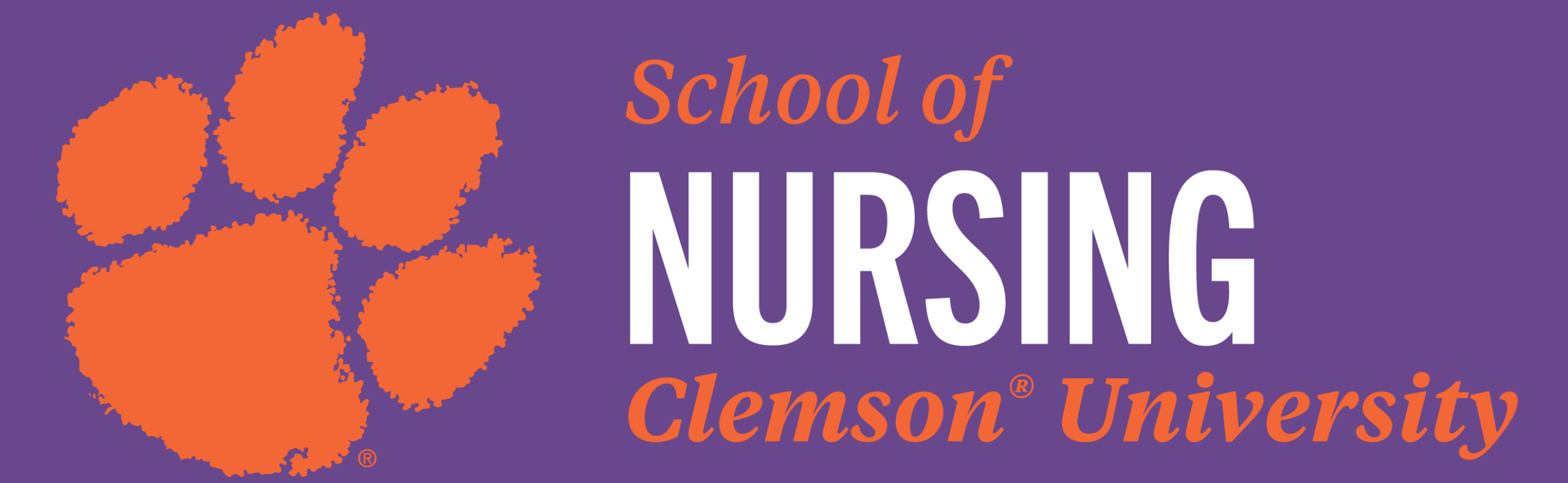


Rural Health Policy Starts Here: Building Momentum within a School of Nursing for a Policy Division

Tracy Fasolino, PhD, FNP-BC, ACPHN, FPCN
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Introduction

The nursing profession plays an essential role in improving healthcare policy and reform. We have made great strides in health policy, but additional opportunities exist. Nurses are often excluded from the highest policy development level and lack the formal education to augment their skillset. Engaging with policymakers has been limited to submitting a form letter to state and federal legislators – A process that that seems to gain very little momentum in influencing decision-making by legislators.

There is a growing shortage of experts who specialize in rural health policy and advocacy. This lack of expertise can slow the development of effective solutions for healthcare challenges in rural communities. Nursing faculty and students readily admit their limited understanding and exposure to health policy. They report having received minimal education about health policy beyond the institutional level. They struggle to expand student's exposure to health policy given their minimal experience.

Aim

Participating in the ACE Leadership Institute will offer three pathways for building momentum for a rural health policy division: a) Allows for highly effective and timely communication, b) Creates a network with thought leaders and champions, and c) Cultivating resilience as a leader in preparation for challenging conversations and conflicts.

There were three aims to the proposed project for the AACN ACEI Leadership Program:

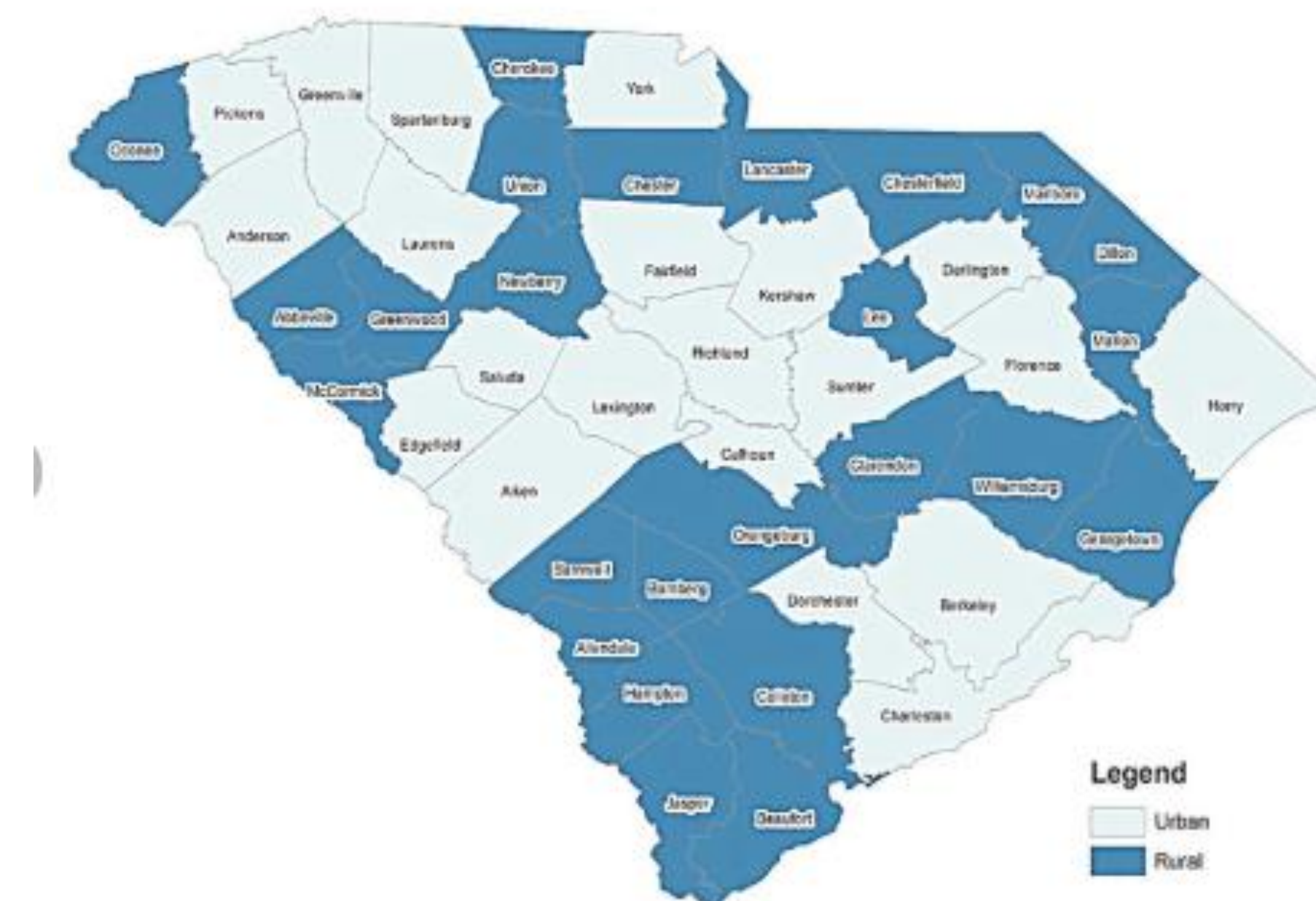
1. Develop and advance evidence-based rural health policies that address healthcare disparities and improve access to care in underserved communities.
2. Prepare nursing students and healthcare professionals to become leaders and advocates in rural health policy, research, and community engagement.
3. Foster partnerships with rural communities, healthcare organizations, and policymakers to support sustainable health initiatives and workforce development.

Exposing academic administrators, faculty, and students to health policy requires tenacity and patience. Clemson University, School of Nursing offers an opportunity to educate and launch a Rural Health Policy Division to elevate the role of the nursing profession in leadership in policy development and implementation.

What is Rural?

Key traits:

- Sparse populations,
- Open spaces,
- Economy typically farming or other natural resources.

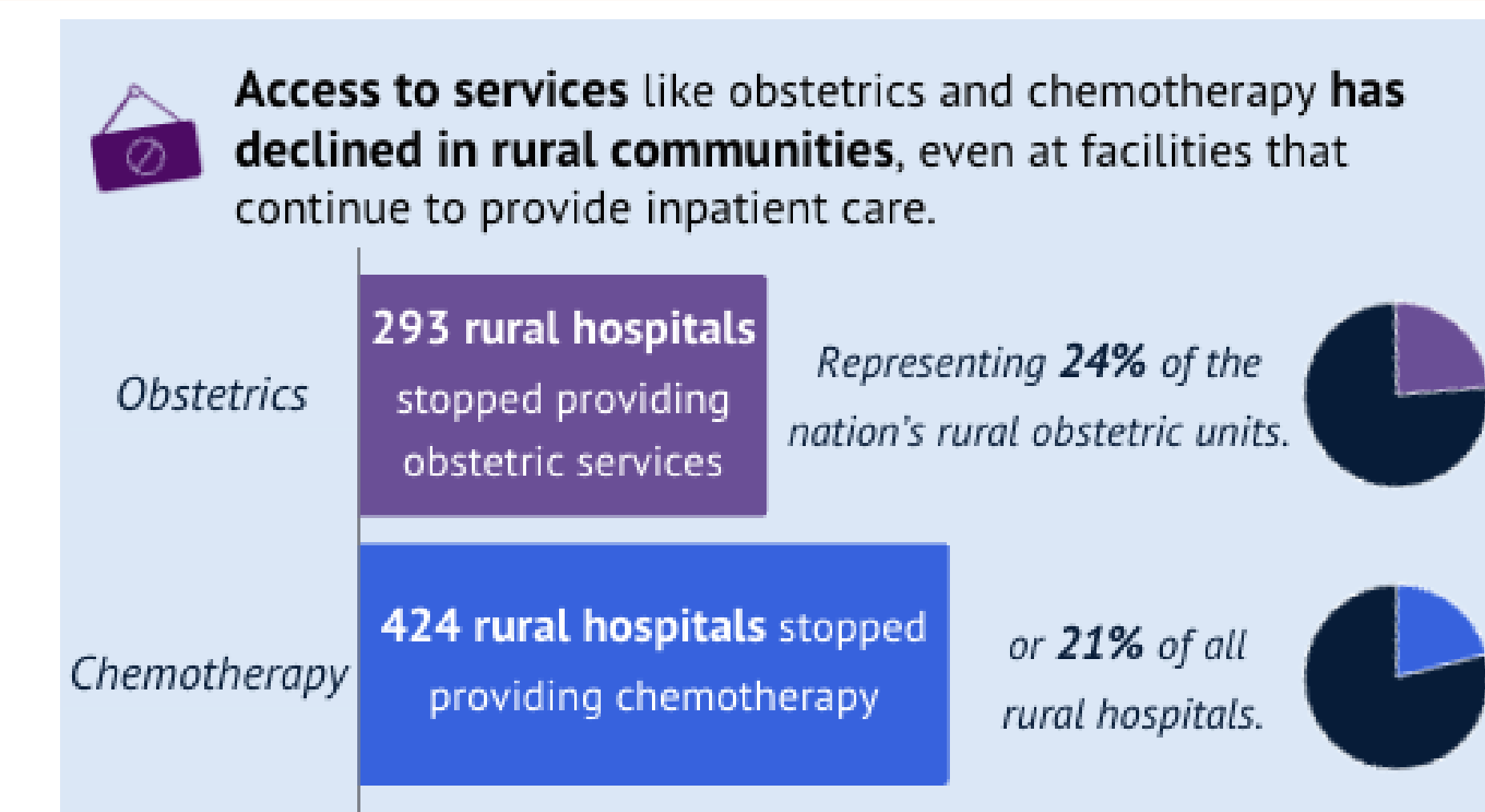


Rural and urban counties in South Carolina, USA 27 .

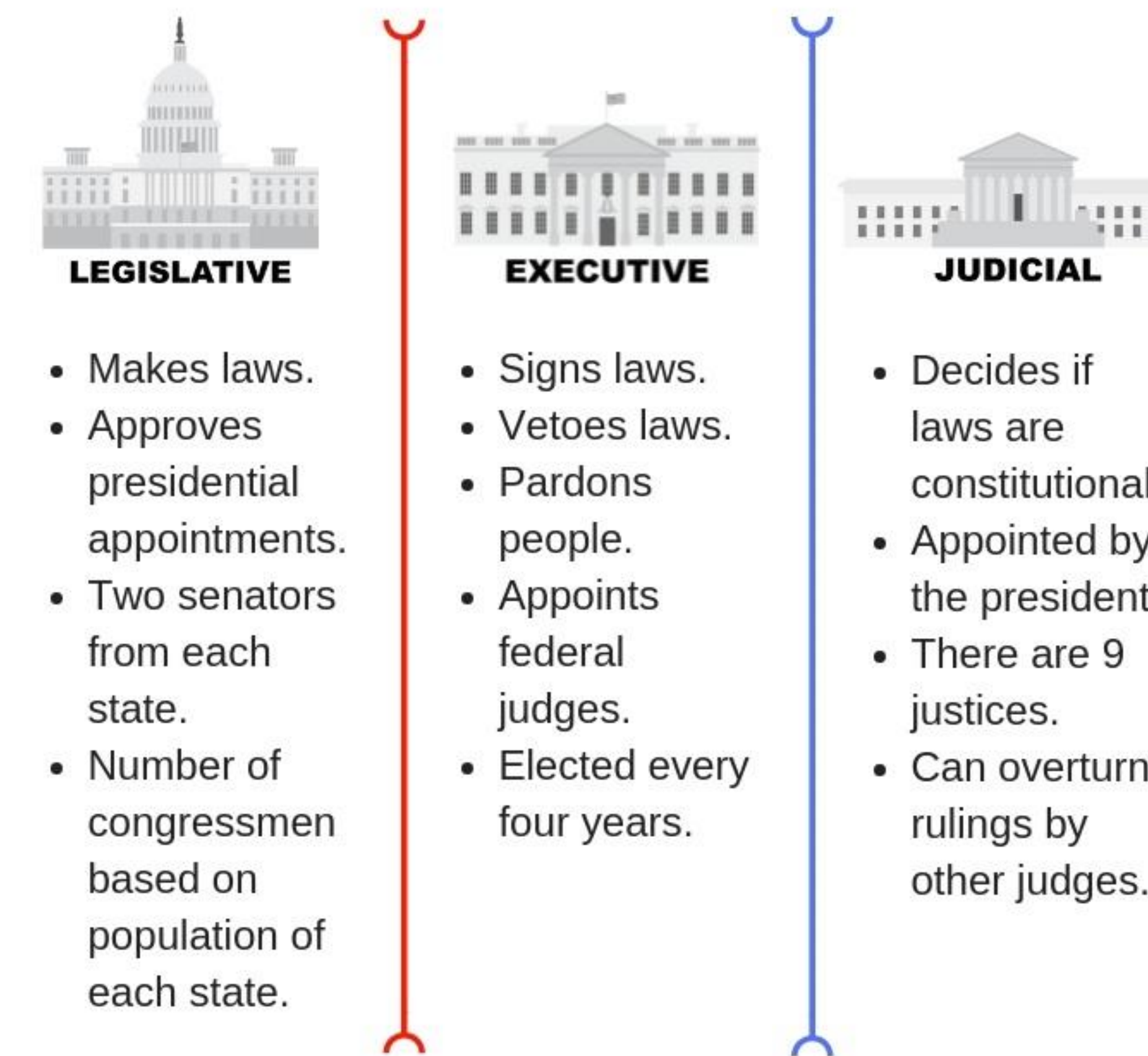
U.S. Federal Government Definitions

- U.S. Census Bureau.
- Office of Management & Budget (OMB).
- U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).
- Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA).

The lack of a single, standardized definition is intentional, as it allows agencies flexibility when distributing resources, determining medical facility designations, and measuring socio-economic disparities.



Back to the Basics



The Role of Advocacy

Nurse advocacy serves as a critical element in defending and promoting patients' rights and interests.

- ✓ **Patient Advocacy – at the bedside**
- ✓ **Workplace Advocacy – for the profession**
- ✓ **State/Federal Advocacy – impact three branches**
- ✓ **Policy Advocacy – for public health**

PRESS RELEASE

U.S. Department of Education Finalizes Landmark Rule to Lower College Costs and Simplify Student Loan Repayment

APRIL 30, 2026

Basis for Reimaging:

- College tuition has increase faster than any other household expense
- Total college loans have increased 343% since 2005
- 71% of college graduates with student loan debt report delaying or abandoning major life milestones, such as buying a home or starting a family
- Graduate students hold over 1/3 of all federal student load debt, yet 40% of master's degree programs have a negative return on investment

Submitting to Federal Registry

The nursing profession plays an essential role in improving healthcare policy and reform. We have made great strides in health policy, but additional opportunities exist, such as public comment during the rule-making process.

Clemson University School of Nursing posted under the rule-making period for the first time as part of the health policy division's startup.

Federal Registry Rulemaking Docket: [Reimaging & Improving Student Education \(RISE\) Committee](#)

Comment Tracking Number: mm5-dr83-yjpi

Public Comment on Proposed Nursing Redesignation Ruling

Clemson University, School of Nursing, Center for Research on Health Disparities, Health Policy Division, appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on the Department of Education's proposed redesignation of the nursing profession under "Reimagining and Improving Student Education" (ED docket number 2026-01912). As a land-grant institution dedicated to improving health outcomes, particularly in rural and underserved communities across South Carolina, we are concerned about the potential impact of this redesignation on the rural healthcare workforce, access to care, and the stability of safety-net health systems.

Conclusion

Rural health policy is often obscure due to fragmented regulations, limited resources, and inconsistent implementation across regions, making it difficult for healthcare professionals to stay informed. Nurses working in rural settings frequently struggle to navigate these complex policies while balancing patient care demands and addressing gaps in access to healthcare services.

AACN Joins with National Healthcare and Higher Education Groups in Legal Action to Recognize Nursing as a Professional Degree

May 21, 2026 | Education & Curriculum, Policy & Advocacy, Press Release

WASHINGTON, D.C., May 21, 2026 – Today, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) announced that it is taking legal action in response to the Department of Education's (ED) final rule, published May 1, which excludes nursing from its definition of professional degree programs. AACN is joining with a interprofessional group of national organizations to preserve access to federal student loan funding for post-baccalaureate students, which is critical to protecting the nation's health. The plaintiffs are challenging a new policy that would unlawfully exclude a wide variety of professionals from adequate access to ED's Direct Loan program – the largest source of federal financial assistance for postsecondary education.

Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the funding and opportunity provided through the Health & Aging Policy Fellowship (2025-2026) and the sabbatical provided by Clemson University.



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Biography

Dr. Tracy Fasolino is an educator, researcher, and academic leader whose work focuses on advancing student success, educational innovation, and strategic program development in higher education. With extensive experience in teaching, curriculum design, and institutional collaboration, Dr. Fasolino has dedicated her career to creating inclusive and engaging learning environments that prepare students for success in a rapidly evolving global society. Her leadership philosophy emphasizes collaboration, evidence-based decision-making, and the development of partnerships that strengthen both academic programs and community impact.

Throughout her professional career, Dr. Fasolino has contributed to a wide range of initiatives designed to improve educational access, student engagement, and interdisciplinary learning opportunities. She is recognized for her ability to bridge academic and administrative perspectives, helping institutions align strategic priorities with meaningful student-centered outcomes. Her work often integrates innovative teaching methodologies, assessment strategies, and experiential learning practices that encourage critical thinking, communication, and lifelong learning.

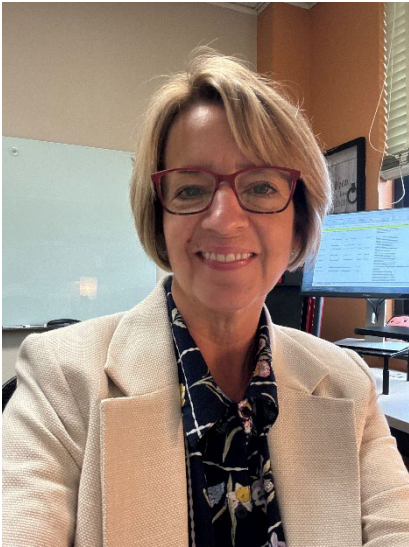
Dr. Fasolino has served in multiple leadership and mentoring roles, supporting faculty development, student advising, and collaborative research. She is committed to fostering academic environments that value diversity, creativity, and continuous improvement. Colleagues and students alike recognize her for her strong communication skills, thoughtful leadership, and dedication to mentorship. Her collaborative approach has enabled her to build productive relationships across departments, institutions, and professional organizations.

In addition to her institutional responsibilities, Dr. Fasolino has participated in professional conferences, workshops, and scholarly initiatives related to education, leadership, and organizational development. She values professional engagement as a means of staying current with emerging trends and best practices in higher education. Her contributions reflect a commitment to innovation and to the continuous enhancement of teaching and learning practices.

Dr. Fasolino's work also reflects a strong commitment to service and community engagement. She believes higher education institutions play a vital role in strengthening communities through outreach, partnerships, and applied learning opportunities. By connecting academic experiences with real-world challenges, she seeks to create educational experiences that are both meaningful and impactful for students and stakeholders alike.

As a professional, Dr. Fasolino is known for her integrity, strategic vision, and dedication to excellence. She continues to pursue opportunities that support institutional growth, student achievement, and collaborative problem solving. Her career reflects a deep commitment to educational leadership and to advancing initiatives that positively influence learners, educators, and organizations. Through her teaching, leadership, and service, Dr. Fasolino has made significant contributions to higher education and remains dedicated to fostering innovation, access, and success in academic communities.

Contact Information



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