

Join Us in Congratulating Minnesota Online, CAEL's 2006 Institutional Service Award Recipient

By Bernadette Dubs

At a special award luncheon on Friday, November 10, during the 2006 CAEL International Conference, CAEL will present the Institutional Service Award to Minnesota Online, a member of CAEL's Featured Provider Network. The Institutional Service Award is given to an institution that has shown an outstanding commitment to the expansion of lifelong learning opportunities and for innovative efforts to improve access to and quality in academic programs for adult learners. Through the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System, Minnesota Online offers accessibility to higher education opportunities for all Minnesota residents through its online educational opportunities.

History with CAEL

The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system have a long history with CAEL. Metropolitan State University began working with CAEL in 1974 when Gary Langer, Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Innovations, met with Morris T. Keeton to form a partnership with CAEL, institute the principles of prior learning assessment, and to increase access to lifelong learning for adults at the university. "Metropolitan State was interested in creating a school without walls for adult students, and we met with CAEL to ensure that we were incorporating all of the principles of CAEL and to create a university that met the needs of adult learners," Gary Langer said. More recently, Metropolitan State University completed the ALFI Assessment Toolkit and worked with CAEL to open an experiential learning center.

In recent years, the system has worked with CAEL to aggregate the entire system's schools and programs into an effective online program, Minnesota Online. Through CAEL's Pathways for the Future program, Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system's Gary Langer acted as the state liaison to connect Qwest employees to courses and programs at Minnesota colleges and universities. Additionally, Minnesota Online became a member of CAEL's Featured Provider Network (FPN) last year. CAEL's Featured Provider Network is a group of regionally accredited, quality higher education institutions with online degree programs that offer significant discounts to CAEL's Tuition Assistance Management (TAMS) clients, TAMS manages a company's tuition assistance program. Minnesota Online was the first public sector set of universities to join the FPN. "We wanted to join the FPN because we have many programs and opportunities to offer companies just like the private and for-profit colleges and universities that were already members of the FPN," Langer said.

Minnesota Online's Service to Adult Learners

Today, the system consists of twenty-five two-year colleges and seven state universities. This network offers more than 1,950 courses and 150 programs ranging from certificates to master's degrees.

CAEL's President and CEO Pamela Tate said, "By allowing students to access all the online learning opportunities provided by Minnesota State community colleges, technical colleges and universities through one website, Minnesota Online is working towards CAEL's mission to expand learning opportunities for adults. The online format allows working adults to integrate learning into their already

busy schedules. Not only can students find all they need in course work from Minnesota Online, but the program also provides students with online financial aid service, educational planning tools, contact information, and live online and telephone support to answer student questions, so students never have to worry about a question going unanswered.”

According to Linda Baer, Senior Vice Chancellor of Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, Minnesota Online was established to be an internal “innovative enterprise” within the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities’ system for the development and operation of e-learning. “Minnesota Online, www.minnesotasonline.org, provides a central location for information about courses and programs that are available to students online.”

In addition to Minnesota Online, the system offers eFolioMinnesota for lifelong education and career planning (www.efoliominnesota.com). eFolioMinnesota is a statewide electronic portfolio infrastructure for Minnesota institutions, educators, students, workers, and citizens that can serve as an online version of a person’s resume. However, unlike a paper resume, an e-portfolio can include documents, links to related sites, examples of a person’s efforts and activities, and greater detail on a person’s accomplishments. It allows Minnesota residents to document their academic, personal, and professional achievements online, free of charge. There is also the Seamless Project to make it easy for students to move around the system and a new policy on credit for prior learning.

Minnesota Online’s Strategy and Target Populations

The system’s program--Minnesota Online--has reached success in giving access to learning for adults because all the campuses have made a concerted effort to improve access via online learning.

Through years of hard work and dedication, Minnesota State Colleges and Universities’ staff reached the goal of providing a broad-based e-curriculum. “These efforts have included three rounds of funding for e-Curriculum development; increased collaboration in the development of programs; training of faculty through the Center for Teaching and Learning; development of centralized services, such as Call Center, D2L Technical Help Desk, tutoring, etc. that augment campus programs; and a Minnesota Online Council that is a representative body of campus faculty, administrators, and students to guide the development of the programs and services needed to deliver the access and opportunity needed by adult learners.”

Minnesota Online now strives to meet the needs of seven learner segments, several of which typically consist of students over the age of 25:

- 1) Corporate Learners who work for private sector companies and are seeking education to advance their careers. The purchase decision is made by the corporation and not by the individual acting alone. Corporate Learners demand a broad range of educational services.
- 2) Professional Enhancement Learners who are seeking to advance their careers or shift careers. They are interested in advanced degrees or non-degree work that furthers their career. They may be employed full- or part-time.
- 3) Degree Completion Adult Learners who are seeking to complete a degree at an older age and are often balancing work and family needs with their educational goals.
- 4) Life Fulfillment Learners who are interested in education for its own sake. They enjoy learning

and the academic environment and view additional education as a source of personal development or as a hobby.

In addition, Minnesota Online also seeks to assist the following segments:

- 5) “College Experience” Learners who are preparing for life. They are 18- to 24-year-old residential college students for whom the “coming of age” process that occurs in college is often as important as specific academic learning.
- 6) Pre-College (K-12) Learners who are interested in taking baccalaureate-level work prior to completion of secondary school.
- 7) Remediation and Test Prep Learners who are interested in learning as a prerequisite for an examination or enrollment in another program.

Future Plans

In the future, Minnesota Online administration will continue to develop online curriculum. The organization is now developing a unique assessment gaming tool that will measure a student’s subject knowledge and decision-making skills. New this year is the addition of SMARTTHINKING for 24-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week online tutoring. Plans are also underway for enhancing online library services.

“Minnesota Online has also been a leader in the development of learning objects so that curriculum can be high quality and reusable throughout our systems and other partners. We now have an asynchronous home health care program totally based on learning objects that is a national model. We have also created a repository for use by faculty to build, share and use digital objects. In addition, Minnesota Online is a partner in MERLOT, an internationally known learning objects repository and one of the leaders of MERLOT’s program for building and sharing workforce learning objects,” Baer said.

Minnesota Online anticipates a 20 percent growth for 2006-2007 and beyond. Currently about 5.8 percent of the total system FYE consists of online learners. According to Baer, this is up from 3 percent two years ago and does not take into account a much greater percentage of blended learners, that is, those enrolled in courses that combine online and face-to-face learning.

The staff of Minnesota Online is excited about receiving CAEL’s Institutional Service Award on November 11 and the recognition it will bring for their years of work and program development.

“We are very honored to receive this award as recognition for the collective work of our colleges and universities in collaborating to better serve students in Minnesota and beyond,” Baer said. “We are excited to continue serving students in new ways into the 21st century.”