

**NOTHING AS EXPECTED: THE YEAR
THAT WAS ...**

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INTRODUCTION

This presidential essay, much like the times in which it was initially written, centers on the human experience and the Divine Providence through which our lives are shaped and our interactions with others take purpose.

While past presidents of the Association for Education Finance and Policy (AEFP) have reflected upon the trajectory of the organization, of the state of research, of policy, of the interaction of research and policy, I reflect upon a fundamental shift in the world that we as an organization, as members of AEFP, and as human beings, experienced over the past two years—driven by a global pandemic, jarring social unrest, and direct threats to our democratic institutions. We now breathe a bit freer, though no doubt more cautiously. And, now is the time to reflect on where we are.

“THE YEAR” 2020–21

Yes, it was a single year plus a handful of days, when I served as President-Elect (2020 Conference) and then as President (2021 Conference) of AEFP, that the world around us turned on a dime and changed everything in our lives and in our association.

In February 2020, I traveled to Washington, DC, for the U.S. Department of Education Institute for Education Sciences panel review meetings aware and unaware at the same time of the coronavirus (later taking on the name COVID-19). Looking back, it was surreal on so many levels, we traveled without masks, we met without masks, not knowing quite yet what to make of everything. I returned home to Florida and prepared to head out to Dallas for our conference. In emergency meetings with AEFP’s executive committee and board, we had to face the reality—we had to cancel our in-person conference. The decision to do so gave us only eight days to plan, organize, and pull off a virtual conference. Thanks to our then new Executive Director, Lydia Ross, and our longtime information and technology professional, Hiep Ho,

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it was an amazing conference, of course not without glitches, but most certainly without precedent.

Settling into the reality that COVID-19 would be with us for a while, we turned our eyes toward our June summer board meeting and the work of the organization. Again, events snapped us out of any lull we might have hoped for to catch our breath. With the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, we knew that it was time to speak out as an organization and to make a commitment to do better as an organization and to “challenge the long-standing patterns of institutional racism,” as we noted in our message to members, elements of which bear repeating:

As an organization we are committed to fostering an inclusive and anti-racist environment. We recognize that academia as a whole, and education finance and policy in particular—including our own association—suffers from a lack of diversity and is not as inclusive as it must be. We are committed to working toward changing that.

Education is the core of who we are as an organization, education is the core of who we are as human beings. The deep and persistent inequities at all levels of education and society at large must be addressed. From its inception, AEFP has been a place where strategies to eliminate these inequities germinate. We must continue to provide a forum for those discussions. Out of upheaval emerges opportunity—opportunity to root out racism at its core and to rebuild our education, social, and economic systems in a more equitable manner that reflects each individual’s unique and essential role in this world.

At our summer 2020 board meeting, we deepened our efforts in cross-cutting ways, not simply in terms of affirming our commitment to diversifying the pipeline of scholars as our pre-doctoral fellowship initiative aims to do, but also to diversify our perspectives, which I will discuss a bit later in this essay.

But, let’s continue with the year that was! We understood that 2021 would be a virtual conference and committing to that early on helped us learn from our mistakes in 2020 and to incorporate our members’ feedback. As AEFP members, we know that our organization is special and that our in-person conferences exude an energy that reflects intellectual engagement in a professionally and socially warm, welcoming environment. The challenge: How to infuse and capture that spirit in a virtual conference.

As that planning was shaping up and we turned the corner on 2021, just six days into the new year, the constant attacks on our senses and sensibilities culminated in an assault on our nation’s Capitol, the bedrock of our democracy. And, a mere two days before the 2021 conference we were shocked out of our lull, once again, when the hate-filled murders of six Asian American women (which also took the lives of two others) happened in Atlanta.

Through the energy of our members, current and past leadership, and extraordinary commitment by our board, our 2021 conference was an amazing success that reminded us of who we are as an association, capturing our beautiful essence, while also informing others through social media. Yes, what a year it was.

The rest of this essay imparts my thoughts and reflections that I initially shared in my presidential address. All food for thought with the aim of getting us to think about knowledge and to caution us to not confuse knowledge with beliefs and truths, as well as to encourage us to have humility in all that we do; to see how perspectives shape knowledge; to encourage us to value other perspectives; and to build/remodel a scholarly home and family to shape the future through our search for meaning.

KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge starts with the flash of insight—the flash coming from experience, from observation, from the work of others, from casual conversations, from wherever. We, then, take that flash of insight and develop it, deepen it through study, gathering data (in all forms), analysis, contemplation, articulation, vetting, reconciling, presenting feedback, revising, and refining. All of this toward the goal of knowing—having knowledge. Knowledge is not static—it represents our best understanding of a phenomenon at any given moment. Knowledge grows, sharpens, deepens, and gets overturned. Knowledge alone is not truth. Truth is static, not changing irrespective of perspective or (for example) advances in technology. To confuse knowledge with truth is a mistake and a disservice to both.

PERSPECTIVES

Knowledge is shaped by perspective in meaningful ways. Starting with an illustrative example, our orientation on school finance equity and education research shifts as available data and technology evolve. Fifty years ago, school finance research focused on equity within states using district-level data that were entered into mainframe computers with analytic code “written” onto punch cards. Thirty years ago, we were able to shift perspectives to within-districts with newly available school-level data that came on some form of floppy, large-capacity disks entered on personal computers with software to run our analytic codes. Soon after came data on individual students matched to teachers, CD-ROMs and thumb drives, and now cloud space where you can choose your statistical software and code.

As our access to data and capacity to analyze the data shifted, so too did our questions, which moved closer and closer to what matters, from the state to the district to the school to the teacher to the student. We moved from knowing how much districts spend and the object and/or function of the spending, to knowing what was being spent at the school level (with cost accounting attributing district-level spending to the school level), to knowing that—in the form of the most important resource of all—teachers matched to kids mattered. With statewide individual student-level data systems integrated and matched with other information systems on labor market participation and earnings, social welfare participation, and military service—quantitative data went big. Not to be outdone, qualitative data have also gone big!

Yet, it is not simply a matter of data (but most certainly aided by the data)—our perspectives are shaped by the disciplinary lenses and methodological approaches we bring to research that shape our questions, our analyses, and our conclusions. This is a complex world and education is at its core, always has been and always will be in informal and formal ways—we are richer when we value the other.

VALUING THE OTHER

No two people are the same. No two points on a color spectrum are the same, yet every point and every individual are necessary and essential parts of the whole, and the richness and full color of the whole. A “whole” that does not recognize and value its parts is not truly a whole, a part that does not recognize the other cannot then be united in the whole. There are so many dimensions on which we identify ourselves, personally and professionally, and it is so critical to see ourselves as part of the whole without erasing who we are individually. This is most certainly at the core of our nation’s motto: *E pluribus unum*—out of the many, one.

OUR SCHOLARLY HOME

Building and/or remodeling our home that is centered on building knowledge to improve policy and practice, makes lives better. Central to this is bridging the gap between research and practice, and AEFP has made great strides in this (as has the broader educational research community). Within AEFP, Carrie Conaway’s leadership took us to another level and the Walton Family Foundation’s support for our policy makers and practitioners has been so critical in this building and expanding of the bridge.

As we, as an organization, leaders and members alike, embark on our journey forward, we must go beyond ourselves, beyond our comfort zones and established connections. There are, no doubt, tradeoffs between the concentration and clustering of like-minded, like-trained, like-thinking colleagues and the broadening and bringing in of different-minded, differently trained, and diverse members. When we are in our “like” group, it is comfortable, fun, we share language and references. However, it is also isolating—stunting meaningful growth and deeper and richer perspectives of this richly hued world.

I would like to end with passages from our Promise and Hope message sent in January 2021:

What role does a scholarly and professional association of those devoted to research and policy play in this? It depends. It might in fact aid and abet darkness, knowingly or naively, by claiming that scholarly distance requires us to not take a stand, to not speak out against affronts of the kind we saw on display in our nation’s Capital on January 6th. But, it also might bring much needed light that has the potential not to just brighten a dark space but to transform it. As researchers and policy makers and those committed to the use of evidence to further a more just and equitable society, we have the opportunity and even the imperative to shine a light on the structures and forces that allowed for the ugliness and hatred that made a mockery of our nation in the events of January 6th and all the moments in our history that led to this day. But shining light on darkness alone is not enough, we must literally transform that darkness to light.

Our mission as educators, researchers, professionals, and policy actors must be the utter transformation of our systems that have perpetuated the racism and disregard for democracy that led to January 6th. We are uniquely situated to do this because we are educators, we are researchers, we are practitioners, and we

are policy actors. Nothing worthwhile happens in an instant, rather it is through diligent, sustained effort that we will transform darkness into light, doing what we do best and doing it better by broadening our minds and understandings with different ways of knowing. We are AEFP and we are committed to doing just that and we hope that you will continue to be our partners in this and reflect and grow with us.

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