

CAEL POLICY AGENDA 2017

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), a national non-profit organization, has a vision of meaningful learning, credentials, and work for every adult. Many of our activities center on creating change within higher education institutions, workforce investment boards, and workplaces that support new learning opportunities for today's adult. We also recognize, however, that the public sector has important levers for improving the access and success of the adult learner, and so CAEL regularly advocates for policy changes that we believe will have the greatest impact on making our vision a reality.

We support policy change opportunities in various ways, both at the state and federal levels. We educate state and federal policy makers on adult learner issues and concerns. We join with other non-profit organizations to educate and advocate with one voice in Washington, D.C, and we develop and pilot new policy models to serve adult learners. In addition, at the state level, we actively engage with policy makers by serving on state-level policy task forces, publishing reports that showcase state-led efforts to support the adult learner, and convening stakeholders to highlight the needs of adults who are returning to learning.

The following are CAEL's current policy priorities for our activities at the federal level. These are the issues that we care about and believe that there is political will to advance in conjunction with the start of a new administration. We will be working with our policy allies in Washington and across the country to make these issues known and understood among leadership in the new administration and in Congress.

1. **Section 127 regulations.** Section 127 of the Internal Revenue code allows for employer educational assistance to workers (i.e. tuition assistance) to be exempt from an employee's gross income for the purposes of federal taxation, up to \$5250 annually. This private sector support for adult learning can remove a significant financial barrier to higher education for adults, and any reform of the U.S. tax code must be sure to retain this important provision. Further, the cap of \$5250 has not been increased since 1986 and thus has not kept up with the higher costs of higher education today. *CAEL supports Section 127 as an important part of the way we can encourage private sector investment in workforce development and adult learning. We further support changes to this code that will increase the allowable amount of educational assistance per year and allow those funds to be used for additional related expenses such as career and education advising and prior learning assessment.*
2. **Incentives to provide tuition assistance.** Not every employer offers tuition assistance to their workers, and many of those who do offer it limit the benefit to management level employees. While there is currently a tax deduction for employers for job-related educational expenses, the only incentive for offering a broader educational assistance program is the promise of attracting and retaining good workers through an educational "fringe benefit." *CAEL supports the creation*

Tax Code

of stronger incentives to leverage greater employer investment in educational assistance programs, particularly for frontline workers and those without a postsecondary credential.

3. **Greater flexibility in the Higher Education Act to support innovations like PLA and CBE.** Currently, some Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) and many Competency-Based Education (CBE) programs are not eligible for federal financial aid because these programs and services sometimes operate in ways that depart from traditional higher education design around the classroom and the credit hour. Innovations that focus on evidence of student learning rather than seat time are not a good fit for current regulations, which instead prioritize the traditional instructional model from 1965, the year that the Higher Education Act was originally drafted. This older model focuses primarily on seat time in the classroom and not on learning outcomes. *CAEL proposes changes to the HEA that would allow for federal financial aid to have greater flexibility to pay for these and other innovative approaches to postsecondary learning and degree completion.*
4. **Financial aid for the working adult learner.** Currently, federal financial aid can be difficult for students attending less than half time. For example, the eligibility requirements for Pell Grants are designed in a way that significantly restricts access for the less than half time learner. Yet, a lower income adult who may only be able to take one or two classes at a time could greatly benefit from federal grant aid. *CAEL proposes changes in policy that would provide year-round Pell, expand eligibility for federal financial aid for the less-than-half-time student, and provide supports or financial incentives that would enable more working adults to meet eligibility requirements.*
5. **Career Counseling and Advisement.** The higher education landscape is difficult to understand and navigate. Similarly, it is difficult to understand the changes in the labor market and what the best career pathways are in this economy. Adults have very little help with these topics as they make decisions about what to study and what college to attend. Too often the only advising services adults receive occur after they have enrolled in a college program. Just providing data on a website is not enough. Adults need professional guidance on how to use that tool as well as other resources on careers and educational options. *CAEL proposes federal demonstration projects to test different models for providing better information and guidance to students as they make these decisions. We also propose that the cost of this kind of advising be eligible expenses under all federal programs, including Pell, GI Bill, etc.*
6. **Comprehensive workforce development approach as part of infrastructure investments.** With current talk about major infrastructure investments as a key strategy for boosting the economy, it is key that such investments be paired with a strategy for developing the skills of the workforce in order to carry out those infrastructure improvements. *CAEL proposes that investments in workforce development be targeted to adults who are underemployed or disconnected from the workforce - and that education and training dollars are used not only to train thousands of new construction workers, electricians, plumbers and engineers, but also to help fill “downstream” jobs that may be vacated by the new infrastructure workforce. All education and training efforts tied to infrastructure must further*

consider how to prepare all of these workers for the kind of employment opportunities that will exist after the infrastructure efforts are over - new economy jobs requiring broad transferable skills as well as targeted technical skills - that will be part of a new middle class in this country. The administration's infrastructure investments should be coordinated with workforce development investments that are led at the regional level and designed to address local and regional workforce development and labor market needs, with the goal to benefit local economies and workers in the short- and long-term.

Labor
(cont.)

7. **New graduation metric for non- first time, full time students.** The current federal College Scorecard system relies only on first-time, full-time students' data that does not incorporate contemporary students into institutional populations. This metric is also often used by the various entities that rank colleges. However, this graduation rate measure is not meaningful for the 40% of undergraduates who are 25 years or older. These are mostly students who are working full time and/or who come to college with previous college experiences. *CAEL supports the defining of a new metric - or set of metrics - for degree completion to be collected nationally. This new metric would be a meaningful source of information about institutional effectiveness for the adult learner.*

U.S. Dept. of Ed

Select Resources for Further Information

For more information on Section 127:

Coalition to Preserve Employer Provided Education Assistance. (n.d.) Employer provided education assistance (Section 127) fact sheet. Retrieved from http://www.cpepea.com/sites/default/files/Section%20127%20Fact%20Sheet%20-%20In%20Congress%20Page,%202.27_0.pdf

For more information on graduation rates for non-traditional students:

Wexler, E. (2016, May 5). The ignored graduates. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/05/05/stories-students-not-counted-federal-graduation-rates>

For more information on HEA Reauthorization for PLA and CBE:

HEA Reauthorization Coalition. (2015). *Transforming the Higher Education Act for the 21st century*. Retrieved from <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/press-releases/transforming-the-higher-education-act-for-the-21st-century/>

For more information, or to collaborate with CAEL to advance these ideas, please contact our policy team at cael@cael.org.