Access 4

September 2024

It's that time of year again...

by Steve Smith—Executive Director, A4L Community

It's that time of year again; students, educators, administrators and staff all returning to school, along with caregivers all excited with anticipation about the new school year. For some they will experience new teachers, a new classroom, a new school building, and some will be returning to the same environment, but for all the excitement and anticipation for what lies ahead is palatable.

Similarly, the energy and anticipation of what lies ahead for the A4L Community & SDPC is generating a lot of excitement. There is a great deal of positive news to share about the work that you all are doing. It is the community of passionate and active members that makes the A4L Community so effective and successful.

Here are just a few highlights of the great work going on;

- Unity adoption is growing with multiple states beginning to transition from SIF 2.* to Unity as well as three new states implementing Unity,
- GESS V2.0 has launched with a free self assessment for vendors,
- the Registry 2.0 project is making great strides and remains on time,
- a new member management solution has been selected and will be rolled out over the coming months, and
- overall project team and committee participation by Community members is up! Not to mention that A4L membership continues to grow.

You will find more details about most of these accomplishments in this newsletter, but I wanted to stress how proud I am of this community, the commitment of you all and the great work that you are all doing to improve the education ecosystem for all learners!

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Welcome new members!

Biblionix	*cloudHQ LLC*	*CPSI Ltd*	*Hamilton Southeastern Schools, IN*
iCivics	*Mathematical Association of America*	*MindPrint Learning*	*Mote Technologies*
Oklahoma Department of Education	*Pickcode*	*Santa Clara County Office of Education (SCCOE)*	*Sooth Inc.*

Scheduled Maintenance

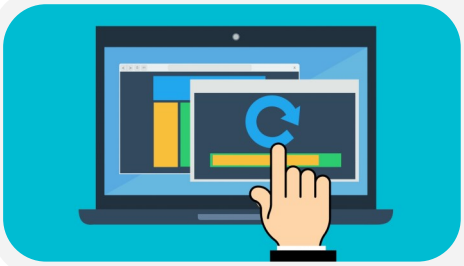
Our regular maintenance schedule is timetabled for the last Friday of each month.

Please be aware of the following scheduled maintenance that will be taking place over the coming weeks:

SDPC Resource Registry, SIF Test Harness and operational databases:

Maintenance will take place from 8pm ET on Friday, September 27 until COB on Sunday, September 29, 2024.

We are sorry for any inconvenience that this may cause and advise you to plan your work accordingly.



Global Community News

The Rise of JSON-LD in Data Standards: A Collaborative Approach

by John Lovell, Technology Director

In the evolving world of data standards, JSON-LD has emerged as a powerful and innovative way to define data models, particularly in the education sector. As data needs expand and systems evolve, the transition to more flexible and interoperable standards has become essential. JSON-LD, with its ability to support rich, linked data models, is at the forefront of this shift. In the Access 4 Learning (A4L) Community, we've been witnessing this change not just within our own efforts but also through the work of our friends at HR Open Standards, the Common Education Data Standards (CEDS), and the Postsecondary Electronic Standards Council (PESC).

Among these organizations, A4L's collaboration with PESC stands out, particularly in the development of PESC's first JSON-LD standard focused on the College Transcript. This marks a significant step forward for the education community. JSON-LD enables data models to be more readable, developer-friendly, and flexible, a critical requirement as systems become more complex. PESC's commitment to laying the groundwork for future standards is evident in their approach. At their JSON-LD Standards Development Resources page, they've outlined how they plan to structure, validate, and clarify not just the College Transcript standard, but future ones as well.

PESC is working to create a comprehensive suite of tools and resources to assist organizations in developing JSON-LD standards. These resources include templates and guidelines to support the creation of key elements like Application Profiles, Context Files, SHACL Specifications for validation, and JSON Schemas for structural integrity. Each component is being designed to ensure that standards remain robust, interoperable, and easy to implement. This collection will also feature practical examples and implementation guides, which are essential for ensuring that developers and stakeholders alike can effectively work with JSON-LD standards.

Together, A4L and PESC are working towards a future where JSON-LD becomes the cornerstone of data standards in education, supporting seamless data exchange and enhancing the flexibility and reliability of educational technologies. As these collaborations continue, we can expect to see a growing number of interoperable, efficient, and developer-friendly standards that support the needs of the entire education community. For more information and to explore PESC's latest developments, you can visit their JSON-LD Standards Development Resources page.

The Community Needs YOU!

As a membership organization, there are two key components to our survival ...

- the ***income*** generated by membership dues (our only source of funding) which enable us to develop our Specifications, enhance the SDPC Resource Registry, and provide additional tools and resources for our members

PLUS, and most important...

- our league of ***volunteers***! Without member engagement and participation in our locale & global Project Teams, Management Boards and Technical Boards we would not function.

So, as we enter a new school year, please assess your participation and consider joining one of the many Project Teams ***that need YOU!*** Further details of current group activities can be found on page 9.

If you are not sure where to get 'plugged in', feel free to drop our Community Director, Penny Murray an email—we'd be happy to help!

A4L Community project to upgrade existing membership collaboration tools

by Penny Murray, Community Director

As some of you may be aware, A4L Staff have recently embarked on a project to upgrade our (internal) membership management software and (member-only, external) collaboration area - the A4L Community Site.

We have set ourselves a tight target to achieve this deliverable, and are working hard to ensure that Phase 1 of the implementation is completed by early November 2024, with Phase 2 completed by early 2025.

Phase 1: Membership Management software implementation and a new Community Site

The first phase of this implementation is moving our existing membership database to a new software platform and updating the internal database and structure. As part of this phase, we are also planning to move to a new Community Site, allowing for more collaboration and the ability to 'subscribe' to meeting calendars.

What can you expect?

We hope that our new membership management software will provide our members with increased functionality to manage their own organization involvement - identifying Key Contact for invoicing; adding colleagues so that they may have access to and participate in the various Project Teams and Committees within the A4L Community; updating organizational information to avoid missing important announcements; and gaining clearer oversight of membership renewal dates and outstanding invoices.

We are planning to completely overhaul our current Community Site. Moving from its current platform to a part in-house developed offering, we are aiming to provide a more seamless experience, making it easier for members to participate in Project Teams. With this will come easier access to collaborate on Project Team documents via Google; the introduction of Listservs, so that members can easily communicate with each other during and in-between meetings on various work items; and a calendar subscription model, so that Project Team members can subscribe to a meeting series, and any updates or changes to those meetings will be immediately updated on their personal calendars.

Phase 2: Single Sign-on for all A4L Community Tools

The second phase of our implementation is directly linked with the development of SDPC Resource Registry 2.0, building towards even smoother management of privacy contracts. This phase will involve moving the current SDPC Resource Registry user database onto our new membership management software platform, therefore providing one 'source of truth' for all member & user records. From here, we can then start to implement a single-sign-on process to use any of our current Community tools - SDPC Resource Registry; A4L Community Site; SIF Test Harness and SIF Certification Program.

What can you expect?

We hope that Phase 2 will provide improved access and communications for all our members & users; and provide a more seamless user interface alongside an improved SDPC Resource Registry.

Planned downtime / impacts

Whilst we hope to implement the member management software without too many disruptions, the implementation of the Community Site may take a little longer and cause some downtime to our Members. **Our current timelines indicate that the Community Site will not be available between October 11-25, 2024.**

This may also affect our communications with you. We are planning to send out a more detailed 'Community Digest' just before our planned outage. Further information will be included in this communication, but please be aware that **Project Team communications via the old (current) Community Site will not be available during the outage**. During the outage you can expect communications through direct email messages or via our new listserv capabilities.

We ask that you keep an eye on the weekly Community Digest mailers for further updates in advance of the outage.

Any questions or concerns, please contact Penny Murray, Community Director.

Announcing the Formation of the A4L Artificial Intelligence Project Team

by John W. Lovell, Technology Director

The Access 4 Learning (A4L) Community is excited to announce the merger of the Data Model, Migration & Mapping (D3M) Project Team and the Open Source Developers Network (OSDN) into a single, unified Artificial Intelligence (AI) Project Team. This strategic consolidation recognizes the increasing overlap in our efforts to process source data model artifacts, which are integral to driving specifications, ensuring quality, and developing supportive tooling. By combining our resources and expertise, we aim to enhance our impact on the education sector through the innovative application of AI.

Our Mission

The newly formed AI Project Team is dedicated to acting as an advocate and analyst for the use of artificial intelligence in education, with a particular focus on data and data standards. Our mission encompasses two key objectives:

1. Leveraging AI for Problem-Solving and Efficiency: We will harness AI technologies to address challenges, streamline processes, and improve efficiency within the A4L Community. Our goal is to drive the highest levels of accuracy and reliability in all our endeavors.
2. Serving as an AI Knowledge Resource: We are committed to being an enthusiastic knowledge hub for the community. By providing active discussion forums and sharing insights, we aim to position A4L as a leader in understanding the implications of AI for education.

Planned Deliverables

The AI Project Team has outlined several key initiatives:

- Example Data Object Generation: We will complete and potentially expand the Unity Data Generator to create comprehensive example objects, aiding in data modeling and testing.
- Automated CEDS Data Mappings (Due by December 31, 2024): In collaboration with CEDS Copilot, we will explore leveraging AI to facilitate the mapping and alignment of data according to the Common Education Data Standards (CEDS).
- Specification-Driven Chatbot: We plan to develop a chatbot informed by our specifications to assist users in navigating and understanding our data standards.
- SpecGen Musings (Ongoing): We will continuously evaluate the inputs and outputs that comprise our specifications to positively influence our AI work and broader projects.

Join Us in Shaping the Future of AI in Education

We invite all interested A4L members to participate in this exciting new venture. Whether you're an AI enthusiast, a data specialist, or simply curious about the intersection of AI and education, your contributions are valuable.

- Virtual Meetings: Join us every other Wednesday at 10:30 PM UTC for collaborative discussions and project updates.
- Group Meetings: Details will be announced soon. Stay tuned!
- Meeting Minutes: We commit to providing minutes for each meeting to keep everyone informed and engaged.

We also welcome research and activity suggestions. If you have ideas or topics you'd like us to explore, please bring them to our meetings or reach out to the team.

Let's Work Together

By uniting our efforts, we can make significant strides in enhancing education through AI. Join us in this journey to innovate, educate, and lead the way in understanding the transformative power of artificial intelligence in the education sector.

For more information or to get involved, please contact Technology Director John W. Lovell.

Together, let's make A4L a beacon of AI innovation in education!

Community Project Team Updates

ASSOCIATION

Association Board of Directors: The Board continues to meet monthly with a full agenda. In recent months the board has discussed and considered many issues including but not limited to; approving additional contracted services to support A4L's growth, upcoming A4L events planning, monitoring of the Registry Stabilization and Registry 2.0 projects, budget updates, approval of new member management software, approval of the PESC Joint Venture Agreement, and continued review of progress towards meeting this year's strategic goals and targets.

Policy & Procedures: This group are currently focused on updating the SIF Certification Program for the Unity Specification (NA).

INTERNATIONAL

International Technical & Privacy Leadership Group (ITP-LG): The ITP-LG's most impactful official act since the last newsletter was to approve the AI charter combining the D3M and OSDN teams into one global initiative spearheading our R&D going forward.

Data Privacy: This team has made progress on defining the scope of and identifying the players in our second Privacy Obligation Document (POD) pilot project. This Project Team is also developing new privacy training and certification programs for both educators and vendors.

Global Education Security Standards (GESS) Project Team: See page 9 and page 10 for update.

Infrastructure: This team has pulled together an initial draft of SIF Infrastructure Specification 3.7 and is preparing to bring it before the ITP-LG for review.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Project Team: This newly formed team is already having some early success! See page 4 for more details.

Vendor: The group recently reconvened their meeting (every other month), providing a forum for Vendors to get together and discuss any issues and/or questions .

AUSTRALIA

AU Leadership Group (AU-LG): The AU Management Board are discussing updates on AU activities.

AU Technical Project Team: The AU Technical Board are continuing their discussions on proposed updates to SIF Implementation Specification (AU).

NORTH AMERICA

North American Leadership Group (NA-LG): The NA-LG continues to meet monthly with a full agenda. In recent months the board has discussed and considered many issues including but not limited to; potential 1EdTech collaboration, Legal Project Team reorganization, monitoring of the Registry Stabilization and Registry 2.0 projects, and Project Team charter approvals.

North American Technical Advisory Committee (NA-TAC): Exciting progress has been made on the Unity Certification Program: the upcoming release of the SIF Infrastructure 3.7 specification will enhance clarity for Unity Certifications, and we are actively working to support the program through updated RFP language, policies, and procedures to facilitate wider adoption.

CEDS Alignment: While this group isn't currently holding separate meetings, we are very active within State Requests (see below) and are eager for the possibility of utilizing CEDS co-pilot to better inform our strategic goal of an updated mapping that is as complete as possible.

State Requests: This group continues to prepare for the updates in EDFacts reporting and to consider other requests from state representatives.

Unity Adoption: We are excited to announce that the Unity Specification is making significant strides in adoption. Virginia has successfully implemented a student locator system using Unity across multiple districts, the group would like to convey thanks to all the participating vendors. See page [PAGE] for more information.

Legal: This group is currently transitioning to become the NDPA Project Team with new members being appointed by the NA-LG.

SDPC Alliance Leadership: The Alliance Leadership group continues to meet bi-weekly to discuss any issues and questions that arise for Alliance Admins.

SDPC Resource Registry Roadmap (R3): This group continues to review SDPC Resource Registry performance enhancement suggestions for the Registry.

News from the North American Community

Streamlining Educational Data Reporting: Aligning SIF Unity with EDFacts through CEDS

SIF Unity and EDFacts are two critical systems used in the U.S. education data landscape, each serving unique purposes. A4L's initiative to map Unity to EDFacts, utilizing elements from the Common Education Data Standards (CEDS), aims to streamline data collection, reporting, and interoperability across educational institutions.

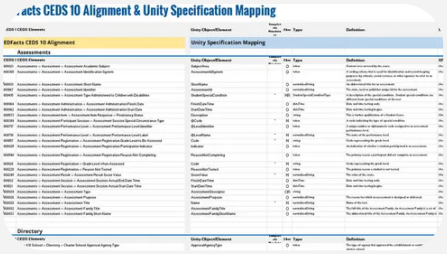
Unity provides a standardized way for educational software systems to communicate with each other, facilitating data exchange between various applications. EDFacts, is a U.S. Department of Education initiative that collects, analyzes, and reports on educational performance data from K-12 institutions across the nation.

The challenge lies in how these two systems can communicate seamlessly while leveraging CEDS elements to ensure consistency, accuracy, and compatibility. CEDS is a data dictionary that standardizes terminology and data models used in education, making it the perfect bridge between Unity and EDFacts.

By mapping Unity elements to EDFacts through CEDS, educational institutions can streamline data reporting for federal compliance, avoiding redundant entry and inconsistencies. This alignment ensures that SIF Unity-enabled applications at the local level produce EDFacts-compliant reports, simplifying compliance while improving data quality. The use of CEDS also harmonizes data standards across national and local levels, reducing the need for custom solutions, enhancing data integrity, and fostering a more efficient and unified data management ecosystem.

For institutions seeking to enhance their EDFacts reporting capabilities, there is also the option to further automate this process using the Generate tool. Generate, developed by the U.S. Department of Education, provides a standardized way to automate the extraction, transformation, and submission of EDFacts data. By integrating Unity, CEDS, and Generate, educational agencies can significantly streamline their reporting workflows and ensure timely, accurate submissions while reducing the manual effort involved in meeting federal reporting requirements.#

View webpage: https://data.a4l.org/sif-unity-edfacts/



Get our CEDS driven Unity EDFacts mapping here!

Iowa Department of Education PK-12 State education system

The Iowa Department of Education, a state education agency in the US, collects data from the PK-12 education system in the state. This collection provides the Department with data to meet operational needs in supporting students, compliance activities ranging from federal data submission to public -facing reports, and interagency collaborative efforts to inform the systems that support a broad range of students.

The Department recognizes the necessity of transparency and accountability, especially in the use of complex technology to perform the functions of governance. To this end, the organization publishes a State SIF Profile. This document declares what data is collected, what systems consume the data, and how it relates to the Schools Interoperability Framework (SIF) North American Data Model (NADM) Version 2.4.

Annually, the Department updates this document, to incorporate any changes required in the data collection, to meet the ever-evolving business needs of the organization. The 2024-2025 academic year Iowa State SIF Profile was recently published, and is available here: https://educate.iowa.gov/pk-12/data/data-collections/sif

News from the Student Data Privacy Consortium

Global Education Security Standard (GESS) and Self-Assessment released

PRESS RELEASE: Global Education Security Standard (GESS) and Self-Assessment released

Washington, DC, 27 August 2024—The A4L Community, through its Student Data Privacy Consortium (SDPC) has released a FREE self-assessment for marketplace providers as well as Version 2 of GESS. This tool will allow EdTech vendors to begin aligning to the Global Education Security Standard (GESS).

The SDPC has come together over the past two years to synthesize security, privacy and child safety requirements from across the USA, Europe, New Zealand and Australia to develop a set of relevant controls, which draw on existing international standards, to produce a set of controls which can be used by the education sector to drive adoption and compliance across the thousands of applications used across schools globally.

Anthony Yaremenko, Co-founder of Safer Technologies 4 Schools (ST4S), Australia states; "A unified standard, respected and supported by education authorities globally, will help shape the bi-partisan conversations between software vendors and education providers as we all work together to ensure the safety of students and school communities. Intended key benefits include a single repository of controls able to be contributed to and shared by education bodies across the globe; significantly reduced compliance overheads for software vendors who will be able to be attest once to the GESS controls and have this result respected in participating education jurisdictions; and lastly, a message to the software industry that security and privacy of education data is of the utmost importance."

Building upon the success of the Student Data Privacy Consortium's work to normalize privacy obligations across jurisdictions, the GESS is expected to move the international EdTech community towards shared expectations and solutions to secure education data while ensuring privacy obligations are met.

Version 2 of GESS includes a restructuring of the GESS controls to align closer to NIST frameworks as well as the identification of CORE GESS controls.

As a way to lower the barriers to adoption the SDPC has developed, and made freely available to any vendor, a GESS self-assessment tool. The tool will assist vendors in aligning their practices to the GESS controls and help identify any areas they need to focus on.

"The GESS framework allows us, as a global EdTech vendor providing software and services to schools, colleges, local government and the wider public sector, to map our existing approaches to security and data protection against the wide range of standards and frameworks, covering approaches based on local legislation as well as international codes, and allow educational institutes to openly review and assess what we do" states Tony Sheppard, Information Governance Lead, NetSupport. "As well as enabling the mapping to take place, it can also highlight our gaps and in which regions it may affect our compliance. I can't think of a more comprehensive tool for EdTech vendors to use as part of a continuous cycle of security improvements and providing demonstrable information on good practices."

To learn more about the work of, or join the A4L Community, please visit https://privacy.A4L.org/

To find out more about GESS, please go to: https://privacy.A4L.org/gess/

GESS Global Education Security Standard

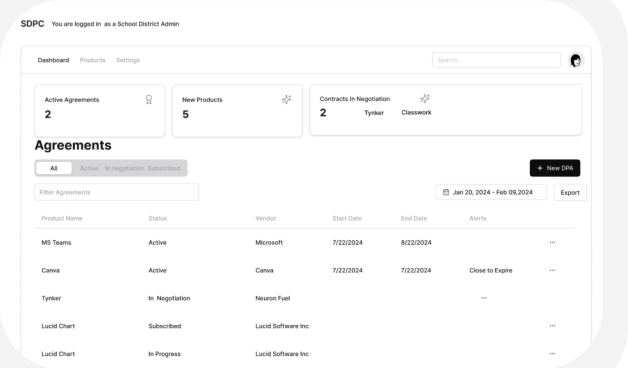
UPDATE: Registry 2.0

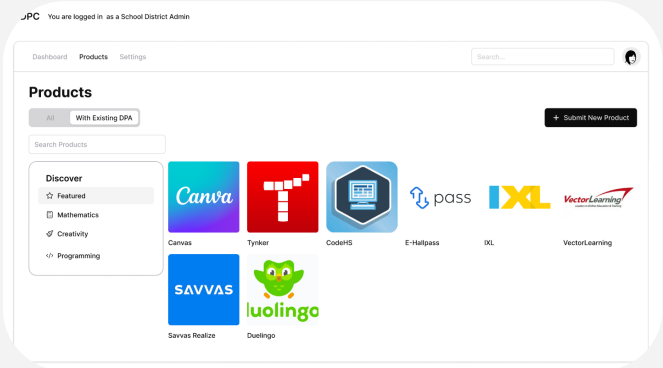
The building of the SDPC Resource Registry 2.0 is well underway.

Learn 21 development staff has been meeting regularly with user groups and sharing wireframe mock-ups of the new system.

We are all very excited at the potential of Registry 2.0 to streamline the DPA execution process.

For updates on the Registry 2.0 project please visit THIS page.





UPDATE: Global Education Security Standard (GESS)

The Global Education Security Standard project team has launched Version 2.0 as well as the self assessment for vendors. GESS V 2.0 includes newly written control statements for all control sets as well as a new organizational structure. The structure of the control sets were reorganized to better align to the NIST Cybersecurity Framework.

The GESS self assessment is a FREE tool for all marketplace providers to leverage to begin assessing how well they line up to the GESS controls. Recognizing that the barrier to begin implementing GESS may be high for some providers the project team chose to launch the self assessment as a free tool to allow the market to begin exploring and adopting prior to the framework being required.

The GESS controls are intended to be a master set of controls that meet jurisdictional requirements across the US, UK, AU & NZ. By aligning to one set of controls marketplace providers will be meeting cybersecurity control requirements across all these jurisdictions. As the marketplace begins to adopt, and eventually mandate, GESS the expectations around security controls implemented in EdTech products will become clearer to everyone.

GESS
Global Education Security Standard

Community Meetings Schedule

Day	*Frequency*	*Group*	*Staff Liaison*
ASSOCIATION			*meetings are based on US Eastern time zone*
Wednesday	2nd Weds, monthly	**Association Board of Directors**	Steve Smith
Tuesday	4th Tues, monthly	**Policy & Procedures**	Penny Murray
INTERNATIONAL			*meetings are based on US Eastern time zone*
Tuesday	2nd Tues, monthly	**Data Privacy**	Penny Murray
Wednesday	Every 2 weeks	**Infrastructure**	John Lovell
Wednesday	Every 2 weeks	**Artificial Intelligence Project Team**	John Lovell
Thursday	Every 4 weeks	**International Technical & Privacy Leadership Group**	John Lovell
Thursday	4th Thurs, monthly	**Global Education Security Standards (GESS)**	Steve Smith
Thursday	2nd Thurs, bi-monthly	**Vendor Project Team**	Penny Murray
NORTH AMERICA			*meetings are based on US Eastern time zone*
Monday	Every 2 weeks	**State Requests**	John Lovell
Tuesday	1st & 3rd Tues, monthly	**Unity Adoption**	John Lovell
Tuesday	1st Tues, monthly	**SDPC Resource Registry Roadmap (R3) Project Team**	Penny Murray
Wednesday	3rd Weds, monthly	**NA Leadership Group**	Steve Smith
Thursday	Every 2 weeks	**SDPC Alliance Leadership**	Penny Murray
Thursday	Every 2 weeks	**NA Technical Advisory Committee (NA-TAC)**	John Lovell

Connect with us!

Access 4 Learning (A4L) Community

Student Data Privacy Consortium (SDPC)

About the Access 4 Learning Community

The Access 4 Learning (A4L) Community, and its special interest group the Student Data Privacy Consortium (SDPC), is a unique, non-profit collaboration composed of schools, districts, local authorities, states, US and International Ministries of Education, software vendors and consultants. The Community is "Powered by SIF" as its major technical tool to help manage learning data simply, securely and in a scalable, standard way regardless of platform. The SDPC is designed to address the day-to-day, real-world multi-faceted issues faced when protecting learner information by setting common expectations between market providers and end users. The A4L Community has united these education technology end users and providers in an unprecedented effort to "***connect and secure effective learning ecosystems***" to give teachers more time to do what they do best: teach.

For further information, visit https://www.A4L.org

Contact Us

Steve Smith
Executive Director

Provides direction and leadership toward the achievement of the organization´s philosophy, mission, strategy, and its annual goals and objectives. Support includes; Board Administration and Support, Program and Service Delivery, Financial and Human Resource Management, Community Relations and Fundraising.

✉ ssmith@A4L.org

John Lovell
Technology Director

Provides technical leadership and as the primary resource for all things technical – from internal IT support to driving the global community efforts state-wide, nationally and internationally focused on both technical specification development and privacy support.

✉ jlovell@A4L.org

Penny Murray
Community Director

Provides leadership and ownership over providing "value-add" for members and potential members of the Association. This position gauges all aspects of member services including communications, marketing, support member working activities, organizational meetings and strategic partnerships to ensure initiative success.

✉ pmurray@A4L.org

Access 4 Learning Community
Simple. Secure. Scalable. Standard.

P O Box 249, Malden, MA 02148
✉ staff@A4L.org
☎ +1.202.621.0547
A4L.org | data.A4L.org | privacy.A4L.org