

# RURAL COLLEGES HAVE THEIR DAY IN D.C.

DURING RURAL COLLEGE DAY, REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE WHITE HOUSE AND FEDERAL AGENCIES DISCUSSED RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE NEEDS.

**BY MARK TONER**

MICHELLE ASHA COOPER'S CAREER BEGAN ON A COLLEGE CAMPUS IN RURAL PENNSYLVANIA. Now, as acting assistant secretary for postsecondary education at the U.S. Department of Education, she told leaders from rural colleges that the recovery from the pandemic provides an opportunity to address longstanding challenges.

"Students are struggling... they really do need our leadership more than ever," Cooper said during February's Rural College Day. "We cannot strive to do things like they were once done. This is our opportunity to get things right."





Clockwise from left: ACCT Chair James Cooksey; AACC Chair Richard Rhodes; Rural Community Colleges Alliance President Penny Wells; U.S. Department of Education Deputy Assistant Secretary of Higher Education Programs Michelle Asha Cooper; Chesapeake College Trustee Reza Jafari.

Held concurrently with the Community College National Legislative Summit and co-sponsored by ACCT, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), and the Rural Community College Alliance (RCCA) with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the event focused on the potential of community colleges to serve as hubs and connectors to drive an equitable economic recovery in rural areas.

“Rural communities are not just about education,” said RCCA President Penny Wells. “As you know, we’re about workforce development, economic development, and strengthening our whole communities.”

Rural colleges are also often their region’s largest employers and economic drivers in their own right, and many provided COVID services during the pandemic. The Rural College Day provided an opportunity for their leaders to meet with representatives from the White House, the U.S. Departments of Education and Agriculture, and the Appalachian Regional Commission. It also was part of broader efforts to identify the unique needs of rural institutions.

“It’s critical we understand their successes and challenges,” said ACCT Chair James Cooksey, a trustee at Moberly Area Community College in Missouri.

## An Emerging Agenda

Pairing the Rural College Day with NLS reinforced the power of advocacy by institutional leaders. AACC Chair Richard Rhodes pointed to Texas, where the vast majority of the state’s community college districts serve rural communities.

“Do you know who makes the biggest impact on our legislators?” asked Rhodes, who is president of Austin Community College. “It’s our rural community colleges. It shows.”

Federal officials agreed. U.S. Department of Agriculture Deputy Undersecretary for Rural Development Justin Maxson recalled his time working with economic development in Kentucky. “Some of the strongest partners at the table were consistently rural community colleges,” he said. “That still resonates with me.”

Senior adviser to the Secretary of Education Amy Loyd also stressed the impact of rural community colleges. “We know that

rural America is the heart of our country... and there are no greater assets in rural communities than our community colleges,” said Loyd, who has been nominated to serve as assistant secretary for the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) at the U.S. Department of Education. “You are dedicated and deeply rooted in your communities, you are tireless advocates for your students, you are innovators, you create solutions to longstanding challenges, and we are committed to listening and partnering with you.”

Federal officials outlined the impact of COVID relief funds to date and outlined in broad strokes emerging federal policy targeted at rural communities. Acknowledging that the federal government has historically underinvested in rural development, Maxson said the administration “understands it’s their job to step into that void and do things that make a difference.”

Speakers said that rural communities are a key part of the Biden Administration’s goal of ensuring that underserved populations are supported more equitably. Rural communities also will be a central focus in efforts to support the ongoing economic recovery from the pandemic, with investments in infrastructure improving economic opportunities and, over a larger timeframe, addressing climate change through workforce development in areas such as green energy.

“Rural development is a critical part of our priorities,” said Will McIntee, associate director of the White House Office of Public Engagement.

The American Rescue Plan included several programs focused on rural communities, including support to healthcare providers, funding for COVID testing and vaccination, increased benefits through such programs as the child tax credit, support for small businesses and farmers, and the expansion of broadband and programs to make Internet access more affordable. The subsequent infrastructure bill represents “a generational investment in our rural communities,” McIntee said, including further broadband investments, repairs to existing infrastructure, and longer-term goals such as building resilience to climate change and extreme weather.



Participants met throughout the day to address issues central to rural community colleges.

However, federal officials acknowledged the need for overarching policy focused specifically on rural communities.

“One piece of the vision is that [policy] is place-based,” Maxson said. “So much of our federal economic policy is at the national level, and we’ve got to get more granular. A regional and local approach is key, which in my mind requires community colleges to be a key actor.”

## New Challenges, New Opportunities

Federal speakers urged community college leaders to think about serving their students and communities in new ways.

“The pandemic has changed how we approach higher education,” Cooper said, noting that the department has released new guidance to help institutions use American Rescue Plan funds to meet students’ basic needs. She pointed to rural institutions that did so in creative ways, including Iowa Central Community College, which used relief funds to cover unpaid tuition balances, and Dyersburg State Community College in Tennessee, which opened a food pantry and subsidized childcare.

Cooper said that emergency funds were also “designed to help you emerge from the pandemic stronger — that’s the goal.” Among the Education Department’s own goals: addressing disparate outcomes, improving completion, and addressing college affordability and debt — which research shows disproportionately impacts students who grew up in rural communities. She highlighted the department’s grant program for rural colleges. “We’d like to see more of you apply and hopefully get selected for these funds,” Cooper said.

Breakout sessions allowed institutional leaders to speak in small groups with representatives of the Education and Agriculture Departments, the White House, and the Appalachian Regional Commission. College leaders spoke to the challenge of navigating different programs and grants offered by multiple federal agencies. As the lead agency on rural issues, USDA alone has more than 50 programs serving rural development, ranging from housing and business support to infrastructure.

Maxson stressed the importance of making connections beyond

Washington, D.C. “If you take anything away, figure out the offices local to you and build relationships with that local staff,” he advised.

Among college leaders’ feedback for policymakers: make it easier for rural institutions without full-time grant writers to apply for programs, change metrics such as the number of people served, and, in some cases, rethink the very definition of “rural” in programs and grants that disadvantage the smallest institutions, tribal communities, and territories. Galvin Deleon Guerrero, president of Northern Marianas College, pointed to his Micronesia territory as an extreme example of the challenges. “When it comes to federal legislation and grants, certain assumptions are made with areas of large land masses that overlook the fact that we have oceans,” he said.

## Looking Ahead

Maxon said that the Biden Administration recognizes these challenges and has plans to address them in order to achieve its broader goals. “There’s an effort to try to imagine what it would look like to develop rural policy that flows to all the departments and agencies,” he said. “Instead of starting with departments and agencies, we need to flip it on its head. This administration has a real shot of taking on the challenge of doing this in a different way. We’re not there yet, but I’m hopeful.”

RCCA’s Wills said that rural community colleges would benefit from that changed perspective. “I have yet to see a vision of what rural is,” Wills said. “And I feel a lot of hope from the Biden/Harris administration that there’s a vision now, an emphasis on rural... We have trust in our communities, and they expect us to be part of the solution.”



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