

# Two Networks, One Aligned Mission: CAEL and TGN



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## STRATEGIC AND COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION CAN HELP STRENGTHEN THE INSTITUTIONS' OR ORGANIZATIONS' IMPACT, BETTER SERVING STUDENTS AND THE WORKFORCE.

The more education and employment overlap, the more important strategic partnerships become. Meeting adult learners and workers where they are requires a continual presence in those intersections. That's why I'm delighted about the newest strategic partnership at CAEL: our collaboration with [The Graduate! Network](#) (TGN). TGN is distinguished by a community of practice comprised of partner and affiliate organizations. They represent communities, states, programs and institutions that engage with TGN to advance their work in support of adult learners. Both organizations share a deep commitment to providing the support adult learners and workers need to succeed, whether they are just starting out on their education journey or looking to advance in their careers. Considering how well aligned our missions already are, I am excited about coordinating operational efforts and what that means for the outcomes we deliver at the individual, partner and system levels.

Our recently developed theory of change outlines the benefits of collaborative synergies. We enacted our theory of change to help coordinate and concentrate CAEL's impact. We have more individual impact when more adult learners and workers engage with the CAEL network of services and resources. The collaboration that unites disparate entities around a common cause is what drives our partner impact. Finally, our systemic impact is the result of the strategic integration of our individual and partner outcomes.

Because adult learners and workers are pivotal to equitable economic mobility, our work naturally expands to stakeholders and programs focused on regional and national education-employment ecosystems. Tying these elements together at all levels requires an emphasis on adult learners and workers who face barriers due to racial, ethnic, gender and socioeconomic inequities.

The Graduate! Network fits in well with this strategy of drawing on the power and efficiency of mobilizing mission-aligned organizations to support of adult learners and workers. TGN was founded to drive educational equity for adults, especially those who have been historically underrepresented in the college labor market. This common thread is now bringing together [CAEL and TGN's missions](#), and I'm excited about what that means for our members and other stakeholders.

I'm also excited to welcome TGN's network, which is comprised of mission-aligned organizations complementary to CAEL's work, into our [member community](#). As part of this partnership, all current members of The Graduate! Network are welcome to become CAEL members, where they will join more than 4,600 individuals, institutions and organizations representing educators, employers and nonprofits in the education and workforce development sector champions of adult learners and workers across the nation.

One aspect of TGN's work I know will resonate with the CAEL community is its longstanding advocacy for adult learners who left college without a credential. You've probably heard many terms for them. Some are more flattering than others. "Some college, no degree." "Stopouts." Or, hopefully not too often these days, "dropouts." But TGN frames this vital demographic, which is now more than 40 million strong<sup>1</sup>, with empathy and empowerment. They refer to them as

comebackers<sup>2</sup>. This term reflects a culture of not just meeting adult learners where they are but getting them to where they aspire to be and where, quite frankly, we as a community of employers, educators and policy-makers need them to be.

Thanks to our strategic partnership, the CAEL community will benefit from TGN's Data That Move Us (DTMU), a comprehensive data collection and tracking platform that features biannual data verification via the National Student Clearinghouse and provides analytics dashboards on comebackers. The platform synthesizes over 30,000 adult learner records to provide deep insights into the continuum of the adult learner experience, from enrollment to career outcomes. DTMU has great potential to drive broad-scale initiatives within communities and regions as part of larger workforce development efforts. Over time, I anticipate using the DTMU platform to enhance CAEL's capacities in several areas, including tracking the impact of advising and CPL on enrollment, retention and completion; informing future resource development; and improving clarity around education-employment ecosystem partnerships.

Another data-driven solution in the TGN toolkit is Bridging the Talent Gap (BTTG). Anyone familiar with CAEL's Adult Learner 360 understands the power of parallel surveys. They illuminate performance gaps and provide multiple layers of insight. Like [Adult Learner 360](#), BTTG surveys complementary audiences — in this case, employers and employees. BTTG brings a precise lens to analyzing employers' perceptions and talent requirements and workers' learning aspirations. Findings inform actions employers can take to actively support their employees'

continual education, upskilling and career advancement. Their impact is especially profound among front-line workers and other staff for whom attrition is often a challenge. Bridging the Talent Gap's proven methodology for marshaling employers and talent ecosystems to the cause of educational equity has great potential for advancing CAEL's mission.

Returning to our theory of change, at its core is an imperative to build and strengthen partnerships spanning postsecondary, workforce and industry. There are inherent challenges to convening entities that intersect on so many complex — and sometimes competitive — levels. It takes an authoritative and credible intermediary to foster the trust and communication partnerships depend on and illuminate the path forward to mutual success.

CAEL's dual legacy within the education-employment ecosystems has uniquely positioned us to serve as a nexus for a diversity of stakeholders. Our collaboration with The Graduate! Network bolsters that capacity while paving the way for new opportunities within CAEL's immediate footprint. In the months ahead, I look forward to updating you on how our partnership with TGN is facilitating an increased ability to scale TGN's work within new and existing systems, support employer engagement, expand its practitioner network and embrace a broader equity framework. In the meantime, feel free to contact [Bridgett Strickler](#), Vice President of Strategic Partnerships, and visit [cael.org](https://cael.org) for more information about how you and your institution can benefit from this exciting growth in CAEL's capacity.

<sup>1</sup> <https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SCNCRReport2023.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://graduate-network.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/The-Comebackers-Odyssey-09.14.21.pdf>



Christine Carpenter is vice president of membership engagement for CAEL and serves as NACTEL's executive director. Through an operating agreement, CAEL serves as NACTEL's fiscal agent and provides it with marketing support. Both CAEL and NACTEL are 501(c)(3) organizations. NACTEL partners include AT&T, CenturyLink, Communications Workers of America, Frontier Communications, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, and Verizon.

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).