

Academic Sector Advisory Committee – Meeting Summary February 10, 2026 (Virtual Meeting)

Academic Sector Advisory Committee:

Open discussion was encouraged from a horse industry wide perspective and perspective given within that Advisory Committee. Notes from the Steering Committee prior meetings were distributed prior to the Advisory Meeting.

The Academic Sector Advisory Committee convened to discuss how Maryland's education and workforce systems can better support the state's horse industry, including racing, breeding, training, recreation, youth programs, and emerging equine-related fields. Participants represented K–12, postsecondary education, youth organizations, agri-tourism operations, workforce agencies, federal partners, and industry programs.

Maryland's horse ecosystem and shared messages

Committee members emphasized that Maryland's horse ecosystem is broad, interconnected, and science-based, spanning lesson barns, agri-tourism farms, youth programs (4-H, FFA, Pony Club), trade schools, community colleges, four-year institutions, veterinary and federal services, racing, and aftercare. They felt the industry should consistently communicate that there are many legitimate and diverse careers with horses—not just riding and barn management—and that these careers range from hands-on trades (farriery, saddlery, grooming) to professional roles in veterinary medicine, research, business, and public service.

Participants described Maryland's academic horse sector as a strength that underpins workforce development for the entire industry, from entry-level barn work to highly specialized roles in nutrition, biosecurity, and regulatory oversight. They noted that horses increasingly sit at the intersection of science, animal welfare, wellness, and land stewardship, and agreed that messaging should highlight both the emotional appeal of working with horses and the technical skills and credentials the sector demands.

Several members stressed the close relationship between racing and the broader horse community, pointing out that youth riders, lesson students, and agri-tourism visitors often become future workers or professionals in racing-adjacent roles (farriers, vets, farm managers, feed and equipment providers). They saw opportunities to tell a more unified story about how the horse industry relies on the same educational pathways, safety standards, and welfare-focused practices that serve the rest of the horse world.

Themes raised:

- The horse industry is science-based and technical, not just recreation.
- Careers span trade, two-year, four-year, graduate, and government pathways.

The industry includes:

- Saddle fitting, bridle fitting, and master saddlery standards (North American Saddlery School)
- High school equine science concentrations (Oldfields School)
- Two-year equine studies and agribusiness degrees (Cecil College)
- Four-year equine science programs (University of Maryland)
- Veterinary medicine and federal animal health roles (USDA)
- Workforce development infrastructure (Maryland Department of Labor)

Important shared messaging point:

- Parents often perceive horse careers as “not real jobs” or financially unstable.
- Participants emphasized that many equine careers are:
 - Science-driven
 - Skilled trades
 - Professionalized

Why the horse industry matters to Maryland

The committee underscored that Maryland’s horse industry contributes to the state in multiple ways: economically, through jobs and small businesses; agriculturally, by supporting farms and related supply chains; and socially, by shaping local identity and offering youth development and community engagement. Members referenced strong equine regions such as Cecil County and Anne Arundel County, noting the concentration of farms, lesson barns, race tracks, and related businesses that support local employment and associated services (e.g., feed stores, transport, veterinary practices).

Participants also highlighted horses’ role in land use and open space preservation, explaining that horse farms help maintain working landscapes and green space near urban and suburban areas. They pointed to agri-tourism operations that host thousands of visitors annually as examples of how horses draw families into rural communities, support local economies, and build long-term interest in agriculture and equine careers.

Several speakers emphasized mental health and wellness benefits as a growing area of value, citing emerging fields such as equine-assisted learning and equine-assisted

wellness. They felt this dimension could resonate with policymakers and funders who are focused on youth mental health, social isolation, and community resilience, and argued that horses can be framed as part of Maryland's broader public health and quality-of-life strategy.

Equine careers contribute to:

- Life sciences and agricultural science sectors.
- Workforce development priorities identified by the Governor (Life Sciences sector specifically).

Biosecurity, disease prevention, and animal health were highlighted as:

- Critical economic and public health functions.
- Areas where better education could prevent outbreaks (e.g., EHV, Coggins cases, disease spread during transport).

Maryland students are leaving the state for equine education (especially to Kentucky), which represents:

- Loss of talent
- Loss of workforce pipeline
- Missed economic opportunity.

Connection and fragmentation within the industry

Members agreed that the equine and academic sectors in Maryland currently feel fragmented and siloed. They cited multiple parallel systems—4-H, FFA, Pony Club, discovery programs, trade schools, community colleges, four-year programs, and private certifications—that each have their own standards, curricula, and advancement frameworks. While this diversity was seen as a strength, participants noted that for students, parents, and newcomers, it is difficult to see how all these pieces connect into a coherent pathway.

Participants contrasted Maryland's relatively ad hoc pathways with more structured systems in parts of Europe and the UK, where equine careers follow clearly defined ladders and nationally recognized skill levels. They stressed that in Maryland, access often depends on "who you meet," personal networks, and luck in finding good mentors—conditions that can leave aspiring horse professionals exposed to inconsistent quality and "bad actors" as well as outstanding mentors.

The group discussed several ideas to help the industry function more as a single system, including:

- Developing a Maryland horse career “hub” or online portal that describes equine careers, associated education levels, and where to get training.
- Creating a statewide mentoring network modeled on successful youth frameworks, where experienced professionals (e.g., breeders, farm managers, farriers, trainers, saddle fitters) can be matched with interested youth and adults.
- Exploring ways to map or align existing certifications, micro-credentials, and programs into a more understandable progression without attempting to fully standardize every provider.

Members felt that joint initiatives—such as shared marketing campaigns, cross-discipline events, and co-branded materials across academic institutions and youth organizations—could help present Maryland’s horse industry as a unified, opportunity-rich system rather than a collection of separate niches.

Repeated concern:

- The academic and workforce landscape is fragmented.
 - Pony Club
 - 4-H
 - FFA
 - Trade schools
 - Community colleges
 - Four-year universities
 - Apprenticeships
 - Certification programs
- No centralized pathway showing how someone progresses from:
 - Youth involvement - trade - certification - degree - career.

Examples:

- Cecil College struggled to fill equine certificate classes despite being in a strong horse county.
- Students unaware of Maryland-based programs.

- University of Kentucky actively recruiting Maryland students more effectively than Maryland institutions market themselves.
- Saddlery school unable to connect qualifications to a recognized U.S. academic equivalency framework.

Coordination and statewide leadership

The committee expressed a need for more intentional coordination and long-term leadership around education and workforce issues in the horse industry. There was broad recognition that individual entities (schools, barns, agencies, organizations) are doing valuable work, but that no single body is currently tasked with integrating these efforts, maintaining a clear picture of statewide needs, and driving shared priorities.

Several participants suggested that an ongoing education and workforce committee or similar standing body under the Maryland Horse Industry Board could provide structure and continuity, meeting at least once or twice per year to review progress, identify gaps, and coordinate initiatives. Others pointed to the potential role of an industry association, nonprofit, or intermediary organization as the “central organizer” for apprenticeship and training initiatives, especially in collaboration with the Maryland Department of Labor.

From the discussion, a realistic coordinating role would likely include:

- Convening stakeholders across K–12, postsecondary, youth organizations, industry, and government.
- Maintaining a statewide inventory of equine occupations, training programs, and credentials, and identifying gaps.
- Supporting development of the proposed career hub and mentoring network.
- Coordinating grant applications and strategic industry partnerships (e.g., through the EARN Maryland program and apprenticeship funding).
- Serving as a connector between the horse industry and state and federal agencies on workforce, life science, and biosecurity priorities.

Key discussion:

- Who should coordinate statewide workforce and education efforts?
Ideas included:
 - Creating a standing Education & Workforce Committee
 - Developing a centralized “Maryland Horse Career Hub.”
 - Leveraging existing Department of Labor programs (e.g., Earn Maryland, Registered Apprenticeship).

- Using Strategic Industry Partnerships as an organizing model.

Concrete programs mentioned:

- Earn Maryland grants (industry-driven workforce partnerships).
- Registered Apprenticeship programs (including new Raise Act funding).
- Life Sciences investment priorities under the Governor's economic growth strategy.

Information needs for decision-makers

Committee members discussed what information would help the Governor's Office, legislators, local officials, and agencies better understand the value of the horse and academic sectors. They felt decision-makers need both clear economic metrics and compelling human stories.

The group identified the following types of information and products as especially useful:

- Quantitative data on employment, wages, and business counts across equine occupations, including hard-to-see roles such as farriers, saddle fitters, grooms, and equine professionals attached to racing.
- Regional breakdowns (by county or corridor) showing where equine activity is concentrated and how it interfaces with other priority sectors (e.g., life sciences, agri-tourism).
- Case studies of programs (e.g., youth clubs, agri-tourism farms, academic pathways) that illustrate how a first exposure to horses can lead to long-term careers and community benefits.
- Clear maps or "career ladders" showing what education or credentials are needed for different roles and how people can move up over time.

Participants noted that state workforce tools and the **Chief Economist's** office could support analysis of occupation-level demand and earnings, if the industry can first organize and define a list of target occupations. They stressed that packaging this information into accessible reports, infographics, and online resources will be important for advocacy and funding.

Gaps identified:

- No clear inventory of:
 - Top in-demand equine occupations.
 - Workforce shortages (e.g., veterinarians, farriers).
- No centralized directory of:
 - Training providers
 - Certification programs
 - Career pathways

Suggestions raised:

- Develop:
 - An “encyclopedia of equine careers.”
 - A statewide mentoring network.
 - Clear occupational mapping (GED - Trade - 2-year - 4-year - Graduate).
- Align career messaging with economic data and workforce demand.

Financial sustainability of operations

The committee acknowledged that many operations linked to the academic and horse ecosystem—lesson barns, youth programs, agri-tourism facilities, and small businesses—struggle to remain financially sustainable. Members pointed to rising input costs (labor, feed, equipment, farrier services), limited margins on lessons and educational programming, and the capital and insurance costs involved in safely hosting the public.

Participants cited the shortage of farriers as an example of structural pressure: with fewer practitioners and high demand, shoeing costs are significant and rising, affecting both boarding barns and individual owners. They also noted that some programs and initiatives, such as the Horse Discovery Center model, have had to pause or scale back due to limited staff and funding, even though the underlying concept remains popular and effective.

Regulatory and administrative burdens were mentioned as background challenges, particularly for small operations trying to balance compliance, program development, and hands-on animal care with little staff. Participants suggested that better access to grant opportunities, intermediary support for managing workforce programs, and stronger integration with state workforce and economic development tools could help more facilities remain viable while providing public and educational services.

Issues raised:

- Professional shortages driving high service costs.
- Aging workforce in certain skilled trades
- Difficulty sustaining small academic certificate programs with low enrollment.
- Programs being discontinued due to low student numbers.
- Need for:
 - Apprenticeship stipends
 - Grant funding to support training pipelines
 - Industry partnerships to ensure job placement after training.

Specific stabilization ideas:

- Fund apprenticeship models for trades & professionals.
- Use Earn Maryland grants to subsidize training pathways.
- Reframe equine careers as life sciences careers to align with funding streams.

Entry points and pathways into the industry

Members devoted substantial discussion to “entry point” spaces such as lesson barns, agri-tourism farms, youth programs, and Pony Club centers. These venues were described as critical for introducing children, teens, and adults to horses, building foundational skills (barn care, safety, basic horsemanship), and fostering the confidence needed to take on early employment in barns, farms, and racing-related environments.

Participants stressed that these entry points need support in several forms: program funding, marketing and visibility, connections to higher-level education providers, and recognition of the skills they develop (e.g., micro-credentials in stable care or grooming that can be shown to employers). They also emphasized the importance of helping parents and school counselors understand that equine careers are legitimate, science-based, and can provide good livelihoods, so that youth are encouraged rather than discouraged from pursuing them.

The committee discussed pathways from these entry points into more formal academic or trade routes, such as equine-focused high school concentrations, community college certificates, university programs in animal and equine science, and specialized trade schools in saddlery and farriery. Members saw value in:

- Micro-credential systems that document specific competencies (e.g., stall care, grooming) and help students transition into part-time barn work or early-career roles.
- Articulated pathways between two-year and four-year programs, and from non-degree training into recognized certifications.

Stronger marketing of in-state education and training options so that Maryland students understand the breadth of opportunities available without leaving the state.

Current entry points identified:

- Pony Club
- 4-H
- FFA
- High school equine science concentrations
- Trade schools
- Community colleges
- Four-year equine science degrees
- Pre-vet pathways
- Lesson Barns
- Apprenticeships

Major problem identified:

- No visual roadmap showing how someone moves between these.

Suggestions raised:

- Statewide mentor network.
- Career coaches tied into high schools.
- Youth board initiatives connecting upper-level Pony Club members to professionals.
- Formalized micro-credentialing
- Registered Apprenticeship pathways for trades.

Workforce and careers in the horse industry

The committee explored in depth why it is difficult to attract and retain workers in equine careers, including racing-specific roles. They noted several recurring issues:

- Limited awareness of the range of equine jobs and the fact that many do not require a four-year degree.

- Perceptions that equine careers are low-paying, financially unstable, or only accessible to those with significant personal resources.
- A lack of clear, standardized pathways and credentials that signal competence and support career advancement.
- Difficult working conditions in some roles (early hours, physical demands, weekend work, travel) without corresponding structures for housing, transportation, or benefits.

The group identified particular shortages and concerns around veterinarians and farriers, with aging practitioners, high demand, and long training times leading to service gaps and increased costs. They felt that these occupations are strong candidates for structured apprenticeship or strategic industry partnership models, especially when paired with community college or institute-level programs and existing professional associations.

Committee members discussed what would make equine careers easier to understand, access, and sustain over time:

- A clear inventory of equine occupations, organized by education level (high school/GED, trade school, two-year, four-year, graduate) and by function (e.g., care, health, business, science, regulation).
- Career “coaches” or advisers who can help youth and adults navigate pathways into equine roles, similar to career coaches in other sectors.
- Expanded use of registered apprenticeships and “earn while you learn” models, especially in trades like farriery and saddlery.
- Mentorship networks to connect aspiring professionals with experienced practitioners across disciplines.
- Better communication to highlight the science and technology aspects of the industry (biomechanics, nutrition, pasture management, disease prevention, biosecurity), positioning equine careers within the state’s life sciences and agricultural priorities.

Workforce shortages identified:

- Veterinarians
- Farriers
- Skilled trades (saddlers, fitters)
- Stable Workers
- Instructors/Trainers

Barriers identified:

- Perception that horse careers lack financial viability.
- Lack of structured credential equivalency across programs.
- High cost of equestrian participation (competition model seen as exclusive).
- Academic programs struggling to recruit students.
- No standardized skill ladder or competency framework across sectors.

Innovative ideas raised:

- Micro-credentials for stable care and horsemanship skills.
- Structured apprenticeship expansion.
- Biosecurity certification roles.
- Science-based marketing of equine careers.
- Mentoring networks tied to specific occupations.
- State-recognized trade certification equivalency.

Major takeaways and suggested next steps

Across the discussion, several major themes emerged:

- The need for a more organized, visible system of equine education and careers in Maryland, rather than isolated programs.
- The importance of early exposure and youth development programs as pipelines into lifelong participation and employment in the horse industry, including racing-related careers.
- A desire to ground messaging in both the emotional appeal of horses and the scientific, welfare-focused, and economically significant nature of the sector.
- Recognition that small businesses and educational operations face real financial and workforce constraints and will need targeted support to deliver on strategic goals.

Committee members suggested several concrete next steps for consideration in the Maryland Horse Industry Strategic Plan:

- Develop a statewide Maryland Horse Career Hub: an online resource that catalogs equine occupations, describes required education/credentials, lists Maryland-based programs and training providers, and includes links to workforce tools and labor-market data.

- Create a statewide mentoring network: a vetted list of professionals willing to mentor youth and adults in areas such as breeding, farm management, racing, farriery, saddlery, veterinary support, and agri-tourism.
- Establish or formalize an education and workforce committee within the Maryland Horse Industry Board (or a similar entity) to provide ongoing coordination, inventory assets, and shepherd initiatives beyond the life of the strategic planning process.
- Pursue strategic industry partnerships and apprenticeship initiatives with the Maryland Department of Labor, focusing first on high-need occupations such as farriers and potentially allied trades or support roles.
- Strengthen marketing and outreach for Maryland-based academic and training programs, particularly in high schools, youth organizations, and among parents and counselors, so that students are aware of in-state options before looking elsewhere.

Participants expressed interest in continuing this dialogue, reconvening the advisory committee as the strategic plan advances, and connecting through standing board meetings and subcommittees. They emphasized that successfully implementing the plan will require sustained collaboration among educational institutions, industry partners, and state and federal agencies.

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