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Adult Education for Abundance and Liberty for All: Celebrating 40 Years of the Adult Education and Literacy System of the United States

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Forty-two years ago, in 1964, President Lyndon Baines Johnson launched a War on Poverty which included for the first time an initiative to provide adult basic education for undereducated adults. Two years later, on November 3, 1966 President Johnson signed a new law, the Adult Education Act of 1966, which moved the adult basic education program from the War on Poverty and established it as a new education system comprised of a partnership between the federal government and the states.

This year we celebrate forty years of the Adult Education and Literacy System that was created by the Adult Education Act of 1966, and which continues today as Title 2: The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. How the Adult Education Act emerged from the adult basic education program of the War on Poverty illustrates how multiple interests were brought together to break through a barrier that had blocked the development of an Adult Education and Literacy System for decades.

Abundance and Liberty: The Merger of Interests for a War on Poverty and War For Defense of the Nation

By the beginning of the 1960s, the adult education community had become fragmented into several factions: those seeking recognition for adult education as a broad, liberal educational component of the national education system; those who sought education for the least educated, least literate adults; and those seeking the conservation of human resources to enhance America's security and increase the industrial productivity of the nation by giving education and job training to adults stuck in poverty.

As it turns out, none of these groups was having much success getting adult education or adult literacy education implemented in federal legislation.

An Adult Literacy Act drafted in 1962 was deemed to be too narrow and so it was renamed the Adult Education Act even before it was introduced for legislative hearings. But the U. S. Office of Education considered the term "adult education" too broad. The name finally decided on was the Adult Basic Education Act of 1962, but it went nowhere.

At the time, President John F. Kennedy, struck by issues of poverty, particularly poverty among African-Americans, had placed the adult education issue within the

human resources development framework and problems of labor force training. He had been successful in getting the Manpower Training and Development Act and the Area Redevelopment Act for community economic development passed in 1962. But further legislation to combat poverty was stalled. In 1963 President Kennedy was assassinated and Lyndon Johnson became President. He would soon find the leverage for breaking the log jam and for moving along his "War on Poverty" which would carry adult education along with it. This time leverage for social action in adult education would come from the nation's military.

In July of 1963, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then an Assistant Secretary of Labor and later a leading Democratic Senator in the U. S. Congress, was reading an article in the Washington Post. The article said that about half the young men called for examination for military service had failed the physical or mental test or both. According to his biographer, Godfrey Hodgson, "Moynihan had observed how the sacred plea of national security could be used to persuade politicians to support causes they might not otherwise care two pins about" After reading the article, Moynihan got hold of the Secretary of Labor and convinced him to have the President establish a task force on manpower conservation for which he, Moynihan, would serve as staff leader. On September 30, 1963, just two months before he was assassinated, Kennedy established the Task Force on Manpower Conservation, which President Lyndon Baines Johnson continued.

The Task Force set out to understand why so many young men were failing the military's standardized entrance screening exam, the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT), and to recommend what might be done to alleviate this problem. Just three months later, on January 1, 1964, the Task Force's report was delivered to President Johnson. The report was stunning in revealing that one third of the young men called for service did not meet the standards of health and education. It went on to recommend methods for using the AFQT to identify young adults with remediable problems and to provide them services, such as the Manpower Training and Development program, and the enactment of new legislation that would provide additional education and training.

In May 1964, President Johnson gave the speech that launched his "Great Society" programs in which he argued that "The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time"

With his appeal to "abundance and liberty," Johnson captured the interest of those in Congress concerned with employment, productivity, and poverty ("abundance") as well as those concerned with national security ("liberty"). In August 1964, Public Law 88-452, the Economic Opportunity Act, was passed by the Congress and signed by President Johnson. It contained within it Title IIB: the Adult Basic Education program.

Two years later, in 1966, when the Economic Opportunity Act legislation came up for legislative review, adult educators lobbied to move the Adult Basic Education program to the U. S. Office of Education, and to change the name from the Adult Basic Education program to the Adult Education Act, broadening its applicability beyond basic education. Congress agreed to these changes, and, on November 3, 1966, President Johnson signed an amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, that included Title III: The Adult Education Act of 1966.

With the passing of the Adult Education Act of 1966, the acorn from which the Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) would grow was finally planted. Over the last four decades, adults have produced some 100 million enrollments in the Adult Education and Literacy System of the United States. These adults have sought the education that they hope will help them find abundance and liberty from the bonds of poverty and underemployment for themselves and their families. For tens of millions of adults this hope has been fulfilled. For this we celebrate 40 years of the Adult Education and Literacy System of the United States.

[Note: Most of the foregoing is adapted from Sticht, T. (2002). *The rise of the Adult Education and Literacy System in the United States: 1600-2000*. In J. Comings, B. Garner, & C. Smith (Eds.), *The annual review of adult learning and literacy* (Vol. 3, pp. 10-43). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.]

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