



Empowering Adults: CAEL's Vision for Economic Advancement through Public Policy and State Strategies

For 50 years, CAEL (the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning), has been at the forefront of the paradigm shift toward recognizing the unique needs of adult learners and workers. CAEL's [theory of change](#) recognizes that adults not only want and need additional education and training throughout their lives, but their participation in such opportunities is necessary for collective economic opportunity and growth. Postsecondary education and training systems need to continue to adapt to better serve them. In the process of supporting more accessible and effective programs and solutions for adult learner success, CAEL became a catalyst for increasing the quality of postsecondary education and training for all students.

Initially — and continuing to this day — CAEL has been a leader in helping postsecondary institutions recognize and value learning in all its forms, particularly learning acquired through work, life, and military experiences. Over time, CAEL's focus has expanded to helping a broader set of entities — postsecondary systems, workforce agencies, labor unions, economic development organizations, and employers — adapt and collaborate to advance adult learner engagement, recruitment, persistence, and success. These decades of experiences across the country have revealed numerous best practices and lessons learned that have important implications for public policy.

Our country is wrestling with a myriad of issues including student debt and affordability, race and gender inequities, postsecondary education enrollment declines, labor shortages in key industries, generational poverty and inequality, and global economic competitiveness. Through all of this, there is increasing recognition that policies that target adults result in economic gains for individuals, businesses, and communities alike.

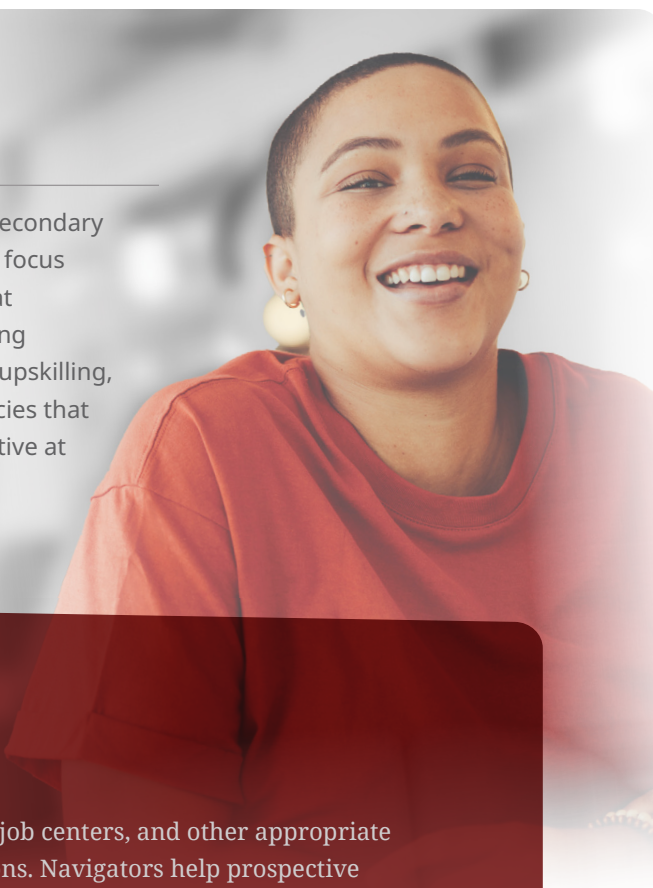
Over the past year, CAEL has engaged our members, partners, and staff to explore the ways we might advocate for public policy reform that would benefit even greater numbers of adult learners and workers. These priorities are intended to be high-level yet scalable enough to be applied to federal, state, and sometimes even local policies. In fact, many of the potential policy solutions listed have already been adopted at the state, local, or even institutional level with success. Some potential policy solutions are also being considered actively at the federal level. The hope is that this helps propel the case for thoughtful consideration of advancing these policies. CAEL looks forward to working with our partners, policymakers, and peer advocate organizations to move these policies toward adoption.



Collectively, we can proactively shape policies that resonate across federal, state, and local landscapes.

CENTERING THE ADULT LEARNER

Adult learners have often been an afterthought when it comes to postsecondary education and training, as our nation has for too long maintained laser focus on the seamless high school graduate to four-year college pipeline. That conversation is changing with today's ever-changing economy, increasing automation and AI, and the growing recognition that lifelong learning, upskilling, and reskilling are necessary for economic growth and opportunity. Policies that center the adult learner and their unique circumstances are more effective at recruiting, retaining, and helping these students succeed.



POLICIES THAT | SUPPORT THE ADULT LEARNER

- Supporting adult learner navigators at institutions, one-stop job centers, and other appropriate locations such as libraries and community-based organizations. Navigators help prospective adult learners navigate the education, workforce, and support services ecosystem to recruit more students and set them up for success with holistic support.
- Supporting increased usage of credit for prior learning (CPL). At the federal level this could mean allowing the Pell Grant or Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) to be used to cover assessment fees. At the state level, this could look like issuing guidance on how other entities (workforce boards, employers) can partner on CPL and supporting institutions in implementing CPL (fee waivers, transfer agreements, articulation agreements, etc.).
- Encouraging seamless attainment of postsecondary credit and/or credentials for experiential learning, including apprenticeship, on-the-job training, military experience, immigrant experience and education, etc. and facilitating standardization of those credits across postsecondary institutions.
- Increasing support for and adoption of Integrated Education and Training (IET) models in career-focused postsecondary education and training programs.
- Removing punitive barriers to re-enrollment, such as transfer holds for unpaid fees.
- Providing a second chance for adult learners in regulations for Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP), including establishing additional ways for adult learners to appeal SAP-related loss of awards.

ENHANCING ACCESSIBILITY THROUGH AFFORDABILITY

While students of all ages often need additional financial support to succeed in postsecondary education and training, adults have unique needs that must be met with a unique set of policy solutions. [Research](#) has shown that the number one concern of adult learners in considering returning to school or training is affordability. This can and often does mean tuition, but it often also means affording things like childcare or transportation. It can also include the fear of or inability to forgo wages due to prioritizing school instead of work. Policy solutions should aim to provide direct stipends or up-front disbursements whenever possible, as after-the-fact reimbursements can be burdensome for students.

POLICIES THAT | ADDRESS AFFORDABILITY

- Funding last-dollar grants that reduce tuition for adults attending college.
- Providing tuition-free education and training for in-demand industries and occupations.
- Increasing the value of the Pell Grant and making it applicable to quality shorter-term programs.
- Funding support services for basic needs that increase education and/or employment outcomes such as childcare, transportation, textbooks, internet access, emergency funds, etc.
- Expanding earn-and-learn programs such as registered apprenticeship.
- Supporting expansion of employer tuition supports for upskilling, including doubling the amount of tax-deductible tuition reimbursement that employers can provide their employees.
- Supporting efforts to incentivize additional employer educational assistance through matched-dollar, portable Lifelong Learning Accounts.
- Reducing or eliminating fees for CPL, application fees, etc., for example by allowing Title IV Financial Aid and/or WIOA funds to pay for CPL fees.
- Using data to increase transparency around costs and return on investment for different education and training programs without compromising student privacy.
- Creating more paths to Ability to Benefit, which allows students without a high school equivalency to gain access to the Pell Grant and other Title IV financial support.



UNLEASHING THE POWER OF TRANSFORMATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

Strong partnerships among education, workforce, community-based organizations, and employers are vital to anyone of any age pursuing postsecondary education or job training. They are especially consequential for adults who are navigating an overwhelming and unclear ecosystem in order to try to reskill or upskill and who are dependent on finding work that pays a family-sustaining wage after their program of study is over. For them, the connection with employers that provide quality jobs is of particular importance and helps reduce some of the opportunity cost associated with returning to education and training. Deepening and increasing these partnerships are important to achieving successful economic outcomes for people, business, and postsecondary education.

POLICIES THAT | ENCOURAGE AND STRENGTHEN PARTNERSHIPS

- Increasing reliable and predictable funding for the public workforce system to support the development and management of partnerships that improve outcomes for adult learners.
- Scaling usage of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) to increase funding for third party partnerships and reimbursements for tuition and supportive services for SNAP-eligible students.
- Aligning WIOA, SNAP E&T, Temporary Assistance for Needy Family (TANF), and other key funding streams to support postsecondary education and workforce, such as through combined state plans.
- Expanding work-based learning programs that have close connections with employers.
- Supporting education-employer partnerships that offer training and education aligned with industry needs and with commitments for hiring and recruitment.
- Supporting industry sector partnerships and intermediary organizations to convene such partnerships.
- Incentivizing partnerships beyond workforce, education, and employers, including but not limited to libraries, community-based organizations, department of corrections, faith-based organizations, housing and hunger organizations, etc. that improve attainment of education and/or employment outcomes.
- Support data sharing partnerships that connect education with workforce and labor data, with the ability to analyze demographics such as race and gender.

By focusing on adult learners, improving affordability, and fostering partnerships we can set the stage for a future where all learners and workers thrive and contribute to economic prosperity. Collectively, we can proactively shape policies that resonate across federal, state, and local landscapes. We look forward to collaborating on these transformative efforts.

CAEL would like to thank our Policy Advisory Group for their time, effort, and feedback into crafting these policy priorities. In addition, thanks to select members of Energy Providers Coalition for Education (EPCE), the National Alliance for Communications Technology Education and Learning (NACTEL), and CAEL's Advisory Council and staff, who also provided feedback.

CAEL POLICY ADVISORY GROUP

DR. AMY BELCASTRO

*Professor of Education, School of Education
Southern Oregon University*

SEAN CAREY

*Interim Associate Dean, Career Programs
Wilbur Wright Community College*

ELIZABETH "E" COLE

*Director, Outreach and Partnerships
Rio Salado College*

DR. JENNIE HARROP

*Associate Dean, Adult Degree Programs
George Fox University*

DR. SUSAN C. LANE

*Higher Education Strategic and
Leadership Consultant*

ANGELIQUE MAGUIRE

*Director of Adult Education Instructional Services
Illinois Eastern Community Colleges*

JESSE McCREE

*Chief Executive Officer
South Central PA Works*

TONY MATAMOROS

*Director of Student Engagement and
Completion Services
South Texas College*

JOHANNA PRADO

*Director, Center for Degree Completion
and Adult Learning
William Paterson University*

TRACY ROBINSON

*Executive Director, Center for Regional
Economic Enrichment
University of Memphis*

DR. TRACY SCHOOLCRAFT

*Associate Provost and Interim Dean of
Exploratory Studies
Shippensburg University*

WALTER L. SIMMONS

*President and Chief Executive Officer
Employ Prince George's, Inc.*

For questions or to collaborate, please contact:



Rachel Hirsch

Vice President, Public Partnerships | rhirsch@cael.org



Recognizing that adult learners are the backbone of the U.S. economy, CAEL helps forge a clear, viable connection between education and career success, providing solutions that promote sustainable and equitable economic growth. CAEL opens doors to opportunity in collaboration with workforce and economic developers; postsecondary educators; employers and industry groups; and foundations and other mission-aligned organizations. By engaging with these stakeholders, we foster a culture of innovative, lifelong learning that helps individuals and their communities thrive. A membership organization established in 1974, CAEL is Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Workplace™ certified and is a part of Strada Collaborative, a mission-driven nonprofit. Learn more at cael.org and stradacollaborative.org.