

# CAEL's New Peer Matching Membership Program Debuts with Advancing Delta Talent Partnership



This article originally appeared on The EvoLLLution® — an online newspaper exclusively for and by those who understand higher education best.

**PARTNERSHIPS ARE KEY TO GROWTH AND SUCCESS. BY BUILDING STRONGER CONNECTIONS, INSTITUTIONS CAN COME TOGETHER TO BETTER SERVE THEIR COMMUNITY AND EXPAND REACH TO ADULT LEARNERS.**

In September 2022, the Council of Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) launched the Advancing Delta Talent (ADT) initiative with a grant from the Delta Regional Authority, working in partnership with the U.S. Department of Labor. This grant is specifically intended to improve the economic opportunity for residents in the Mississippi River Delta region of Arkansas and Mississippi. CAEL is partnering with two community colleges in the area: Arkansas State University Mid-South (ASU-MS), a predominantly black institution (PBI) in West Memphis, Arkansas and Coahoma Community College (CCC), a historically Black college or university (HBCU) in Clarksdale, Mississippi. This region has a rich history of civil rights activism and was hit especially hard during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A busy transportation hub for the country, the area has extensive hiring needs and is home to many residents actively seeking career advancement or growth. Through the ADT program, CAEL is supporting these partner institutions to create and grow existing academic pathways and student-

centered programs that will prepare students for economic mobility and growth in their communities, using partnerships with local employers and workforce development boards.

This important work will encompass a variety of program initiatives, including assessing how well the institutions are serving adult learners through comprehensive student satisfaction surveys, developing and implementing credit for prior learning (CPL) process and policy and offering wraparound student services. With a strong focus on equity in access and outcomes, residents of several local counties will be eligible to participate, including people of color, adult learners, displaced workers, un- or underemployed workers, economically disadvantaged residents, justice-involved individuals and high school students entering specific workforce-related programs. CAEL is excited to be participating in this work and is eager to provide technical assistance as well as customized, curated membership benefits for these new partners.

Both ASU-MS and CCC became members at CAEL when the ADT program started. Since it was first established, CAEL's members have been part of a vibrant community of higher education institutions, workforce development boards and employer partners working together to uplift adult learners and support economic empowerment. Member benefits are robust and include access to this community of industry leaders as well as resources, tools, training and discounts on many CAEL services. In rolling out the ADT initiative, CAEL is piloting another benefit to the member experience: peer matching.

Peer matching is the partnering of CAEL members to create strong community ties and foster an environment in which members can learn from one another. By identifying both strengths and opportunities for growth within our member community, CAEL will be able to pinpoint specific areas of need and skill and link institutions through mentoring teams. A work in progress for some time, the ADT partnership was the right opportunity for CAEL to open the door to a more curated, peer-connected membership experience.

According to Jeannie McCarron, Vice-President of Member Engagement at CAEL, planning for peer matching had been underway as part of a strategic focus on membership, and the launch of ADT provided the perfect opportunity to pilot the peer matching program with these two new members. Not only are they similar in region and student population, but there are specific areas of expertise they can share with each other to strengthen student engagement in targeted academic programs. Ms. McCarron explained that the goal of peer matching

is to build the capacity of CAEL's current members by leveraging the experience of partners with greater expertise. In the case of ASU-MS and CCC, one such area is that of artificial and virtual reality (AR/VR).

Christine Carpenter, Senior Vice-President of Engagement at CAEL, shared that many CAEL employer partners have developed complex training and onboarding programs using AR/VR technology. By relying on their expertise, CAEL can assist faculty at each institution in determining the appropriate use of this technology for their adult learners. Both ASU-MS and CCC have implemented limited applications of AR/VR in programs that align with regional hiring needs. By creating partnerships between employers and higher education institutions, ASU-MS and CCC will have access to cutting-edge implementation strategies and techniques employed by the very industry leaders who may be employing their future graduates.

Additionally, both institutions will be encouraged to partner with each other. For the last year, ASU-MS has been undergoing extensive training and development in online education. Leveraging their skills and experience, ASU-MS can share their implementation process, guiding CCC as they implement and update their online offerings. By building these connections among members, CAEL hopes to foster a community of collaboration and peer support and create an environment in which members are able to learn from their peers' experiences to supplement their own growth.

Though still in the early stages, CAEL hopes to expand the peer matching program to other members over time. CAEL's widely recognized and implemented Adult Learner 360 (AL360) student satisfaction survey has collected many years of data from student and staff responses to questions regarding institutional support areas, including life and career planning, teaching and learning, and change management. By reviewing high-scoring institutions, CAEL intends to seek out best-in-class institutions across the country that have proven successes in a variety

of specific areas to partner with institutions that demonstrate a need in that space. Because of the AL360 data's complexity and specificity, an institution may be both a mentor in one area and a mentee in another, as the questions and analysis cover a wide variety of content.

CAEL ambassadors, a segment of the CAEL membership identified as leaders with subject matter expertise, will be the earliest members selected to act as mentors. As the program continues to expand and new members are identified as potential mentors or mentees, there will be additional opportunities to collaborate and engage with other institutions experiencing similar challenges and opportunities.

This will occur both online using [caelCONNECT](#) and at the annual [CAEL conference](#) happening in Baltimore in November 2023. Membership at CAEL is eager and excited to implement this program with the ADT partners as part of the overall focus on a more curated and customized membership experience. With new assessment tools, peer partnerships and a comprehensive onboarding process, CAEL members will receive the connections and guidance most beneficial to meeting their current and future needs.

As the ADT partners build their connection to each other — and to other CAEL mentors — they will be able to expand their reach to the adult learners in the community, ultimately advancing both their institutions and the people around them. CAEL strives to uplift all learners toward economic mobility and equitable futures, and we are enthusiastic that peer matching will enable us to do so effectively and meaningfully with our members. This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the view or policies of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.



As Director of Initiatives, Kari Shafenberg focuses on helping the organization's partner institutions attain operational excellence. Shafenberg is passionate about college access and success, especially for transfer and adult learners. She brings significant experience and expertise with process management/refinement within postsecondary education and a keen understanding of whether and how credits stack into certificates and degrees.

Learn more at [cael.org](https://cael.org)



Link Learning and Work

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, CAEL fosters a culture of innovative, lifelong learning that helps individuals and their communities thrive. A national 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](https://cael.org) and [stradacollaborative.org](https://stradacollaborative.org).