



RCCA2025

GATEWAY TO THE BEST

Show Me Rural Excellence

2025 National Conference
September 17 - September 19
East Central College



RURAL COMMUNITY
College Alliance

Creating Opportunities in Place.

A WELCOME NOTE

Thank You for Joining Us at the 2025 RCCA National Conference



Thanks for joining us at the 2025 Rural Community College Alliance (RCCA) National Conference here in Union, Missouri! We're thrilled to have you with us and truly grateful for your presence. A special thank you to East Central College and President Dr. Jon Bauer for generously hosting this year's gathering and helping make it all possible.

Over the coming days, we'll connect around shared challenges, bold ideas, and the collective strength of our rural institutions. Whether you're attending as a speaker, participant, partner, or

friend of RCCA, your involvement helps make this conference a powerful space for learning and leadership.

Our theme this year, "**Gateway to the Best: Show-Me Rural Excellence,**" celebrates the innovation, determination, and community spirit that define rural colleges. I began my higher ed leadership career here in Missouri; those early experiences helped shape the way I lead and serve today. It's meaningful to return to this state with gratitude and renewed purpose.

As you take part in sessions and conversations, I hope you find fresh inspiration and walk away with practical tools and lasting connections to support your work back home.

Thank you for all you do for rural students and communities—and for being here with us. We're honored to have you as part of the RCCA family. Let's make this an unforgettable and energizing conference, together.

With gratitude,

Christopher Breitmeyer

RCCA President

A "Thank You" From the RCCA Board President



As board chair of the Rural Community College Alliance, I am pleased to welcome you to Missouri and the 2025 Rural Community College Alliance (RCCA) National Conference. I am especially proud that this year's gathering is hosted here at East Central College; it is our honor to serve in that role.

Our theme, "**Gateway to the Best: Show Me Rural Excellence,**" reflects both where we are meeting geographically, near the "Gateway to the West," and what we represent metaphorically. All of us know that community colleges serve

as gateways to our students, the starting point toward a college degree and a rewarding career. Over the next few days, you'll see examples of "rural excellence" from across the country, highlighting the best of what we can do together.

RCCA is the only organization focused entirely on rural community colleges, the students who attend them, and the challenges they face. We value the partnerships and support from ACCT, Phi Theta Kappa, the NJCAA, and other national organizations that share this work.

This conference would not be possible without the dedication of the East Central College staff, the RCCA team, and 25th Hour Communications. Thank you all for making this event a success. Most of all, thank you for being here. We are glad to welcome you.

With Thanks,

John Bauer, Ph.D.

*President, East Central College;
Chair, RCCA Board of Directors*

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Chris Breitmeyer

RCCA President

25th Hour Communications

Conference Coordination and Support



8:30AM *Theatre Lobby*

Registration Opens

9:00AM - 3:00PM *Theatre Lobby*

Vendor Set Up

9:00AM - 12:00PM

Pre-Conference Session with ResearchEd Off The Charts: Effective Strategies for Data Storytelling

Room HH286

Tarush Lall, Director of Operations, ResearchEd

Rachel Rush-Marlowe, Founder & Executive Director, ResearchEd

Ayana Tapper, Policy Analyst, ResearchEd

In today's higher education landscape, data is critical to support ideas, decisions, and advocacy, especially for rural leaders. This hands-on workshop will guide participants through accessing, interpreting, and visualizing federal education data to support strategic data storytelling.

5:00PM - 6:00PM *Theatre Lobby*

Welcome and Opening Reception

6:00PM - 7:30PM *The Dive Cafe*

Dinner and Opening Keynote Modern Leadership for Modern Learners

Dr. Joe Sallustio, Ellucian

As student and technology experiences are intertwined forever, colleges and universities need to think quickly and act intentionally to serve learners with evolved expectations. Therefore, digital transformation is imperative. This webinar will dive into how we can think about extending our expectations for service from our personal lives to our professional lives. This includes a conversation about artificial intelligence and our personal and professional adoption curves. Ultimately, students expect higher education to look and feel like other services they engage with. How can we get the industry moving in this direction? We'll also explore enrollment and marketing tactics to engage the modern learner.

Session Topic Key

- Alliance in Action
- Trailblazing Leadership in Rural Higher Ed
- Gateway to Student Success: Paving the Road for Rural Learners to Excel
- Rural Roots, Thriving Futures: Community & Economic Impact

7:30AM *Theatre Lobby*

Registration Opens

7:30AM - 8:30AM *Theatre Lobby*

Breakfast

8:00AM - 8:40AM - *Platinum Presentations*

● Supporting Rural Student Success with ConexED

Room HS126

Dawn Whidden, Ed.D., ConexED

Learn how ConexED helps rural colleges close access gaps, improve retention, and strengthen compliance through an all-in-one platform with proven student success strategies.

● Show Me Excellence: Inspiring and Enabling Grow Your Own Talent

Room HH286

Carol Cutler White, Mississippi State University

Learn key leadership skills for rural college success and see how Mississippi State University's affordable online graduate programs can strengthen talent pipelines and advance careers.

● Student Success in Action: Building a Connection to Campus with Mentorship

Room HS100

Blair Maloney, Mentor Collective

Andrew Shaw, M.Ed., Mentor Collective

Jonathan Lord, Ed.D., College of Southern Idaho

This session will present a data-driven mentorship model that effectively integrates students, faculty, staff, and peer mentors to build a robust support network.

● WGU Enhancing Rural Community Growth: How Online Institutions Strengthen Retention and Completion at Rural Community Colleges

Room HS202

Andy Moore, Western Governors University

Christy Seawall, Western Governors University

Dr. L. Dean Fisher, College of Southern Idaho

Valerie Norwood, Missouri Health Professionals Consortium, East Central College

Hear from a rural college leader and a WGU alum now leading a rural healthcare program as they discuss how WGU's model and strong support can boost retention, accelerate completion, and strengthen the local workforce.

SESSION ONE 8:45AM - 9:45AM

- Engaging Youth in Workforce Development through the Power of Rural Collaboration and Innovative Strategies**
Room HH286
Shawna Marquardt, Madison Area Technical College
 Learn what happens when a community college, workforce board, K-12 partners, and local employers join forces to tackle workforce shortages: blending innovation, collaboration, and youth engagement with a few missteps along the way.
- Rural Excellence - A Policy Governance Approach**
Room HS126
Leah Barrett, Northeast Community College
 Advancing rural community colleges begins with presidents and boards working together through effective governance to support student success and rural vitality.
- Embracing AI for Student Success in the Digital Age**
Room HS100
Dr. Betty Young, Hocking College
 Discover how Hocking College is leading the way in AI integration in labs, curriculum, and student-driven app development to boost rural student success and operational efficiency.
- Rural Higher Education Research and Innovation in Changing Times**
Room HS202
Alyssa Ratledge, MDRC, and Kate Mahar, Shasta College
 See how MDRC's Rural Higher Education Research Center is helping colleges respond to today's challenges by turning real questions from leaders into research-driven strategies for rural student success.

SESSION TWO 10:00AM - 11:00AM

- Transactional and Stopgap Relationships Between Community College Department Chairs and Their Adjuncts**
Room HS100
Keith Zoromski, Mineral Area College
 Explore new research on how rural Midwestern community college department chairs can better support and humanize adjunct faculty through intentional, relationship-driven leadership.

- Rural Routes to Readiness: Building Scalable Pathways to College and Career**
Room HH286
Angie Smajstrla, The NROC Project
Leah Ballard, Texas College Bridge with the Commit Partnership
 Rural students face challenges in college readiness and access, and this session spotlights Texas College Bridge, a student success initiative powered by EdReady and developed with the nonprofit Commit!, as a promising solution.
- Mentorship that Matters: Designing a Mentorship Model for Rural-Serving Community Colleges**
Room HS126
Mayra Nuñez Martinez, University of California, Davis
Jordan Reed, University of Washington Community College Research Initiatives
 This session explores what makes mentorship effective for rural-serving community college students, based on a national study of 587 program websites, interviews, and a student survey.

SESSION THREE 11:15AM - 12:15PM

- From Assessment to Action: Workforce-Driven Fundraising**
Room HS202
Joe April, Convergent Nonprofit Solutions
John Rainone, Mountain Gateway Community College
 See how Sandhills Community College developed an innovative workforce strategy by combining assessments, employer engagement, and economic modeling to align programs with rural labor market needs and drive investment.
- Building Grant Infrastructure with Limited Resources: A Leadership Guide for Rural Colleges**
Room HH286
Chris Spence, New Growth Group
Dr. Steve Cole, Cossatot Community College of the University of Arkansas
 Get practical guidance on building sustainable grant systems in rural colleges, even with limited staff and funding capacity.
- In Their Words: Using Student Feedback to Assess Instructional Quality**
Room HS126
Allison Brosch, Dr. Autumn Whitehead, and Dr. Cara Barth-Fagan
State Fair Community College
 When national surveys fell short, we asked students directly; this session shares lessons from their feedback on instruction quality and how we're acting on it.

SESSION THREE 11:15AM - 12:15PM

- **Building Your Lifelines: Overcoming Leader Loneliness in Rural Community Colleges**

Room HS100

Hannah A. Guada, Hocking College

This session helps rural community college leaders combat isolation by building networks for support and belonging.

12:30PM - 1:45PM **The Dive Cafe**

Lunch/Keynote

What's Happening in Washington?

Carrie Warick-Smith, Association of Community College Trustees

Join Carrie Warick-Smith of the Association of Community College Trustees for a rundown and discussion of the latest action in Washington. She will cover the latest from Congress, the White House and executive agencies, as well as the courts in relation to community college engagement. Bring your questions and campus impacts! There will be time to ask questions and feedback on what's happening on your campus.

2:00PM - 2:30PM **Theatre Lobby**

Vendor Showcase

Visit our vendors and grab a treat on your way to session 4!

SESSION FOUR 2:30PM - 3:30PM

- **Gateway to Opportunity: Leveraging Workforce Benchmarks and Labor Market Data for Rural Excellence**

Room HS126

Paula Nissen, North Iowa Area Community College, Iowa Lakes Community College, Iowa Central Community College, and National Council for Workforce Education (NCWE)

In today's fast-evolving economy, rural community colleges are lifelines to opportunity but need timely, relevant data to guide decisions and align with regional needs for lasting impact.

Session Topic Key

- Alliance in Action
- Trailblazing Leadership in Rural Higher Ed
- Gateway to Student Success: Paving the Road for Rural Learners to Excel
- Rural Roots, Thriving Futures: Community & Economic Impact

- **Preparing the Next Generation: Enhancing Rural Grow Your Own Leadership Programs**

Room HH286

Zoë Thornton, and Doug Smith, Iowa State University

Join us to explore how colleges at any stage can develop or enhance leadership programs designed to build the capacity of next-generation leaders across diverse functional areas.

- **NJCAA Athletics - Path to Retention and Graduation**

Room HS202

Christopher Parker, NJCAA

This session reviews the benefits of community college athletics in rural America, highlighting their positive impact on recruitment, retention, graduation rates, and pathways to success.

- **Deep Dive into Rural College Innovation: Unpacking Key Learnings from the Education Design Lab's Rural Design and Data Academy: Extended Session 2:30-4:00pm**

Room HS100

Leslie Daugherty, Education Design Lab

Join us for a deep dive into the Rural Design and Data Academy, highlighting how rural community colleges are using human-centered design and data to tackle challenges, drive innovation, and support their communities.

3:30PM - 5:00PM **Theatre Lobby**

Campus Tours

Check out our host East Central College

5:00PM - 8:00PM **Quad**

Send-Off Event and Awards Ceremony

Celebrate Local Flavor at Our Thursday Evening Send-Off!

Unwind and indulge at East Central College as we send you off with a one-of-a-kind evening that blends the best of Missouri with a touch of well-deserved relaxation. Enjoy a true showcase of local flavor including great barbecue and local wines, beers, cocktails, and mocktails. Take a moment to connect with others while listening to music and browsing the always-whimsical Grown-Up Book Fair. Be sure to try your luck at some yard games, and stop by our snack shop for a fun pick-me-up. Don't forget to spend your Bauer Bucks!

7:30AM - 8:30AM *Theatre Lobby*

Breakfast

8:45AM - 11:30AM *Theatre Lobby*

Post Conference Extended Workshop with New Growth Accelerating Your Success: Connecting Essential Systems for Rural College Impact Workshop

Room HS100

Chris Spence, New Growth Group

Patrick Britton, New Growth Group

Dr. Steve Cole, Chancellor, Cossatot Community College of the University of Arkansas

Participants will explore how to strategically assemble these pieces to build systems that not only secure grants but accelerate project implementation, strengthen evaluation capabilities, and expand access to funding networks and supportive ecosystems.

SESSION ONE 8:45AM - 9:45AM

- **Uniting Development, Workforce, and Marketing**

Room HS202

Joseph April, Convergent Nonprofit Solutions

John Rainone, Mountain Gateway Community College

Discover a cross-functional strategy that helps rural colleges align development, workforce, and marketing teams to drive stronger results across the board.

- **Cultivating Rural Leadership: A Gallup-Inspired Blueprint for Onboarding New Supervisors**

Room HS126

Andrew Long, Central Arizona College

Learn how rural community colleges can use a proven framework based on Gallup principles and 13 years of experience to effectively onboard and develop new supervisors tailored to their unique context.

- **Re-Engage to Reignite: Unlocking Potential in Rural Students with Some College, No Credential**

Room HH286

Elizabeth Cox Brand, Oregon Community College Association

Community colleges have long served adult learners (25+) and, alongside state intermediaries, are now focused on better supporting working adults facing competing priorities.

- **Tedious Tasks**

Room HH225

Brandon Scheldt

Discover affordable tools and apps to streamline your daily tasks, no matter your role or the programs you use.

SESSION TWO 10:00AM - 11:00AM

- **Collaborative Mindset in a Small, Rural North Carolina Community College**

Room HS126

Wes Hill, Wilson Community College

Join us to learn how Wilson Community College partners with industry, government, and schools to drive training and economic growth in growing fields like fiber optics and biopharma through effective and strategic collaboration.

- **Bringing the Future Home: How One Rural College Used Strategic Foresight to Shape Its Vision**

Room HH286

Darci McFail, State Fair Community College

Learn how State Fair Community College used community-driven foresight planning to envision and shape its future through 2035.

- **Providing Quality Health Education for Rural Populations: A Consortium Model**

Room HS100

Dr. Nancy Mitchell and Dr. Robyn Walter, East Central College

Since 2008, the Missouri Health Professions Consortium has expanded affordable healthcare education for low-income rural students through a collaborative model, demonstrating how pooled resources can improve access to education and the quality of healthcare training in rural communities.

- **Building Local Capacity: How C2A3 Helps Colleges Strengthen Agriculture & Natural Resources Programs**

Room HS202

Cassie Cowles, Community College Alliance for Agriculture Advancement

Discover how the Community College Alliance for Agriculture Advancement (C2A3), backed by \$9 million, helps rural colleges expand agriculture and conservation programs through USDA partnerships, curriculum support, and faculty development.

11:15AM *Theatre Lobby*

Lunch

Don't forget to grab a box lunch to go!

KEYNOTES

AWARDS

Carrie Warick-Smith



Carrie Warick-Smith serves as Vice President, Public Policy for the Association of Community College Trustees. In this role, she leads the advocacy efforts of the nation's community college trustees and oversees ACCT's thought leadership work adjoining policy and practice in the community college space.

Prior to joining ACCT, Warick-Smith spent over a decade at the National College Attainment Network where she built and expanded its policy and advocacy program, with a particular focus on access to federal financial aid. In this role, she led the creation of the organization's advocacy agenda including development oversight of a simplified FAFSA prototype.

Warick-Smith holds a Bachelor of Arts in International Affairs and History and a Master of Public Policy, both from The George Washington University. While at GW, she served as a Presidential Fellow working in university administration.

Joe Sallustio



Dr. Joe Sallustio stands out as a leading expert and influential voice in the world of higher education. His unique blend of experience across operations, finance, and academics positions him as a rare breed of executive with leadership acumen in diverse functional areas. Across his impressive 20+ year career, Joe has led teams in every critical aspect of university operation, from non-profit institutions to for-profit colleges. This comprehensive understanding makes him invaluable for scaling and operating businesses and institutions effectively in the 21st century.

Joe is the Vice President of Industry Engagement for the market-leading educational technology company, Ellucian. He co-founded and hosts "The EdUp Experience Podcast", the nation's top higher ed platform featuring global leaders, and is a sought-after keynote speaker, moderator, and facilitator. He co-authored the best-selling book "Commencement: The Beginning of a New Era in Higher Education," a trusted guide for faculty and staff worldwide, and "Digital Modernization for Higher Education Boards," commissioned by AGB and released in June 2025.

Congratulations to all of the RCCA 2025 Award winners!

Rising Star Award

Lucas Hunziger

**Vice President of Technical Education
Highland Community College**

Workforce Innovation Award

**English for the Workplace:
CDL Training Program
New Mexico Junior College**

Workforce Innovation Award

**Targeted EMT Training Initiative
Northern Pennsylvania
Regional College**

Community Engagement Award

**Community College Alliance for
Agriculture Advancement**

Innovation and Access Award

**Missouri Health
Professions Consortium**



THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS

Platinum



Gold



Silver



Bronze



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