of Good Practice* adopted in 1998? Could they also be revisited and operationalized?**

Definitely! We need to continually flesh out NSEE's *Eight Principles of Good Practice* in terms of what it really means in detailed practice to mediate and facilitate learning and to coach students. These all lead to the active engagement and learning that we know can happen *if experience is the catalyst*. When I look at the *Eight Principles*, I see that each of them is necessary. But when I think about my own practice and engage in "backward design," I find that they are never quite sufficient in their current descriptive state. Consequently, we continue to learn from each other as we flesh out these principles in the EEA workshops that NSEE provides. But what we always need is an on-going, dynamic, and evolving "nuancing" of each principle for general use.

I think it's the same with high-impact practices, too. In the spirit of Dwight Giles and Janet Eyler's question "Where is the learning in Service-Learning," we should ask the same question for each of George Kuh's ten high-impact educational practices. In addition, where is the learning in learning communities, community-based learning, internships, global learning, etc.? One answer lies, I think, in the act of seeing ourselves as professionals who can and should function as "learning communities", collaboratively engaged in the kind of "learning cycles" we espouse for our students.



*But what we always need is an on-going, dynamic, and evolving "nuancing" of each NSEE principle of good practice for general use.*



**It's really a question of helping faculty learn to infuse experience into their respective courses, isn't it?**

Indeed, we need to collaborate continually with our colleagues in faculty development. One place for us to start is by make use of the strategies I propose in the chapter on "Increasing Faculty Involvement" [Ch. 3] in *Strengthening EE: A New Era* (2013). Embracing the "backward design" approach to course and curriculum design is something that I cite often and propose in my EEA workshops. There are so many colleagues in faculty development and in the teaching and learning circles/POD with whom we can join forces. We can learn so much from them, but we can also contribute by ensuring that experiential pedagogy is part of the backward design and faculty development movement. Remember, most academic disciplines now have a journal on teaching and learning, and we need to exploit that research, since experiential pedagogy is well documented in these volumes. We, at NSEE, can both help others facilitate that learning and be active catalysts in this process. In other words, well-trained EE professionals are needed today—*now more than ever*.

**Garry Hesser, thank you very much for your time and the insights you have shared with us today about the heritage of NSEE.**

***From the Archives!***



Garry Hesser (right) with fellow NSEE members Christie Boronico and Michael True at NSEE's 38th Annual Conference held in Dallas, Texas in 2009. (Photo: © 2009 Scott Blair)