



COPLAC

COUNCIL OF PUBLIC LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES

YEAR END REPORT



2026



Prepared by

**Jeanine B.
Went**

Cover photos:

President Heather Shotton's Investiture
Fort Lewis College, April 9
&
President Rhonda Phillips' Inauguration
St. Mary's College of Maryland, April 17



COPLAC AWARDS



DUNN AWARD

We are proud to announce that Dr. Kim Ward, Professor of Mathematical Sciences and Math Foundations Program Coordinator at Eastern Connecticut State University, has been named the recipient of the 2026 Charles Dunn Award for Faculty. This prestigious honor, which includes a \$500 prize, recognizes faculty members whose work has made a profound and lasting impact on student success and well-being across Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges institutions. The award is named in honor of Charles Dunn, a longtime champion of the vital role faculty play in shaping student outcomes. Dr. Ward's selection reflects that same commitment to student-centered excellence and highlights the powerful difference faculty can make in the lives of their students—both inside and beyond the classroom.



PRIOR AWARD

Ruhama Adnew from Truman State University's Class of 2026 has been named the 2026 recipient of the David J. Prior Award for Students, a prestigious honor presented annually by the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges. The award, which includes a \$500 prize, recognizes outstanding senior-level undergraduates whose academic journeys reflect the transformative impact of a public liberal arts education. Adnew earned the distinction for her essay, *Liberal Arts, Data, and Public Life*, in which she reflected upon how her educational experience reshaped her academic and professional trajectory. Established in 2012, the Prior Award annually honors students whose academic work and future aspirations embody the mission of public liberal arts institutions. Adnew's achievements, both in and out of the classroom, exemplify that mission and underscore the value of interdisciplinary, community-focused learning.

The selection committee for this year's Dunn Award included Richard Glejzer, Provost, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts; Courtney C. Bentley, Provost, University of Montevallo; and Yvonne Villanueva-Russell, Provost, University of North Carolina at Asheville. The Prior Award selection committee included Keith Mellinger, Dean at University of Mary Washington; Angela Boswell, Interim Dean at Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania; and Forrest Anderson, Dean at University of South Carolina Aiken. Please visit www.coplac.org/awards for more info about our awards and winners.

PRESENTATIONS

COPLAC institutions and leaders were prominently featured throughout the 2026 Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) Annual Meeting, *Answering the Call for Constructive Engagement*. Through presentations addressing enrollment, civic purpose, artificial intelligence, institutional resilience, and collaborative leadership, COPLAC members contributed significantly to national conversations about the future of higher education and the enduring value of the public liberal arts.

Among the highlights were two sessions officially designated by AAC&U as COPLAC presentations, showcasing the consortium's national leadership and collaborative impact. In *Public Liberal Arts Colleges: Enrollment and the Public Good*, COPLAC Executive Director Jeanine Went joined an outstanding panel of leaders from COPLAC institutions to explore how public liberal arts colleges continue to serve students and communities amid changing demographic and enrollment realities. Presenters included Noah Coburn and Trevor Speller of The Evergreen State College, Jordan Cofer of University of Minnesota Morris, and Heather Evans of The University of Virginia's College at Wise. Together, the panel emphasized the essential role public liberal arts institutions play in advancing access, civic engagement, and the public good.

Another designated COPLAC session, *Thinking Consortially: An Overview of a Values-Based Collaborative Culture*, highlighted the power of intentional collaboration across institutions. The presentation featured Karen Moranski of the CSU San Francisco Bay Region Network, Katherine Gantz of St. Mary's College of Maryland, Niti Pandey of Eastern Connecticut State University, and Kim Whitehead of Mississippi University for Women. Their session examined how values-based consortial partnerships foster innovation, strengthen institutional culture, and create opportunities for shared learning and leadership.

COPLAC members also contributed meaningfully to several additional conference sessions addressing emerging issues and strategic priorities in higher education. In *Productive Messiness and AI Campus Literacies: Lessons from a Cross-Campus Humanities Collaborative*, Emily Todd of Eastern Connecticut State University joined Krystyn Moon and Victoria Russell of University of Mary Washington to explore how institutions are navigating the rapidly evolving role of artificial intelligence in teaching and learning. The session focused on interdisciplinary collaboration, critical digital literacy, and the importance of maintaining human-centered inquiry in an AI-influenced academic environment.

COPLAC representation was also present in *Provost Leadership in Crisis: Building Institutional Resilience for Student Success*, where Forrest Anderson of University of South Carolina Aiken contributed to a broader discussion about institutional adaptability, leadership during periods of disruption, and strategies for sustaining student success.

In *Defining Public Purpose: Finding a Dynamic, Regionally Specific Approach*, Harold Mock and Kevin Bucholtz of Georgia College & State University examined how institutions can define and communicate a meaningful public mission that reflects the unique needs of their regions and communities while preparing students for engaged citizenship and leadership.

Collectively, these presentations demonstrated the depth of talent, scholarship, and innovation across the COPLAC network. Faculty, administrators, and institutional leaders from across the consortium helped lead important national conversations on the future of higher education while reaffirming the distinctive strengths and public mission of liberal arts institutions. Their strong presence at the AAC&U Annual Meeting reflected COPLAC's growing visibility and influence as a national voice for public liberal arts education.



DEMONSTRATING VALUE

Promoting Public Liberal Arts Colleges' Value Proposition

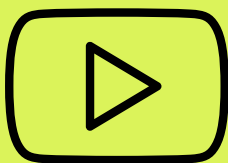
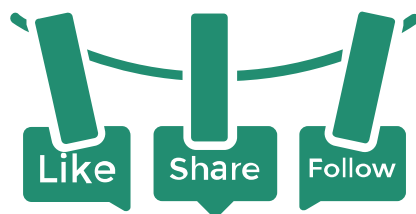
Throughout the 2025–2026 academic year, COPLAC staff and the Communications & Marketing Community of Practice expanded the reach of the Public Liberal Arts Value Social Media Marketing Campaign. In fall 2025, 17 member campuses contributed alumni interviews for the flagship “COPLAC: The Value of Public Liberal Arts Education” [video](#), which premiered on Capitol Hill on January 22 and was later featured at the Association of American Colleges and Universities during a presentation on COPLAC colleges and the public good.

Since launching in January, the campaign has generated strong engagement. By April, the first video had received 5,467 Instagram views, 317 YouTube views, and 229 LinkedIn views. Additional themed alumni videos focusing on health, education, and the environment were released throughout spring 2026 across COPLAC’s social media platforms and YouTube channel.

The campaign will continue through summer 2026 with upcoming videos focused on CEOs, communications, research, and “Liber = Free,” exploring the meaning of liberal education.

COPLAC’s social media audience has also grown significantly this year, with followership increasing by 9.8% on Instagram (+246 followers), 106% on LinkedIn (+117 followers), and 53% on YouTube (+8 followers), while Facebook engagement remained steady at 627 followers.

COPLAC thanks the Communications & Marketing Community of Practice for their creativity, collaboration, and continued efforts to bring the value of public liberal arts education to new audiences.



@COPLAC87



@coplac_members



@CoplacHigherEd



@Council-of-public-liberal-arts-colleges



Legislative Breakfast on Capitol Hill

On January 22, 2026, COPLAC proudly hosted its inaugural Legislative Breakfast on Capitol Hill. Bringing together congressional leaders, higher education advocates, students, alumni, and institutional representatives, the event showcased the power of the public liberal arts experience to change lives, strengthen communities, and prepare the next generation of civic leaders. This was a landmark moment that elevated the national conversation around the transformative impact of public liberal arts education.

The breakfast also marked the premiere of COPLAC's new shared Public Liberal Arts [video](#), featuring compelling alumni stories from 17 COPLAC institutions from across the United States. The video captured the breadth, accessibility, and life-changing value of a public liberal arts education through the voices of graduates whose experiences continue to shape their careers, communities, and futures.

The program featured remarks from Congresswoman Andrea Salinas (OR) and a special video greeting from Senator Amy Klobuchar (MN), whose personalized message of support underscored her recognition of the public liberal arts mission.

Student and alumni voices were at the heart of the event. Grace Carlos '23, a graduate of Eastern Connecticut State University, delivered a powerful reflection on how her education transformed the course of her life and prepared her for a career in public service, serving on the staff of Congressman Jimmy Gomez - CA. Grace articulated the promise of a public liberal arts education: opportunity, mobility, and meaningful civic engagement. Our student speaker, hailing from the University of Mary Washington, was Adam McAninley '27, who shared how access to higher education has opened doors for him. His remarks offered a compelling call for continued federal investment in financial aid programs that make college accessible and affordable for students nationwide.

The event was masterfully emceed by President James Birge of Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts and COPLAC, who also presented COPLAC's federal policy priorities, all of which were student-centered. His remarks urged Congress to protect and expand Pell Grants, restore critical federal grant funding, and amplify the national story of the public liberal arts sector as a cornerstone of American higher education.

The program concluded with closing remarks from COPLAC's Executive Director, Jeanine Went, celebrating the collaborative spirit and shared purpose that defined the morning. With 35 attendees representing institutions, congressional offices, and advocacy partners, the inaugural Legislative Breakfast was a defining statement about the importance, momentum, and future of public liberal arts education in America.



Grace Carlos, Alumna
Eastern CT State University '23



Adam McAninley, Student
University of Mary Washington, '27



BUILDING COMMUNITY

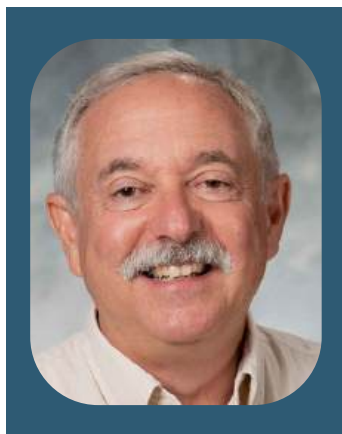
Presidents' Forums



Sarah Spreitzer

*VP & Chief of Staff,
Government Relations,
ACE*

In January, Sarah Spreitzer, Vice President and Chief of Staff, Government Relations for ACE, and co-host of the [dotEDU Podcast](#) presented about the current state of higher education in the United States to a group of 16 COPLAC leaders.



Dick Startz

*Distinguished Professor
of Economics*

In March, Dick Startz, a frequent contributing writer for Brookings and other publications, presented a brief talk about his recent publication, [What College Affordability Debates Get Wrong on the Returns of College](#).



H. Art Taylor

*President & CEO, Association
of Fundraising Professionals*

In May, Art Taylor, a fundraising and nonprofit expert who teaches at Columbia University, spoke with COPLAC CEOs about the fundraising challenges faced by nonprofits today, providing insights into successful strategies for higher education.

This academic year, COPLAC introduced a Presidents' Forum to bring together campus CEOs for 1-hour topical meetings. Two were held in the fall 2025 term, and three convened this spring. The meetings were offered on Zoom, and provided an opportunity for CEOs to discuss issues of common concern in a shared, safe, collegial environment, while enjoying a brown bag lunch or morning coffee. All sessions were held at 12 noon Eastern time. The Presidents' Forum events were free and open to all COPLAC CEOs.



PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

New Presidents' Club



Donna Price Henry

Chancellor, UVA's College at Wise

Donna Price Henry is the College's eighth Chancellor and leads UVA Wise in advancing its mission of student success and service to Southwest Virginia and the Commonwealth. Under her leadership, UVA Wise is pursuing its vision through the Honor the Future Campaign and the 2030 Plan.



Susan L. Thomas
President, Truman State University

Sue Thomas has served as the 17th president of Truman State University since 2017. Under her leadership, Truman has continued its national recognition for academic excellence, including 29 consecutive years as the top-ranked public university in the Midwest by U.S. News & World Report.



Renée M. Wachter

Chancellor, University of Wisconsin-Superior

Renée M. Wachter is the tenth chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Superior. Prior to her arrival at UW-Superior in 2011, she served as the founding Dean of the School of Business at Truman State University and member of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges.

COPLAC continued the New Presidents' Club (NPC) this spring—a dynamic forum created especially for new(er) CEOs. NPC brings leaders together to connect with peers, share real-world insights, and dive into the leadership topics that matter most right now. Each session is led by a seasoned CEO from a COPLAC institution who offers expert facilitation, a fresh perspective, and meaningful mentorship. Think of it as small-group executive coaching—an intentional investment of time that delivers real, measurable impact. NPC is designed for CEOs at COPLAC institutions who are newer to their roles—especially those within their first three years—but all CEOs are welcome to join!



GRANTS

COPLAC Gardner Partnership with Gates Funding

Ten COPLAC member institutions were selected to participate in *Sensemaking & Strategic Prioritization*, a collaborative initiative delivered in partnership with the [Gardner Institute](#) for Excellence in Undergraduate Education with support from the [Gates Foundation](#).

This opportunity is a competitive membership benefit awarded to COPLAC institutions that successfully completed an application process. The initiative is designed to help campuses translate data into action and strengthen institutional strategies that advance student success.

Participating institutions are receiving a comprehensive suite of resources and support, including:

- A facilitated, on-campus Sensemaking Conversation with Gardner Institute staff to interpret findings and establish institutional priorities
- Customized reports and interactive dashboards summarizing Institutional —Transformation Assessment and Readiness for Transformation Assessment results
- A focused Strategic Prioritization plan outlining both near-term and long-term actions to improve student success outcomes
- A Transformation Roadmap aligned with the Gardner Institute’s Six Transformation Principles to guide implementation
- A fully funded, two-day on-campus Sensemaking session
- A \$1,000 stipend for each institution’s Institutional Research office upon completion of the Gardner Institute data upload

“My Gardner Institute colleagues and I are honored and excited to partner with COPLAC in this important work,” said Andrew Koch, chief executive officer of the Gardner Institute. “Our experience — supported by external evaluation of our work — shows that programs, while necessary, are not enough on their own to produce lasting gains in student learning and success. Institutions make the greatest progress when they develop and implement a comprehensive plan for student success. This effort will help COPLAC institutions bring together strong existing work into a more coherent whole, informed by the Institutional Transformation Assessment and the collective wisdom and contextual knowledge of its faculty and staff.”

Through this initiative, COPLAC and its partners aim to equip institutions with the tools, insights, and strategic direction needed to drive meaningful, sustainable improvements in student outcomes.

Selected COPLAC Institutions include:
[Eastern Connecticut State University](#)
[Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts](#)
[Northern State University](#)
[St. Mary's College of Maryland](#)
[SUNY Geneseo](#)
[University of Mary Washington](#)
[University of North Carolina Asheville](#)
[University of South Carolina Aiken](#)
[The University of Virginia's College at Wise](#)
[Western Oregon University](#)

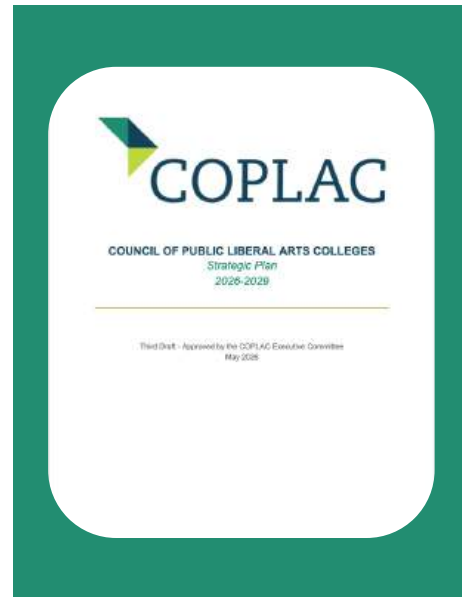


Drew Koch, CEO
Gardner Institute



FUTURE OUTLOOK

COPLAC's Strategic Plan



STEP I

Data Collection

To inform COPLAC's next strategic plan, the consortium implemented a focused data-gathering process designed to clarify institutional priorities and articulate the value of membership. Modeled on peer-consortium planning practices and informed by Jason Saul's nonprofit impact framework and Jim Collins's organizational excellence research, a 16-question survey was administered in December and January to gather broad member input on demographics, strategic priorities, and institutional messaging.

STEP II

Thematic Analysis

The Executive Director conducted a qualitative thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, priorities, and areas of alignment across survey responses.

STEP III

Focus Groups

Six member focus groups convened in February and March via Zoom. Question-level thematic findings were presented for discussion, and participant feedback was integrated into the broader dataset.

STEP IV

Strategic Framework Development

Emergent themes were synthesized into four strategic pillars for the three-year plan. Subthemes informed goal areas, and corresponding action items were developed in the first full draft, completed in March.

STEP V

Executive Committee Review and Board Presentation

The Executive Director presented the draft plan to the COPLAC Executive Committee in April and a revised version in May. Following minor refinements, the committee endorsed the plan for Board review at the Annual Board Meeting on June 21, 2026, at University of Virginia's College at Wise, preceding the Summer Summit.





WITH GRATITUDE



Executive Director Jeanine Went would like to thank the COPLAC community for a wonderful professional experience. She looks forward to the next chapter of her career serving as Vice President of Membership at *The Registry*, and hopes that you will stay in touch!

Special thanks to UNC Asheville for providing fiscal agency and office space for the COPLAC staff. We are ever so grateful!

COPLAC's success is made possible through the extraordinary commitment and generosity of its member institutions and volunteers. Across the consortium, colleagues contribute their expertise, leadership, time, and energy to advance collaborative initiatives that strengthen our shared mission.

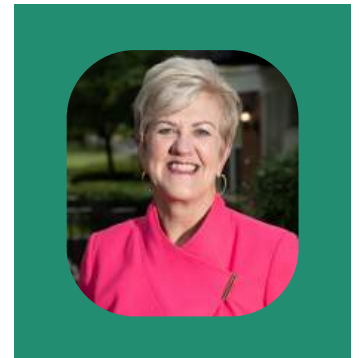
We extend our sincere gratitude to those who serve on the Board, lead Communities of Practice, host convenings, participate on committees, facilitate trainings, conduct research, expand professional networks, and support the daily work of the consortium in countless visible and behind-the-scenes ways.

Your contributions sustain COPLAC's momentum and impact. We are deeply appreciative of your partnership and service, and we thank you for helping make this year's accomplishments possible.

RETIREMENT WISHES

On behalf of the COPLAC Board, we want to thank James Birge, Ph.D., President of MCLA, for his years of service to the COPLAC Board, Executive Committee, and for serving this past year as the COPLAC President. We also thank Nora Miller,

MBA, President of the Mississippi University for Women, for her service to both the COPLAC Board and the Finance Committee. We wish you both best wishes in your next chapter!



Board of Directors

* = Executive Committee Member

Nolan Atkins, Provost, Vermont State University

Courtney Bentley, Provost, University of Montevallo

*James Birge, President, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts

Stacey Bosick, Interim Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs, Sonoma State University

John Carmichael, President, The Evergreen State College

Cathy Cox, President, Georgia College

*Janet Schrunk Ericksen, Professor of English, University of Minnesota Morris

Erin Fouberg, Interim Provost, Northern State University

*Kayla Hale, President, University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma

Daniel Heimmermann, Chancellor, University of South Carolina Aiken

*Donna Price Henry, Chancellor, The University of Virginia's College at Wise

*Karim Ismaili, President, Eastern Connecticut State University

Scott Jones, Provost, Indiana University Kokomo

Mario Martinez, Provost, Fort Lewis College

Jeffrey McClurken, Chief of Staff, University of Mary Washington

Michael Middleton, Provost, Ramapo College of New Jersey

Nora Roberts Miller, President, Mississippi University for Women

John Parkins, Dean, University of Alberta, Augustana Campus

*Jesse Peters, President, Western Oregon University

Rhonda Phillips, President, St. Mary's College of Maryland

Kirsti Sandy, Provost, Keene State College

Gretchen Sechrist, Vice Provost and Dean, Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania

Susan L. Thomas, President, Truman State University

*Melinda Treadwell, President, SUNY Geneseo

*Kimberly van Noort, Chancellor, University of North Carolina Asheville

Renée Wachter, Chancellor, University of Wisconsin-Superior

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Forrest Anderson, University of South Carolina Aiken

Joe DaSilva, Treasurer, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts

Janet Schrunk Ericksen, Co-chair, University of Minnesota Morris

Donna Price Henry, Co-chair, University of Virginia's College at Wise

Nora Roberts Miller, Mississippi University for Women

Mary Toale, SUNY Geneseo

Membership Committee

Jordan Cofer, University of Minnesota Morris

Trisha Folds-Bennett, University of Virginia's College at Wise

Katherine Gantz, St. Mary's College of Maryland

Richard Glejzer, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts

Stacy Lorenz, University of Alberta, Augustana Campus

Jeff McClurken, University of Mary Washington

Karen Moranski, Chair, San Francisco Bay Region Network



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