

NSEE HERITAGE TALKS

A CONVERSATION WITH DR. SHARON RUBIN

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In this newest installment of the *NSEE Heritage Talks*, NSEE Pioneer, leader and *Distinguished Scholar* Sharon Rubin talks to NSEE Board Member Scott Blair about her first encounter with NSIEE in the 1970s; about NSEE's culture of sharing research and scholarship; about how the EEA (Experiential Education Academy) began as an initiative for on-campus consulting in good practice in experiential education; about innovative ways that NSEE might secure its future; and about how NSEE needs to preserve and disseminate its historical record of research so that new members benefit from the insights of NSEE's past achievements.

Hello Sharon Rubin and thank you for sharing your memories of NSEE in its early years as well as your thoughts about how NSEE might evolve in future years. First, please tell us what first brought you in contact with NSEE or with NSIEE, as it was called back in the "pioneer days."

Well, I took a job as Director of Experiential Learning Programs at the University of Maryland College Park. How I got that job is a story in itself. But I came into a new position and the Secretary said "*Oh, by the way, you're in charge of a conference in three months.*" I said "*What?!*" and she said, "*Well, don't worry too much about it: we're just sort of the local hosts. There is an Executive Director of this organization and she will take care of everything.*" And I said, "*Well, just keep me informed and we'll see what we can do.*"

In the end, I was not called upon to do anything but I went to what was the NSIEE conference of course where I encountered this tiny little person, Jane Kendall. I don't know if you've ever seen her. She's maybe 4'9 or 4'10, a little slim person and very charming looking in a Southern Belle way. She was talking to a service person about her expectations for something—I no longer remember what—and she was speaking so forcefully and clearly to him that by the end of the conversation, all he could do was stammer "*Yes, Ma'am*" and run out of the room. I said to myself, "*OK, this woman is capable of doing almost anything.*" I introduced myself and that was the beginning of a long relationship with Jane Kendall and through her and others, I got to understand the organization. I just fell in love with it and it's been a life-long love affair.

What kept you coming back to the NSEE annual conference each year?

Initially, it was finding out that there were people in the world who did the same thing I was doing. I was not really aware of the very large group of people who ran internship programs, cooperative education programs, and other kinds of experiential programs. So there was always a lot of learning that I always did when I came to a conference.

But it was really the friendships with people in the organization that kept me coming back and here's why. I always say, NSEE is an organization that "gives it away". I was used to academic conferences at which people at the conference wanted to prove they were the smartest person in the room and part of that was making sure that people who asked good questions were dealt with in a very sarcastic way. At NSEE, if you asked a question, somebody would answer it. If you wanted a resource, someone would say, "Absolutely, I'll be happy to share it with you." Or someone would say, "There is somebody you should meet who can answer this better than me" and then take you to meet that person. And so, "giving it away" was such a breath of fresh air to me that I kept coming back for more and more. And then, I too became one of those people who "gave it away." For example, when we wrote *Strengthening Experiential Learning within Your Institution*, we never made a penny on that because we "gave it away". And when I did the revision just last year for the new *Strengthening*, I asked the editor "Is there any money in this for us?" He just laughed and I said, "OK, we're just giving it away."

What did you find special about the friends and colleagues you met at NSEE?

I think one of things I valued about NSEE is that people come from such different and diverse life-paths all to the same place. For example, Bob Sigmon was a minister and he did community activities in the health professions. He's the one who taught me a song called "Inch by inch, row by row, this is the way our garden grows" to teach us that very small activities can have very large blossoming impacts. Then there was Dick Couto who ran a program that also dealt with the health professions. There was Garry Hesser who was studying institutional transformation at his university in relation to international activities. There was Tim Stanton who ran the Haas Center for Public Service which was an enormous enterprise at Stanford University. There were people from little colleges and big ones, from community colleges, public institutions and private institutions. Sometimes experiential learning sat in Academic Affairs, sometimes it sat in Student Affairs. Sometimes it sat out there on a small branch over a raging river. Wherever it was, there were people who came together to learn and to contribute. And those personalities really have to be treasured.

I'm sure there's a whole new generation of people that I don't know who come from very diverse backgrounds and who have very different kinds of things to say and to teach. Bob Sigmon, for example, taught me about Service-Learning. I really was not aware of Service-Learning. It was not on my radar then. This was many, many years ago of course. And he said that what is really important in Service-Learning is not the service, and not the learning—it's the little dash between them. It seemed silly when he said it but the longer I thought about it, the more profound it became. He pushed the organization into encompassing Service-Learning. I don't think we wanted to do that initially. I think people were sort of afraid. But because of his background, he could see where that would take us as an organization. And so the range of people that I got to meet and be life-long friends with really captured something in my spirit that I needed. So, when I was asked recently to come here to the annual conference, I said, "Hmm, do I really want to drive six hours to go to Baltimore?" Yes, I do and so I did.



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What do you consider NSEE’s most valuable contribution to K-16 education over its many years of service to experiential teachers and learners?

One of the early projects of the 1980s was our carrying out of a grant that was given to us by a program called the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE), part of the Department of Education that no longer exists. But at the time, FIPSE gave out grants to improve education and we at NSIEE got one. This was the *Strengthening Experiential Learning within Your Institution* grant that allowed us to go and consult with educators on their campuses. We worked with the onsite person to develop a framework for the visit and we were really the experiential “boots-on-the-ground”. We talked to a large variety of people. We talked to administrators. We gave workshops for faculty. Whatever the person wanted done, we at NSIEE were able to do in a consulting capacity.

From that consulting came a second grant where we got a whole new generation of consultants and I think that eventually led to the creation of the EE Academy. It led to a number of very proactive kinds of programs NSEE has done over the years to help people improve professionally where they are in their institutions. Our goal was not to sit and pontificate but actually go out and see how we could be helpful.

And that has, I think, paid off enormously in the respect in which those on-campus people are often held. Because once we gave them a sort of NSIEE “stamp of approval” and some methodologies to get things done, things improved on those campuses. Plus, we could look back and report those things and tell other people about them. And so the whole consulting process started us on a path of being helpful in a way other than just having annual conferences.



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What is your hope for NSEE in years to come? What is the “next era” in experiential education?

I’m not sure how to answer that because I’ve been retired for six years now. I occasionally come to a conference but I’m not involved with the organization in the same way I was. On the other hand, I do have some hopes for the organization. And one is that more and more faculty members do research on experiential learning. The research that does emerge tends to come from staff people and that’s wonderful but the coin of the realm in education is faculty research. How do we get faculty involved in doing the kind of research that not only supports what we know intuitively about experiential education but also helps them get appreciated on their own campuses and tenured and promoted and made a part of this community.

But the second thing that I think NSEE needs is an endowment. While I don’t think there is someone out there burning to give

millions of dollars to the organization, I do think there are many of us who have retired or are coming to a retirement age who might be interested in some planned giving. So, somebody needs to start the process of building an endowment because this work is too important to be connected to the variability of financial circumstances of the organization in any one year. We really need a platform for that. And we need a way to give more scholarships to people who would like to come to NSEE but who work in colleges that either can’t afford it or don’t know that they believe in it yet. We also need to support graduate students who want to be in this field and need to present their research or in some way be a part of this community. I think that’s a big challenge to the leadership of the organization—to figure out how to endow it so that after they are gone from the Board and after we are all gone, this organization continues.

In light of NSEE's record of advocacy, research and training related to high-impact teaching and learning practices, why do you think NSEE has not attracted greater attention and membership from K-16 educators?

NSEE has always had a kind of "Second City" complex. We are content to be the most significant intellectual player in the experiential education game but we let Campus Compact *fly* with Service-Learning. We also let the co-op folks incorporate their kind of experiential education in a very particularly way. As such, we have not pushed our mission with college presidents, with academic Deans, and with the people who could make a difference in getting our name out there. Now the relation we have with AAC&U is a very good one and I think that can bear fruit. But people have to present at those conferences, be engaged in those projects, and really put the name NSEE out there.

We have been a boutique operation for way too long. For example, at yesterday's conference plenary here in Baltimore, we had two college presidents talking really sincerely about how experiential learning affects their campuses. Truly, a lot more Presidents need to hear that and a lot more Presidents need to recognize the name NSEE and a lot more NSEE folks need to invite consultants to campus and speakers to campus and begin to "infiltrate" at the campus level and at the graduate school level. Without such engagement, we are going to continue to be a boutique operation. This was the case in 1978 when I joined and I think it's been the case ever since. No matter how we've tried to put our names of NSIEE and NSEE forward, somehow it hasn't been wildly successful. Maybe we need to send *Strengthening –*

The New Era (2014) to every college president in the country. There needs to be a way to get NSEE to a different level of visibility. But we couldn't do it when we were there so I'm not going to say the Board now should be doing something that we were not capable of doing ourselves. But it's something to think about. With NSEE's new Strategic Plan in mind, how can raising NSEE to the next level of national significance happen?



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What should NSEE be doing to better preserve and disseminate its record of research and practice to the larger community of experiential educators?

Jane Kendall wrote a history of NSEE for its 25th anniversary which was published in a beautiful blue booklet. I don't know if that exists anymore. She's a very good writer and it was a terrific piece. I think someone should dig that up from the archives and add to it instead of starting all over.

I also think that NSEE Board members at various times—there have been a lot of Board members—should be called upon to give short reminiscences of their times on the Board. I'm sure there is an archive somewhere that lists them all. Because some very important things happened in the organization based on those Board meetings and on what Board members individually undertook within the organization. I think that could be very productive.

It did frustrate me when, a few years ago, we were brought together at an annual conference for a sort of pioneers panel discussion. It was not very well attended because I think that conference was maybe not terribly well-attended. In any event, we talked about the history of the organization and it didn't seem that anybody even cared about the history—perhaps not even the Board members of the organization at that time. So I was thinking that this organization may not die from lack of funding; it may die from lack of memory. Because what we've done over the years has been terrifically important but if nobody knows it and new members keep starting off from scratch, we just keep re-inventing the wheel. For example, I know a presenter from a very elite institution who recently gave a presentation and I kept groaning inwardly because what the person was talking about, we had been doing twenty-five years ago. Because this person had "discovered" it, it was new. No, it wasn't! It wasn't new at all.


But that memory gap happened with Service-Learning which was popular in the 1930s and then sort of fell out of favor and it came back in the 1960s and then it fell out of favor again, and now it's back

again. But a lot of the younger people who were active in the development of *this* iteration of Service-Learning didn't know anything about the previous two.

We actually had a workshop at the 1989 Wingspread Conference about the history of Service-Learning because it needed to be captured. There was a document that came out of that and I don't know where that is either. But if you forget your history, you say you're bound to repeat it. No! You may do it *badly* this time instead of the same or better. You have to sort of keep turning over that ground and finding new ways to think about things.

The history is not insignificant and it's not unimportant. The members need to really own that history. We had a group of people come to breakfast today who were relatively new to the field and they seemed very inspired by the original volume of *Strengthen Experiential Education* (1986) which they said they all had on their shelves and wished for another volume they could hold on their shelves even though they may go online for the download. But if they want to show their Dean, or the President, or a faculty member something, it's better to have it in a book. As long as it doesn't have red bricks on the cover, I'll go for it! (*Laughs*)

In short, they were happy to know the history. So we need to find more ways to get people to own the history of NSEE and to see it as their history. It's not a history of the organization; it's their history. Where they are today is because of what we did in the 1970s and after that. It's not that we want people to be grateful—they don't have to be grateful to us—they just have to know where they come from because that too gives them credibility; and it gives them inspiration; and it's a way of making sure that the organization keeps moving forward.


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From The Photo Archive!



Sharon Rubin with NSSE Scholars and Pioneers at the 43rd Annual NSEE Conference held in Baltimore, Maryland from September 29 to October 1, 2014 on the theme of "*Civic Engagement & Global Learning for the 21st Century*".

NSEE Pioneers and Distinguished Scholars

Mary A. King, Tim Stanton, Sharon Rubin,
Garry Hesser and John S. Duley (sitting)