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## "...But What Should I Study? And How Will That Help Me and My Company?" Looking at the Use of Educational Advising for Employer-Funded Tuition Programs

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Adult learners often recognize a need to continue their education, but are generally in need of some guidance to help them match their education choices with their career goals or with the learning and skill needs of their employers. Employers, meanwhile, often give employees great freedom in choosing how to use their tuition or other educational benefits, leading many to wonder if those benefits are always used wisely or whether most employees can use them at all.

CAEL encourages employers to provide educational advising and learning and development coaching in conjunction with any education and training program for employees. We have learned anecdotally from both employers and the individual learners that advising helps to guide individual decision making and develop strategies for minimizing personal barriers to learning. We have learned that funds to support advising and coaching help to make sure that the total investment in learning and development is money well spent because it can help save both time and tuition dollars (see sidebar).

CAEL advisors help employees determine issues such as which school would be best for them, whether an online environment is suitable, or whether they have learning from past training and experience that can be turned into college credit. Advisors and coaches also help employees examine the skills they have and how they might be transferable to another job within the company, and what education or training would be necessary to make that transition. Coaches can also work with high potential employees to determine training that might help them improve communication or leadership skills, for example.

Given CAEL's experience, we have been curious to learn the extent to which employers are using advising and how they are using it.

During the spring of 2006, CAEL conducted a national Career Advising Survey (CAS) to better understand the current state of employer-provided education and career advising or coaching benefits. The CAS research gleaned detailed information about the design, administration, use and effectiveness of employer-sponsored advising and coaching benefits programs.

The two major goals of this survey were to identify the profile of employers offering advising and coaching benefits programs and to establish a baseline understanding of the current state of such programs.

### Respondent Profile

The survey generated responses from a total of 287 companies, with the largest industry groups represented

### How Advising Helps Tuition Programs Have Greater Impact

CAEL advisors have many success stories about their work. One example deals with the topic of prior learning assessment. An employee at a healthcare facility had taken classes at a technical school and earned a radiologic license. He had also taken courses several years ago at a state university. He wanted a college degree, but with work and family obligations, wasn't sure he had the time. His CAEL advisor helped him identify a school that accepted all of his prior college credits, gave him credit for some specialized training he had taken through his job, and gave him 29 credits for his radiologic license alone. What he had feared would be a long, hard road was suddenly manageable for him, time-wise and financially, with the help of his tuition assistance program. Within two semesters, he had a bachelor's degree that he had thought would take him two years or more to earn.

being: Manufacturing (13%), Healthcare (13%), Financial Services (6%), and Government (6%). Companies responding to the survey were fairly evenly spread among the geographic regions of the U.S., with just over ten percent having an international workforce.

The survey sample included a higher percentage of companies with more than 500 employees (57%) than actual national distribution, but our experience—which was borne out in the results—has been that larger companies are more likely to offer these benefits to their employees.

### Prevalence and Common Elements of Advising and Coaching Programs

More than 60 percent of survey respondents offer advising and/or coaching benefits programs according to the following breakdown:

Percentage of Survey Population	Program Offered
38.5%	Both Advising and Coaching
17.1%	Coaching Only
6.6%	Advising Only
37.8%	Neither Advising Nor Coaching
100%	TOTAL

The vast majority of advising/coaching programs are administered in-house, with slightly less than 20 percent of companies using outside vendors. Of those that use outside vendors, however, 82 percent use them to provide the advising or coaching, with another 24 percent outsourcing the advising program administration.

The most common components of advising and coaching benefits programs are individual advising (84%), face-to-face advising (77%), and soft skills development (68%). Among the surprising findings with regard to program components was the fact that only 31 percent of companies incorporate the development of learning plans into their advising program, and only 13 percent have an online component.

Companies are far more likely to provide advising and coaching benefits to the entire workforce (68.5%) rather than targeting a particular segment of employees like full-time versus part-time employees, salaried versus hourly, or based on union affiliation. In companies where services are restricted, 20 percent of respondent companies reported restricting eligibility to executive level employees, 16 percent to mid-management level employees, and 10 percent to associate level employees.

Forty percent (40%) of companies place no limit on the number of hours or sessions dedicated to coaching or advising benefits, nor do they have an annual dollar limit.

Former employees are eligible for coaching or advising at just over 20 percent of the companies offering these services, with 18 percent offering it to downsized employees and 3 percent making the services available to retirees.

The survey sought to examine links between usage of tuition benefits and coaching or advising. More than 70 percent of respondents report that less than a quarter of their workforce participates in their tuition program, and of these, half say that fewer than five percent of the employees using tuition assistance also participate in advising or coaching. Only 14 percent of companies require employees to consult with an advisor or coach prior to using tuition benefits, but of companies tracking course completion, 72 percent say that tuition program participants who use advising have higher rates of course completion than those who do not use advising services.

When asked about the future of their advising or coaching programs, 73 percent anticipate that the budget for the benefit will remain the same or increase in the next three years.

Of survey respondents who do not offer advising or coaching, nearly two-thirds offer tuition benefits. When asked why they don't offer a complementary advising component, the majority of the responses are related to program cost, company size and low company priority for such benefits.

### **The Strategic Intent in Advising and Coaching**

When asked why they offer advising or coaching to their employees, companies that do so provided the following reasons (more than one response was possible):

- Improve employee productivity—82%
- Aid in employee retention—78%
- Improve employee morale—64%
- Maintain a culture of lifelong learning—57%
- Facilitate succession planning—55%

In looking at the overall impact of career or education advising/coaching, there is evidence of linkage between the usage of advising or coaching services and the performance of employees who participate in these programs. According to respondents who tracked their results as compared with non-participants:

- 78% report that participants are promoted more often.
- 88% report that program participants stay with the company longer.
- 91% report that job performance of participants has been noticeably better than non-participants.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The findings of CAEL's survey can be summarized as follows:

- Company programs are usually administered by staff in the Human Resources department with oversight by job titles of Manager, Director, Vice-President, or President.
- There is not a strong link between tuition benefits and advising and/or coaching benefits programs.
- The design of advising and/or coaching benefits programs tends to be "simple" in the sense that most plans do not include restrictions on eligibility, tenure, dollars, and hours. Companies that offer only coaching benefits programs are the most likely to restrict eligibility by employee level.
- Employers most commonly offer advising and/or coaching benefits programs to improve employee productivity, retention, and morale.

The results of this survey give us an overall picture of what type of companies are providing advising and the value that some find in it in terms of employee retention and performance. Among the challenges for CAEL is to show that the costs associated with an advising program can be considered an investment in the company's future through the better informed choices employees will make for their education and the resulting knowledge and productivity they will bring to the workplace. Advising can lessen employees' time in the classroom, thereby saving tuition dollars and increasing the return on investment for the participating company.