

Biden's Higher Ed Team Takes Shape

The president's nominees for Education Department have records of advocating for student borrowers and close ties to progressive senators Warren and Sanders.

[Kery Murakami](#) February 4, 2021



The Biden administration on Wednesday announced a slew of appointments to the Education Department, including well-known higher ed advocates, people who have worked on behalf of student loan borrowers, and several former aides to progressive Democratic senators Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders.

Among those named was Michelle Asha Cooper, a longtime advocate for education equity. She was formally appointed as deputy assistant secretary for postsecondary education, and will serve as acting assistant secretary, as [reported](#) by *Inside Higher Ed* Wednesday. She was most recently president of the Institute for Higher Education Policy, which advocates for colleges and universities to do more to help students succeed. In her new role at the department, she will be responsible for running day-to-day higher education operations but could have more influence on policy issues than prior officials in the role.

Julie Margetta Morgan, Warren's former senior education counsel and her domestic policy adviser during Warren's 2020 presidential run, was appointed senior adviser to the still-unnamed education under secretary, the department's top official on higher education issues. Morgan, who also served on Biden's transition team, was vice president of research at the progressive Roosevelt Institute, where she wrote a number of studies making the case for canceling student debt.

In a 2018 Roosevelt [study](#) she co-wrote with University of Utah assistant economics professor Marshall Steinbaum, Morgan argued that while debt had increased wages for college graduates, it did not do so between 2000 and 2015 because employers are increasingly requiring college degrees for lower-paying jobs.

Melanie Muenzer, most recently associate vice president and vice provost for academic initiatives at the University of Oregon, was named chief of staff to the under secretary.

Muenzer served at the Education Department during the Obama administration as a White House liaison, chief of staff in the policy office and deputy assistant secretary for higher education policy. Prior to joining the Education Department, she served on Obama's 2008 campaign and his presidential transition team.

Another longtime advocate of student loan borrowers, Joanna Darcus, was named senior counsel in the department's general counsel's office. Darcus was most recently a staff attorney at the National Consumer Law Center focusing on consumer protection litigation and was a member of its Student Loan Borrower Assistance Project.

Darcus testified before a House financial services subcommittee in 2019 during which she called for stricter regulations for loan servicers, saying they often do not inform borrowers about a federal program that sets the amount of monthly payments based on income.

"Our work with individual clients has taught us that many borrowers struggle to repay because they never learn about or access the benefits of the federal loan program that would make smooth repayment feasible,"

Darcus [told](#) the committee. "At present, the financial incentives for servicers are not aligned with the best interests of student loan borrowers."

Tariq Habash, who had been head of investigations at the Student Borrower Protection Center, was named special assistant to the department's Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development.

Before joining the center, started by Seth Frotman, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau's assistant director and student loan ombudsman during the Obama administration, Habash was a senior policy associate at the Century Foundation, where he worked on higher education affordability, accountability and consumer protection issues.

Student Debt Crisis, another advocacy organization, was "thrilled" with the appointments of Morgan, Darcus and Habash, said Cody Hounanian, the organization's program director.

"All three have been strong champions for student loan borrowers, and we are sure they will carry perspective with them as they work in public service at the department," he said. "This is a welcomed -- and much-needed -- change from the Betsy DeVos Department of Education that was filled with student loan and for-profit college industry insiders."

Jessica Cardichon, former education counsel to Senator Bernie Sanders, the Vermont Independent, and Nick Lee were named deputy assistant secretaries of the department's planning, evaluation and policy development office. Cardichon had served as the director of the Learning Policy Institute's Washington office and director of federal policy for the group. Lee had been a senior program officer at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, where he worked on efforts to make public K-12 and higher education funding more adequate and equitable.

Sara Garcia was named special assistant at the Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development. She had been a program officer for the North America, Policy and Finance Team at the Gates Foundation. Before joining the Gates Foundation, Garcia worked as a senior research and advocacy manager for postsecondary education at the progressive Center for American Progress.

A Respected Champion of Education Equity

Cooper's new position as acting assistant secretary for postsecondary education was at one point the Education Department's top position in setting higher education issues. But under the Trump and Obama administrations, it has been focused on running the department's nitty-gritty work on higher education, including administering grants and enforcing regulations.

The department's under secretary and the head of its policy evaluation office, positions that are still unfilled, have been more at the center of setting policy, said Amy Laitinen, former White House higher education policy adviser during the Obama administration and higher education policy director at the left-of-center think tank New America.

"Michelle's appointment is a clear indication that the administration wants that to change," said Laitinen, who was among a chorus of progressive education advocates praising the selection of Cooper.

"Michelle is a known and trusted and respected voice in the field," Laitinen said.

Antoinette Flores, director for postsecondary education at the left-leaning Center for American Progress, agreed.

"Michelle Asha Cooper has long demonstrated a commitment to improving access and student success for all students, with a focus on students of color," Flores said. "Michelle joining the department is a good indicator that the Biden administration is committed to improving equity in higher education."

Cooper participated in an *Inside Higher Ed* [podcast](#) in July, during which she stressed the importance of addressing equity, particularly as students struggle during the pandemic.

"This is a really important moment for all of us. While we do not yet know the full impact of COVID-19, we know that it is having a tremendous impact on higher education and it is also having a tremendous impact on the students who faced tremendous needs prior to the pandemic, and also the institutions that serve them," she said in the podcast. "I think this is a real moment to really double down our efforts on being equity-minded and serving these students and these institutions well. Really thinking about what is it that they need to be successful, not just as they move through higher education, but as they move through life beyond higher education, and what is the institutional responsibility to deliver on that promise."

Cooper also said during the podcast that more work needs to be done to better address decreasing college enrollment by Black and Latinx students.

"We really have to look at this issue about higher education's responsibility in closing and tackling the racial wealth gap. As long as college costs remain what they are and students are forced to take out student loans, we will continue to perpetuate a system of haves and have-nots by forcing more and more students to take out loans to pay the cost of college," she said. "This is a big issue and one that's very personal to me."

She added that the way colleges are financed, and the inability of public funding to keep up with costs, has led to skyrocketing tuition and is a major factor in students' debt.

"How do we make sure that the costs are aligned to what students should and could afford to pay?" she asked. "I think if we can fix that problem, that goes a pretty long way to fixing the student loan problem, by making the cost far more reasonable."

Cooper also stressed the need to restore the buying power of Pell Grants, which cover less and less of the cost of going to college. More broadly, she called for re-examining elements of white privilege in higher education.

"If we want to see change, we've got to be willing to give up some of that privilege that we have held dear to our hearts and our families," she said, citing examples such as legacy admissions, which are common in private higher education but "really have no place within a contemporary higher education enterprise."

Cooper comes to the department after heading IHEP since 2008, but she has experience working in the federal government, having served as deputy director of the Education Department's Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance. She was also a program associate at the Association of American Colleges and Universities' Office of Diversity, Equity and Global Initiatives from 2001 to 2004 and also worked at the Council for Independent Colleges,

"What I really appreciate most about her leadership is that she sees education as a catalyst for economic and social mobility, not only for the students, but their families and entire communities," said AACU president Lynn Pasquerella.

"As a result, she has demonstrated a deep and abiding commitment to advocacy for college access and affordability; the promotion of pathways for transfer and degree completion; the creation of pipelines for those

traditionally excluded from higher education, including Second Chance Pell for incarcerated students; and the importance of colleges and universities as anchor institutions,” she said.

Cooper also co-authored a 2016 book, *Becoming a Student-Ready College: A New Culture of Leadership for Student Success* (Jossey-Bass), according to IHEP’s website.

“She’s a strong voice for institutions to do right by their students,” said Debbie Cochrane, vice president of the Institute for College Access & Success. “Far too frequently schools will blame students as to why outcomes are not higher. She’s a champion for colleges to be more student-ready than expecting students to be college-ready.”

Cooper’s focus on students will also bring a perspective to the department on issues like providing free college, said Denise Forte, the Education Trust’s senior vice president for partnership and engagement. “You look at IHEP’s work, and it has been about the student. Are they really getting the benefits of a high-quality postsecondary education? Are they accessing it?” she said.

In a 2015 op-ed Cooper co-authored in *The Hill*, for example, she noted that some free college plans cover only the cost of tuition, while others pay for living expenses and school supplies.

“When analyzing these efforts, it is important to recognize that they all mean something slightly different -- ‘free tuition’ is different from ‘free college,’ which is different from ‘debt free.’” She noted that under some free college plans, “students may still need to borrow to cover other educational costs such as books, room and board, and transportation. On the other hand, a ‘debt-free’ education would allow students to graduate from college without borrowing.”

In addition, Cochrane said, Cooper is expected to be a voice for improving the use of data in setting higher education policy. Under her leadership, Cochrane said, IHEP created the Postsecondary Data Collaborative, an initiative of 34 groups that advocates for increasing the quality of postsecondary data.

“The federal government did not design its systems to collect data to answer all of the questions pertinent to today’s student population,” a 2017 IHEP report said. The information collected by the federal government -- including the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and the National Student Loan Data System -- “do not communicate, creating a confusing and disjointed data infrastructure that produces incomplete metrics,” it said.

“For example, the most commonly used graduation rate only measures the percentage of first-time, full-time students who complete their degree or credential at their first institution within six years, leaving out part-time and transfer students. As a result, this rate reflects only about 47 percent of today’s students entering college,” the report said.

“She has deep knowledge of higher education with a focus on data and equity,” said Robert Kelchen, chairman of Seton Hall University’s department of education leadership, management and policy. “She is well connected to the research community, which is great for evidence-based practices.”

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