

Western Association of Schools and Colleges

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Pamela Tate, President and CEO, CAEL

Good morning! It is a pleasure to be here with you at the annual WASC meeting to discuss a new framework for thinking about how to improve the way colleges and universities serve adult learners. Since CAEL was founded 28 years ago as a national non-profit membership association of colleges and universities, our mission has been to expand lifelong learning opportunities for adults—and we are delighted to have the opportunity to share the results of our latest work with you today.

I am sure that many of you are probably asking yourselves how your institution can possibly attend to the adult learner—whom you probably think of as an older student returning after many years away from formal education—at a time when you are under increasing pressure to respond to the growing challenge most institutions across the country are grappling with—the enrollment “echo boom” that is now moving through and emerging from our nation’s high schools. Especially for those of you from California, where many policymakers are calling this “echo boom” a looming crisis, adult learners may seem a less urgent priority.

But this morning I would like to challenge that assumption that adult learners can be a lower priority—and begin a new conversation with you about who the adult learner actually is and why Adult Learning Focused Institutions (ALFI’s, for short)—a new term CAEL has created that I’ll be telling you more about today-- are critically important **especiall**y now—for both the older adult learner and the younger “adult learner” that you will increasingly be serving.

First, let me describe the dimensions of this “echo boom” for the nation as a whole and especially for California and Hawaii.

You may be familiar with the 2000 ETS study by Tony Carnevale and Richard Fry called “Crossing the Great Divide,” which estimates numbers of higher education enrollments between now and the year 2015. This study outlines all the reasons why higher education leaders and policymakers need to be concerned about the echo boom:

- the strain on the physical capacity of the higher education system to accommodate more students;
- the under-preparation of large portions of that population from high schools;
- the vast disparities in enrollment rates that vary by income level;
- the huge influx of minority students, traditionally underrepresented in higher education;
- and the financial needs of students who must pay escalating tuition costs.

The ETS researchers estimated that in California in 1995, some 919,000 undergraduates of traditional college-going age (18-24 years old) were enrolled in public and private colleges, and by 2015, that number will grow to 1,450,000—a 57% increase—over 500,000 students.

In Hawaii, the scale is smaller, but the growth projection is equally impressive. In 1995 about 33,000 undergraduates were 18-24 years old, and by 2015 that number will increase to about 44,000—a 33% increase.

Many of you in California may have already seen the more recent 2001 report by EdFUND called “The California Dream and Its Future: Indicators of Educational and Economic Opportunity in the Golden State.” In this report, the authors claim that by 2010, the California population will increase by approximately 5 million people, half of whom will be under the age of 25. The authors call this growth “Tidal Wave II”—and the result of it will be that undergraduate enrollment is projected to increase by more than 700,000, far exceeding growth in any other state. To give you some point of comparison, they note that this number is equivalent to the enrollment in 21 additional medium-sized CSU campuses!!

The profile of the new enrollees, however, will be, as you know, quite different than that of earlier student generations. Nearly three-quarters of the projected increase in 18-24 year olds will be Hispanic, Asian or African American. Equally important, more of the state’s postsecondary students, both those traditionally aged and the older adults, will have lower incomes on average.

Making higher education affordable and accessible for these “non-traditional” 18-24 year old undergraduates, many of whom will be parents and workers while enrolled as students, will be, therefore, critically important. I will return to these younger adult learners in a few moments.

But even as all the attention has been focused on the growth in 18-24 year olds, what is easy to miss is that there is a huge population of older adult learners which is also going to be growing—perhaps not quite as fast, but still noteworthy.

Carnevale and Fry estimated that in California in 1995, undergraduates over 25 years old numbered about 963,000—or in other words, a number about 5% larger than the 18-24 year old pool I have just mentioned. In that year, about a third of California State University undergraduates were 25 years or older, and about

55% of California's Community College students were as well. And that pool, too, will be growing, adding about 200,000 more students by 2015. That's a 20% increase!!

And there is a huge untapped market of adult learners to be served that cannot be overlooked—Measuring Up 2000 by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education pointed out that only 4.3% of working aged adults in California—those between 25 and 44 years old—were enrolled in some type of postsecondary education.

In Hawaii, the 25 and older undergraduates in 1995 numbered about 30,000, or slightly less than their younger counterparts. But by the year 2015, there will be 8,000 more adult learners in Hawaii—an adult student growth rate of 26%. There is also a huge untapped market of adult learners in Hawaii—Measuring Up 2000 noted that only 3.3% of working age adults in Hawaii were enrolled in some type of postsecondary education.

Think of the room for growth in both states if higher education proactively reached out to this adult learner population!!

I think you all know the reasons for this projected growth in older adult learner enrollments—those over 25. A primary driver, as national surveys demonstrate, is that people now understand that learning is the key to success in the New Economy—and to employability over a lifetime. Though individual workers may not know the statistics, it is becoming increasingly clear to them that earnings increase with educational attainment. One example will illustrate this point: In 1975, the annual earnings differential (in 1998 dollars) between high school graduates and those with bachelor's degrees was about \$13,020. Over a 40 year working lifetime, this converted to a \$520,000 benefit to the college-educated. But by 1999, the annual difference was \$20,188, or \$808,000 over a working lifetime of 40 years. Thus, the lifetime

earnings premium for a college education increased by about \$288,000.

Many researchers have also come to the conclusion that more and more jobs require at least some college—the ETS researchers, for example, estimate that in 1959, only about 20% of our workforce needed some education beyond high school to do their jobs—but that today, that figure has risen to 56%. Employers are demanding people with higher educational and skill levels, and in many cases are willing to provide their own funds to help build the skills of their current employees.

So, we are clearly in the early days of Tidal Wave II—and while all the focus is on building capacity to meet the challenge—it is essential that we put in place the policies and practices that will improve the chances of success for this rapidly growing population of both older and younger “adult learners”. We must help them achieve the learning outcomes we expect to see in undergraduate education, but equally important we must provide the support systems that will remove the barriers faced by working adults at any age.

I would suggest that CAEL’s Adult Learning Focused Institution (ALFI) initiative can provide some answers. But before I move to a more comprehensive description of the ALFI principles and where we are taking them, let me take a moment to reflect on the question of who is the adult learner in today’s economy. I think it is time to redefine adult learners—no longer connecting the term to age, as in 25 years or older, but connecting it to a person’s life circumstances. People who are independent from their parents, people who have competing responsibilities such as work and family and community involvement—these people are adult learners. We know that most part-time students, for example, must go to school part-time because of these competing responsibilities.

Let's not forget that in 1999 in California, part-time students already represented 57% of all postsecondary enrollment, and there is no reason to think that this will change over the next eight to ten years given the lower income, ethnically diverse population coming into higher education. Regardless of the *age* of the adult learner, therefore, it is essential that we give serious attention to their special needs and life circumstances.

The ALFI Initiative

It is this growth in numbers of adult learners and this expanding definition of who adult learners *are* that in part motivated CAEL in 1998 to undertake the national benchmarking study of “best practice” institutions in serving adult learners—which has in turn led to a vision of what an Adult Learning Focused Institution *should* look like, what it *should* be doing. Eight guiding principles for an ALFI have emerged from our benchmarking study—and though there won't be time this morning to deal in depth with all of them, I will mention them briefly, focusing only on a few of the principles.

I'd like to provide a bit of perspective about how our ALFI initiative—and the specific principle in it about assessment of learning outcomes-- relates to CAEL's early work in assessing prior learning—the learning that adults have gained through life and work experience that is then assessed by college faculty for credit toward a degree.

When CAEL was founded in 1974, older adults were becoming the new market in higher education, and colleges had no way of recognizing their college-level learning earned outside the classroom other than by course challenge examinations.

You may know that CAEL, in collaboration with a number of colleges and universities, pioneered the concept of prior learning assessment by portfolio—which is based on the idea that if adults

have gained college level learning through their life or work experience, and if that learning can be documented and assessed through a variety of methods by faculty—then the person should not have to repeat that learning at the college and should be awarded credit.

Many of the points in WASC’s own credit for prior experiential learning policy, in fact, appear to be inspired by CAEL’s ten standards of assessment—for example, WASC policy point #6 which emphasizes that credit decisions must be made by faculty with appropriate credentials, and policy point #8, which states that steps must be taken to ensure that no duplicate credit is awarded.

(This is not to say, however, that CAEL and WASC agree on all points—in fact, we strongly disagree with policy point #1 that states that credit for prior learning may be awarded only at the undergraduate level. The very principle that underlies prior learning assessment is violated by this policy: if a learner can demonstrate knowledge at the appropriate level, whether graduate or undergraduate, and if a faculty member with the appropriate credentials agrees that this person has the learning, why should the learning not be counted toward the degree? In our experience, many adults return to higher education for graduate degrees in areas related to their careers—where they may have gained substantial graduate level training or learning—and I cannot find a logical reason to unilaterally exclude such learning from being considered for a graduate degree.)

In any case, our research shows that today, nearly three quarters of the nation’s colleges and universities have at least some processes in place for the assessment of prior learning, and about half of all colleges use individualized methods for PLA that go beyond testing. Thousands of faculty both in the United States and abroad have been trained by CAEL to be assessors—training that many faculty have found helpful as they work on the assessment of

student learning outcomes on their campuses. Prior Learning Assessment is, after all, about assessment and documentation of student *learning*—so the process for assessing college-sponsored learning is quite similar to the assessment and documentation of prior learning.

The second reason that we launched the benchmarking study that led to our current ALFI national initiative is that we took on the management of large-scale tuition assistance and educational advising programs for companies throughout the country during the late 1980's and 1990s as a way of broadening access to lifelong learning—and this gave us first-hand experience with how well colleges serve adults overall.

Today, we manage tuition assistance and educational advising programs for over a half million adult workers so that they can get the help they need in returning to school, and we directly counsel over 100,000 employees annually about how and where to return to college to use their tuition assistance benefits. It is clear from the point of view of both employers and employees that significant changes need to be made in the policies and practices of many colleges and universities, particularly those in the four-year public sector.

Enter the CAEL benchmarking study in 1998 to define and discover best practices in serving adult learners.

In cooperation with the American Productivity and Quality Center, which is nationally known for its benchmarking experience, we sought nominations of best practice institutions nationwide. After surveying 63 nominated institutions, we received 34 responses, 6 from 2-year public colleges, 10 from 4-year public colleges, 17 from 4-year private colleges, 1 from a public system, and 1 from a graduate-only private institution. Through a blind rating system based on criteria we developed with the help of other experts in the

adult learning field, we selected six institutions for a site visit—and found that we had selected two four-year public colleges—Empire State College in New York and Athabasca University in Canada; three four-year private colleges—Marylhurst University in Oregon, the School of New Resources at the College of New Rochelle in New York, and the School for New Learning at DePaul University in Chicago; and one community college, Sinclair Community College in Ohio.

From the characteristics of these six high performing, adult-learner oriented institutions, and from the feedback of people in higher education, business and labor in the United States and Canada, we crafted the eight ALFI principles which I would like to outline for you today.

I would like to note the fact that we have been fortunate to receive major funding from three foundations to carry this work forward: the Pew Charitable Trusts, which funded the development and dissemination of the principles, including the creation of an ALFI Workbook to help institutions with self-assessment; The Ford Foundation, which is funding the application of certain of the eight principles with community colleges and their state policymakers in two states; and the Lumina Foundation, which has recently agreed to support the development of an institutional self-assessment tool, the development of an adult learner survey based on the principles, and a pilot project to enable institutions to try them out. We chose to work with our favorite assessment guru Peter Ewell on the institutional self-assessment tool and are currently recruiting our first cohort of institutions to pilot its use.

Based on our research experience and the benchmarking study, we have developed the following eight principles to span the entire institution rather than simply covering the teaching and learning domain. We think of the principles as interrelated and that the ALFI “whole” cannot be achieved without all the parts.

The first principle of effectiveness we identified relates to **Outreach:**

“The institution conducts its outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers in time, place, and tradition in order to create lifelong access to educational opportunities.”

Unlike traditional institutions that recruit primarily through high schools, ALFI institutions must reach out to adults in a variety of ways including on-line recruitment, workplace recruitment and through other organizations. This outreach is essential because adults need help in gaining access and getting enculturated into the institution. One example of an outreach practice we observed in several ALFIs is that they conducted workplace-based recruitment so that adults did not have to come to campus.

The second principle deals with **Life and Career Planning:**

“The institution addresses adult learners’ life and career goals before or at the onset of enrollment in order to assess and align its capacities to help learners reach their goals.”

For adults, life and career goals are more integral to their learning objectives, and therefore, attention to life and career goals becomes intrinsic to their motivation for learning and their persistence. It is not something that can be left for a decision until the senior year as is often the case with full-time younger students. Some of the ALFI practices we observed that illustrated this principle were courses to assist students in the preparation of their portfolio of prior learning; and “discovery” workshops offered to adults early in their enrollment to help them clarify their career and educational goals.

The third principle is related to **Financing**:

“The institution promotes choice using an array of payment options for adult learners in order to expand equity and financial flexibility.”

In the face of the increasing numbers of low income learners coming into higher education that I spoke about earlier this morning, and knowing that lack of time, money, childcare, and transportation are the biggest barriers adults face, this financing principle is a high priority for us. Two of the ALFI practices we observed were institution-funded ‘gift aid’ for part-time and adult learners; and allowing students coming from employer-paid tuition assistance programs to defer payment of tuition until late in the semester.

The fourth principle, one I have already introduced, relates to the **Assessment of Learning Outcomes**, a principle I know is key to accreditation processes.

“ The institution defines and assesses the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired by adult learners both from the curriculum and from life/work experience in order to assign credit and confer degrees with rigor.”

We have always asserted—based on experiential learning research and theory--that learning and assessment are intertwined and inseparable. We found that many institutions that catered to adults had intentionally brought them together. In addition to the obvious ALFI practice of awarding credit for prior learning using multiple methods of assessment, there are several other practices worth mention—especially those instances where students were encouraged to do self-assessment as a critical part of the learning process. We also observed instances where institutions had

integrated industry-developed skills standards into their curricula and developed excellent methods to assess their competencies and skills.

The fifth principle has to do with the **Teaching/Learning Process**:

“The institution’s faculty use multiple methods of instruction (including experiential and problem-based methods) for adult learners in order to connect curricular concepts to useful knowledge and skills.”

I remember when I first spoke about this principle at a national meeting of the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association a couple years ago, one of the SHEEO’s asked me: “Why isn’t this a principle institutions should apply to all learners, not just adult learners? Shouldn’t colleges be teaching this way with all students?” Indeed, many of these principles would be relevant if you just wanted to be a Learning Focused Institution rather than an ALFI. Current research on experiential learning has demonstrated the efficacy of combining theory and practice in order to enhance and embed learning—and some of the best teachers we know do this intuitively.

We observed many interesting practices in this area among ALFIs, including community service and internship options within courses for adults, and the use of employees’ worksites as the source of case studies for interventions and research.

I’m sure that you won’t be surprised that there is a principle regarding **Student Support Systems**, which I have alluded to a number of times today:

“The institution assists adult learners using comprehensive academic and student support systems in order to enhance students’ capacities to become self-directed, lifelong learners.”

This is an important principle because of the diverse range of needs and circumstances adults bring to higher education. We observed a number of interesting ALFI practices, such as offering childcare services and referrals; providing links to social services, community-based organizations and family support networks; extending office hours for student services to weekends, evenings and on-line; and creating cohort groupings for peer support. Success in school while one is working and raising children, often as a single parent with a meager income, takes unusual initiative and persistence, and we cannot underestimate the importance of these kinds of innovative approaches to student support.

The seventh principle relates to the institution's use of **Technology:**

“The institution uses information technology to provide relevant and timely information and to enhance the learning experience.”

Though we did not come to the conclusion that on-line “everything” was the key to being an ALFI—and in fact we encountered examples in which ALFIs were not yet deeply into providing on-line learning options—remember that the benchmarking study was done in 1998-1999—we did come to the conclusion that web-enabled self-service options for obtaining information and assistance were going to be increasingly necessary; and that ALFI institutions were already on the track of enhancing student learning experiences through the web. While this is not a surprise to you, I am sure, I want to point out that just because an institution is offering extensive on-line learning courses and programs does not necessarily mean that it is adult learning focused—so use of technology is an important ingredient but by no means a sufficient one.

And last, the principle related to **Strategic Partnerships**:

“ The institution engages in strategic relationships, partnerships, and collaborations with employers and other organizations in order to develop and improve educational opportunities for adult learners.”

This was the last principle to emerge from our study, and a critically important one. If most of your younger and older adult learners will be working—either full or part time—understanding the context within which they are learning, and forming strategic alliances with employers, are essential.

I have a particular interest in this one because of the extensive work we do in the private sector to create new educational partnerships between institutions and industry coalitions—and to influence corporate policy so that there will be a broader and more lasting investment in learning and development. For example, we organized the major employers and labor unions in the telecommunications industry to create, in partnership with Pace University in New York, a national on-line associate’s degree in telecommunications technology. The companies provide up front tuition that covers the entire cost of the program, and they play an active role in curriculum development and review and marketing. We handle the website and the national marketing, and serve as a manager of the coalition and the partnership. Pace has already seen over 2000 enrollments since the program began! This partnership has had a major effect on both the companies and the university—and Pace is a lot closer to being an ALFI today than it was three and a half years ago when this effort began.

In our ALFI benchmarking study, we found colleges that had dedicated specific staff to conducting outreach to employers and community organizations to build these kinds of partnerships, institutions that had formed exchanges in which faculty worked in

industry while company representatives became adjunct faculty; and those that had created customized degree and certificate programs in collaboration with an employer. In including this principle, I want to make sure you know that we are not referring to customized, non-credit training programs that many institutions already have in place; we are referring to true collaborative ventures in which certificate and degree-related programs are developed, exchanges of personnel occur, outreach to employees is shared, and learners are assisted in making the transition between the workplace and the academy.

What I have shared with you this morning, are not just eight principles that characterize a few institutions we observed. More important than the details of what we found or the metrics that are being developed to measure whether institutions are engaging in each of the ALFI practices *is* that in our view, Adult Learning Focused Institutions embody a holistic, new approach to serving students and to achieving student learning outcomes.

It is for this reason that we are actively seeking continuing funding to build a voluntary benchmarking consortium of those institutions that want to make the transition to ALFI status—institutions that will be able to use our survey and self-assessment tool to:

- obtain scores on how they are doing on the eight principles;
- compare their institutional results with consortium results; yet at the same time not risk having their results made public without their consent;
- determine where they need our assistance or the assistance of their peers to improve their scores.

We will also be working at the state level in concert with others to influence policymakers to introduce this framework, and we will be building consumer awareness of ALFI by producing guidebooks

that can be distributed to the tuition assistance offices of employers.

But trying to provide the leadership and support needed for institutional change through the ALFI framework is only one piece of the puzzle of what is necessary to remove the barriers to lifelong learning.

We are also working on two other legs of the stool: building supportive public policies that will enhance access to educational opportunities, and continuing to influence the policies of employers so that they will provide more support for the learning of their employees. Our conception is that if this country is to truly be a learning society, policies and practices must be changed in all sectors.

Before I close, I will mention one exciting example of our efforts to influence policies in the public sector.

The Ford Foundation and a number of smaller regional and national funders are supporting our national demonstration in three cities of a new mechanism we have created for financing lifelong learning—Lifelong Learning Accounts, or LiLA's. If we are able to pass federal tax credit legislation to introduce LiLA's, and we are actively working to do that right now, adults could invest in their own tax deductible Lifelong Learning Account, the money would be matched by their employers up to a dollar limit per year, and the money could be used for any career-related learning they chose throughout their lives—for non-credit courses, credit courses, books, and related expenses. If they left that employer, the account could be taken with them to their next employer. Employers who contributed to LiLA's would get a tax credit—and savings in a LiLA would not affect other forms of financial aid the adult would be eligible for.

We have just launched the first LiLA demonstration project in Chicago, and have been able to open this opportunity to 125 low income adult learners in the restaurant industry. For most of them, this will be their first opportunity to engage in postsecondary education. Restaurant owners have been responsive to our arguments about education and training being a good investment—and we already have more employees who want to participate than there is room for in the demonstration.

What I hope those employees will find, when they and their employers have saved enough money so that they can attend a college in the Chicago area, are ALFI institutions ready to embrace them and help them succeed. And that, I think, is what we need in every state and city: a critical mass of ALFI institutions that will step out of the traditional mold and find new ways to serve the diverse workforce in our communities.

I have appreciated the opportunity to share our vision of adult learning with you this morning, and look forward to working closely with your institutions and with WASC as we move forward.

And if any of you are interested in pursuing these ideas with us, there are several options: first, you can refer to our website at www.cael.org for further information; you can order executive summaries of the eight principles and the benchmarking study; you can order our first book on the six best practice institutions in the benchmarking study; you can participate in our annual conference Nov. 7-9, 2002 in Washington, D.C. to hear presentations from some best practice ALFI institutions; or you can use the website to let us know that your institution would like to be a part of the next phase of the ALFI initiative.

Thank you. I look forward to our work together.