

Improving *the* Lives of Entire Families

Both in the courts and as a trustee,
ACCT Chair James Cooksey sees opportunities for the
children and families community colleges serve.

BY MARK TONER

AFTER 22 YEARS AS A MISSOURI TRIAL COURT JUDGE AND more than a decade as a community college trustee at Moberly Area Community College (MACC), James Cooksey sees a common thread among the people he serves in both roles.

“In most cases, they don’t have the education that affords them living wages,” Cooksey said as he accepted the gavel as 2022 ACCT Chair during last October’s Leadership Congress in San Diego (see p. 10). “They have limited options and limited opportunities because they’ve been afforded limited options and limited opportunities all their lives.”

That common thread carries over to Cooksey’s priorities for ACCT, which include studying the needs of teens and foster youth to ensure they continue in higher education. But those needs extend beyond the foster system, he says.

“Most of the students who attend our colleges do not have the financial security or social power to get them where they want to go,” Cooksey says. “Our students have the most to lose, and yet they have the most to gain.”

Cooksey grew up in Moberly, five minutes from what was then Moberly Junior College, whose building at the time also housed the high school’s 11th and 12th grades. “I’m a small-town guy,” he says, and his family ran businesses, including a rock quarry, a concrete plant, and, later, a hotel with a service station while he was in high school.

While attending William Jewell College, a liberal arts college in Liberty, Missouri, Cooksey was torn between being a veterinarian and an attorney until a challenging chemistry class helped make the decision for him. He worked for attorneys in his hometown during the summer while attending law school at the University of Missouri, and after graduating, he thought, “why not come back home?” he says.

After four years of practicing as an attorney, Cooksey was appointed and then ran for an open judge seat on the 14th Judicial Circuit of the State of Missouri by then-Gov. Kit Bond. At 28, Cooksey had just gotten married eight months before and was running against a former prosecuting attorney. Public service ran in his family — his grandfather was involved in local politics, and his father would later work for Sen. Roy Blunt, then Missouri’s Secretary of State. “I’ve always been a political creature,” he says. “We campaigned diligently, and we won.”

Cooksey became the second Republican to hold any county position, much less a judgeship, in the 14th Circuit since Reconstruction. He served on the bench for 19 years before returning to private practice in 2003. While raising his two children, both of whom played soccer year-round, he experienced MACC’s impact firsthand. His son earned dual-enrollment credits while in high school and attended the community college under the Missouri’s A+ scholarship program, where he received his associate degree in one year and transferred to a four-year college.



His wife, Sherry, was involved in education, teaching healthcare classes at the Moberly Area Technical Center.

“All that started piquing my interest,” he says. When he was approached in 2010 to join the MACC board after a trustee retired, Cooksey’s youngest child was about to graduate from high school.

“I wasn’t going to many more soccer games,” he says.

MACC had changed dramatically since it was the junior college sharing space with Cooksey’s high school. The college’s five campuses now serve 16 counties in Northeastern Missouri. The Columbia campus experienced significant growth for several years and more recently has maintained stable enrollment at a time the community college sector has experienced enrollment declines. The strong enrollment is in part due to concurrent enrollment programs with the University of Missouri, Columbia College, and Stephens College, all located in Columbia. These programs allow MACC students to benefit from all the opportunities available at the four-year institutions, such as coursework and student housing, while being full-time students at MACC. Additionally, new programs such as mechatronics, which was developed in conjunction with 3M and other business and industry partners, and an early college program with Columbia’s K-12 school district have had a positive impact on enrollment. The college expects that these programs will continue to grow.

Cooksey was named MACC’s board president in 2014, and he points to how each member of the board is heavily involved in community service beyond the college. Cooksey served as president of the State of Missouri Association of Probate and Associate Circuit Judges, and a board member of the Coates Street Presbyterian Church in Moberly, Moberly Rotary Club, the Randolph County Bar Association, and the Randolph County Big Brothers and Big Sisters Program. A former Eagle Scout, he also served as the organization’s district chair for six counties. As befits his experience as a judge, Cooksey also served on his church’s Synod Judicial Committee, which resolves disputes between congregations and pastors encompassing the states of Missouri and Kansas.

In 2017, Cooksey was approached about returning to the bench. After being appointed and then elected to serve on the same

judicial circuit, he now primarily focuses on the juvenile docket, with around 200 children in his care at any given time. Ranging in age from a month old to 20, most are in foster care settings. Some are born with drug addictions, while others have struggled with learning disabilities and mental health issues.

As a juvenile judge, Cooksey’s primary goal is ensuring the well-being of the children in state care, followed in short order by finding ways to reunify them with their parent or parents. One of the best ways to address the challenges struggling families face, he says, is education.

“We work with parents to try to break this terrible cycle,” he said in San Diego. “One of the best ways to succeed in this, and to give them a real opportunity to grow, is engaging them with our community colleges.”

Cooksey has focused on knowing whether the children in his care are struggling in school, reading reports for as many as 40 to 50 cases each week. “I know their grades, how they’re doing in school, and talk to them about school,” he says. “I still go to sporting events, I see them in Wal-Mart.”

He notes that many children complete high school with the support of foster parents, but don’t continue their education when they age out of the system.

“So many get out of foster care at 18 and get a job. But if they go on to college, [Missouri] will pay for it,” he says. Foster parents typically have younger children of their own and may have not navigated the college-going process themselves, while the children’s parents are often “trying to survive,” he says.

“They’re not aware of Pell Grants or how to fill out the FASFA,” he says.

Cooksey’s role on MACC’s board has also showed him the other side of the equation — the available jobs in careers like veterinary tech, wind turbines, and healthcare the college has developed programs to support. “These are the kinds of programs that ‘my kids’ can participate in,” Cooksey says.

Encouraging youth to do so is part of his role as a judge. Cooksey is required to meet with children and their foster parents every 60 to 120 days, a process made easier by Zoom in recent



(Left) ACCT Chair James Cooksey with former Chair Dawn Erlandson, Immediate Past Chair David Mathis and Vice-Chair Jay Nardini. (Right) Cooksey accepts the gavel from Mathis, the 2021 ACCT Chair.

years. During these meetings, he asks both youth and adults whether they have thought about going to college. “If we can get some of the students I work with enrolled, maybe their parents will also get involved,” he says. “It’s just another segment of society we should be trying to help.”

“You don’t have to get a degree, you can have a trade,” he adds. “I discuss what’s available out there. I make sure they know about community colleges,” Cooksey says. “I’m known as the education judge.”

Cooksey became involved with ACCT almost immediately after becoming a trustee. In particular, he focused on advocacy at events like the Community College National Legislative Summit (NLS).

“I enjoy meeting with Congresspeople, and I think we make an impact,” he says. “We need boots on the ground in D.C.”

Six years later, Cooksey became a member of ACCT’s governance and bylaws committee. He was elected to the ACCT Board of Directors the following year and was named central regional director and chair-elect in 2020. Last fall, he became the first Missouri trustee to be named the association’s chair.

His experiences as a judge and trustee informed his priorities for ACCT during his tenure as ACCT chair, which are focused around improving the lives of families through education.

“Every community has a segment of the population that’s struggling,” he says. “A lot of my parents are unemployed, and they don’t have stable housing,” he says. “I have 203 [children] in my two counties, but how many kids like them are there in the country?”

Cooksey sees his priorities extending the work of past chairs in exploring the issues facing student parents, minority students, and other groups, including food and housing insecurity, mental illness “and other long-addressed issues that are at the center of many of the lives that end up in my courtroom,” he says.

His own focus for ACCT — researching the needs of teens and foster youth to ensure they continue in higher education — reflects Cooksey’s desire to extend the work he does as a judge across the nation.

“I have a different kind of direct line because I can talk to

children in foster care and their parents, but how can colleges and boards and ACCT focus on getting those 17- and 18-year-olds who don’t necessarily have that direction into college?” he asks.

Cooksey received the chair gavel from outgoing ACCT Chair David Mathis at a unique point in the association’s history. Having served on the search team that ultimately selected a new president and CEO for the first time in 16 years, Cooksey says his primary goal is to ensure the association’s new executive, Jee Hang Lee, receives feedback from the membership in the coming months.

“ACCT’s work is targeted and visionary, and it has a direct benefit to our colleges,” he says.

Cooksey also wants to ensure that more resources are readily available to trustees through ACCT’s website and mobile applications. “We’re a membership organization, and we want to deliver,” he says. “The more we can make our resources available to our individual trustees, the better off our colleges are going to be.”

Among the research to be conducted over the coming year is a study on credit/non-credit alignment, including the use of stackable industry credentials, microcertifications, and certificates. “If a student can get some college credit, they’re more likely to get a college degree of some type,” he says.

Closer to home, Cooksey’s grown children have careers of their own — his daughter Shaylyn and son-in-law Eric are pharmacists, and his son Garreth has followed in his footsteps as a prosecutor. While his wife has retired, he remains active on the bench and on the MACC board and plans to seek re-election.

“What I’m doing now is just an extension of what I’ve always done,” Cooksey says.



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