

Southwestern Oregon Community College



The Leah Meyer Austin Award from Achieving the Dream (ATD) is the highest honor conferred to colleges in the ATD Network. Bestowed annually since 2008, the award signifies outstanding gains in student success; recognizes a holistic approach to reducing performance gaps between student groups; and celebrates institutional strength, aligned policies and procedures, and a student-focused culture. It is with great pleasure and pride that ATD presents Southwestern Oregon Community College with the 2025 Leah Meyer Austin Award.

Southwestern Oregon Community College (Southwestern) is a small, remote community college in Coos Bay on the southern coast of Oregon. A branch campus, Curry Campus, lies about 100 miles to the south. With a little more than 1,400 students combined, the campuses serve a district of 10 rural high schools that boast graduating classes of anywhere from 10 to 200 students.

With a steadfast commitment to student success, Southwestern joined the Achieving the Dream Network in 2012 under President Dr. Patty Scott as one of a group of nine rural community colleges in Oregon and has, since then, been part of ATD's enduring emphasis on supporting rural institutions. The college achieved Leader College status in 2015, which it held until 2021 and regained in 2023.

According to Dr. Scott, as the state's most remote community college, Southwestern is the only choice for a college education for those who do not wish or are unable to relocate. "Most of us may not think about the implications of [our remoteness, but] for people who want to go to college, we are the only local option," she points out. Viewing its rural locale as a positive, Southwestern prides itself on what Dr. Scott calls the "people connection," valuing its close-knit atmosphere and emphasis on relationships.

Understanding Local Opportunity

Recognizing that education is key to economic mobility, Southwestern has embraced its role as a catalyst for workforce development and social transformation. The college strives to not only expand access to education but also seeks to align its programming with the needs of the population it serves.

And that population is one that has seen the acute decline of the regional industries — primarily timber, fishing, and agriculture — that historically were the backbone of its communities.

Dr. Scott explains that for families with roots in these industries, whose jobs were often high risk and high paying, college did not regularly factor into the equation. A generation or two ago, she says, high school graduates — and even those who did not finish high school — had ample opportunity to make family-sustaining wages. Just 30% of the adult population (25 years and older) in the area hold a minimum of a two-year degree, which is considerably lower than the state average of 47%. The figure drops to 20% for those with a four-year degree.

Dr. Scott not only points out that those jobs — that a generation or two ago paid enough to support a family — are much fewer and far between these days, but she also highlights another important fact: Such “blue collar” jobs are not what they used to be, now requiring a knowledge of technology that isn’t handed down from parent to child. “Even if you do ... go to work at a mill or drive a logging truck, or fish, ... it’s a whole different world where you *do* need some training [in order] to do as well as a parent or grandparent,” she says.

Understanding this skills gap, Southwestern takes its role in imparting technological competencies seriously, carefully considering its programming to ensure maximum impact locally. “We [consider] what will make the most sense for our region to help the industries that we do have,” says Dr. Ali Mageehon, vice president of instruction and student services, “to help those who are local actually get educational attainment and be able to get higher wages.”

Holistically Engaging the Region’s Communities

While the college has continued to whittle away at the economic and workforce challenges of its district, it has faced another uphill battle: The floundering economy of the region has caused considerable flight, resulting in a shrinking of the traditional aged college-going population of 18–24-year-olds.

But Southwestern has been undeterred. Relying on its nimbleness and spirit of ingenuity — key traits for a rural college to possess — the institution invested in its data capacity and worked to understand the nuances of its community. From this work emerged a strategy to engage not just traditional-aged students but adult learners — including those who never went to college, those who did but stopped out, and those who simply need to reskill to be successful in today’s economy.

Of course, part of meeting the needs of adult learners is meeting the needs of part-time students, as more than half of Southwestern’s adult learners, who often have jobs and family responsibilities competing for their time, start out in their studies on a part-time basis.

While recognizing that one group is not a proxy for the other, the college, noting the overlap between the adult learner population and the part-time population, has implemented a number of reforms that benefit both groups. With a Title III grant as well as other funding from federal, state, and local sources artfully braided together, Southwestern has successfully created specialized advising and new age- and lifestyle-appropriate student orientations that are more targeted towards working students. The college also has performed thorough evaluations

of both its practices around communication to these student populations as well as its portfolio of academic and workforce programs that are of particular interest to them.

With 40% of Southwestern’s overall student body comprising online learners — which includes a large percentage of adult learners who are better able to fit online (as opposed to face-to-face) learning into their busy schedules — efforts to improve online instruction have also been particularly beneficial to adult learners. In addition to enhancing course material, Southwestern has focused on improving the online learning experience by ensuring that students understand the basics of the technology used in the courses. The college has made efforts to more thoroughly familiarize students with software as early as possible to prepare them with the digital skills they need for success in college and the workforce. “We ... recogniz[ed] that there needs to be better support at the start ... to work through those equity gaps,” Dr. Mageehon states.

The strategies are paying off. In comparing the 2017 cohort to the 2020 cohort, the four-year completion rate among part-time learners more than doubled, improving by 8.7 percentage points. While the rate among full-time learners improved too, the gains by part-time learners narrowed the equity gap between the two groups by 3.2 percentage points. Likewise, while the rates for adult learners and traditional-aged learners both improved, the gap between the two narrowed by an impressive 6.7 percentage points, aided by a near doubling of the rate for the former, which rose 12.3 percentage points.

Another population that intersects substantially with adult learners is first-generation students, who make up nearly half of the total student body. With a high number of first-generation students facing economic insecurity, Southwestern has focused dedicated resources to providing comprehensive support.

In 2018, as a complement to TRIO services, the college introduced the SNAP Training and Employment Program (STEP) to provide students with basic needs assistance as well as support with the costs of books, transportation, and interview clothing. Southwestern also employs a benefits navigator who assists students in finding the help they need. "Whether [students] are suffering from food insecurity or housing insecurity, there is somebody who can connect them with the different resources here in the community and on campus," says Dr. Scott. "And I think that has been tremendously helpful for our part-time, first-gen, and adult students." In addition, the college's foundation supplements these services with scholarships, including emergency scholarships to help with

unexpected expenses or utility bills, that can mean the difference between staying in school or stopping out.

Certainly not all first-generation students at Southwestern are adult learners; many of these "pioneers in their families" as Dr. Scott calls them, are traditional-aged. Collectively, as a sub-population, they have made noteworthy strides. For example, the equity gap between first-generation and non-first-generation learners in fall-to-fall persistence narrowed by 3 percentage points, from 8.2% in 2019's fall cohort to 5.2% in 2022's fall cohort.

To help ensure that supports are utilized by as many learners who need them as possible, the administration, according to Dr. Mageehon, has made a conscious effort to publicize their existence. "We have a lot more information out there to everybody on campus that wraparound services are available," she notes.

Supporting Timely Completion for All Student Groups

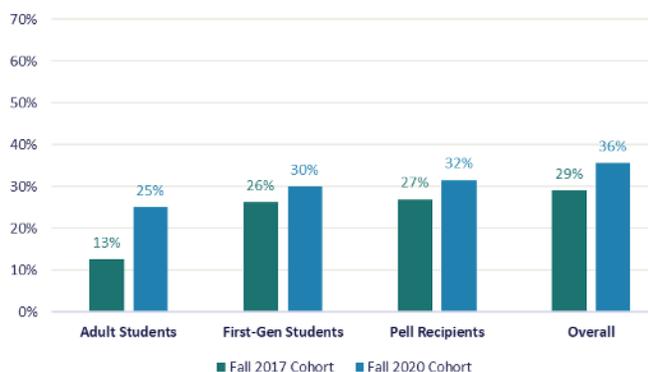
Southwestern proudly boasts the shortest median time to completion among all Oregon two-year colleges, and its four-year completion rate improved from 29% among the fall 2017 cohort to 35.6% among the fall 2020 cohort — an impressive 6.6 percentage-point jump. By swiftly graduating its students, the college is propelling them into the workforce sooner, not only enhancing their individual social and economic mobility but also, through the contributions of their skills and earnings, ultimately boosting the economic vitality of the community.

Contributing factors to these improved completion rates are substantial gains made in the gateway English completion rate, which rose 3.2 percentage points from the fall 2020 cohort to the fall 2022 cohort, and the overall fall-to-fall persistence rate, which rose 3.1 percentage points from the fall 2019 cohort to the fall 2022 cohort.

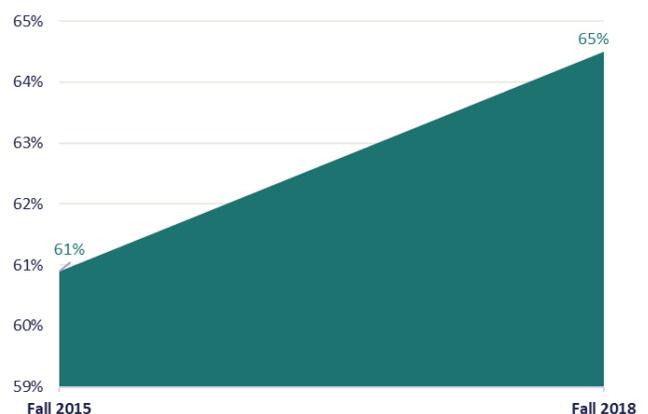
Also striking is that the rate of students transferring and earning a baccalaureate degree within six years of enrollment saw a 3.7 percentage-point climb from the fall 2015 cohort (60.9%) to the fall 2018 cohort (64.5%). This is a particularly remarkable increase given the geographical obstacles that students in Southwestern's district face if they choose to transfer to another college to complete a bachelor's degree.

Dr. Alisha Lund, director of institutional effectiveness, explains: "There's no assumption of a four-year degree here. There's no natural transfer institution [because] there is no commuter option. If you want to stay in district, you either have to complete [a bachelor's degree] online or separate from your family and move — because it's a minimum of a two-hour commute to the nearest four-year institution."

Four-Year Completion Rates



Transfer and Earned Baccalaureate Rates



Reaping Network Benefits

Dr. Scott says the college's improvements in milestone metrics have been the result of extreme persistence but that they are also indicative of what a "mature" college in the ATD Network can expect. It's [from] being in the Network a long time," she says. "Many of these reforms came as the result of our participation in the ATD Network and have evolved into the form they are today."

She points out that Southwestern has remained engaged with ATD for so long because they continue to see positive results. "We ... stayed in [the ATD Network] and stayed active ... because we've gotten so much out of it," she declares.

Achieving the Dream President and CEO Dr. Karen A. Stout notes that what the college has gotten out of its engagement with ATD is directly proportional to what it has put in. "With a continuous commitment in partnership with ATD, Southwestern has demonstrated their dedication over time through intentional efforts to drive change and support their local communities, ensuring they remain responsive to evolving needs," she states. "Their efforts exemplify the strength of rural colleges when they respond to their region's unique needs through a student-centered approach that expands opportunity and contributes to community vibrancy."

Dr. Scott says that one of the biggest impacts of ATD on the college has been the instruction and support received from ATD coaches. "Coaching ... is one of the most valuable things out of this whole experience with ATD," she remarks.

In addition to providing knowledge and resources, coaches are also helpful in granting a certain authority that is needed when convincing others of necessary change. "I can say it, or Ali or Alicia can say it, but when the ATD coach says it [and] ... it comes from the expert from outside ... it's heard differently."

The second thing that has tipped the scales, says Dr. Scott, is ATD's focus on data. Readily admitting that before joining ATD, the college was not consistent in making data-informed decisions to drive student success, she says the switch to being steadfastly data driven has been invaluable. "The big thing I want to emphasize ... [about] Achieving the Dream is the [value of] data coaching ... I just can't emphasize [that] enough," she declares.

Data is now routinely used by the college's Student Success Committee, which is responsible for generating new ideas, developing and piloting them, and then moving them towards institutionalization or modification. "We take data to them to dig into. We take a 'what do you think this means? And what could we do better?' kind of approach," she says.

Dr. Mageehon believes data is critical when trying to bring faculty members on board with suggested changes. "I think the data component of ATD has been the absolute best thing because it keeps us focused," she reports, "and it also helps when I'm communicating with faculty. It satisfies their curiosity, and it helps me make the case for things I need them to do to help our students."



Creating a Welcoming Environment

While making decisions based on data is one important piece of the student success formula, Dr. Scott is quick to recognize that every action need not be dictated by metrics. There are some aspects of student success that are born from customs regarding how to treat others — knowledge that, in the case of Southwestern, is rooted in the traditions of rural culture. “Quantitative measures that make a beautiful chart,” are one thing, argues Dr. Scott, but the “small-town friendliness” embodied by the college goes a long way in enhancing students’ sense of belonging. As Southwestern’s ATD coach, Dr. Cam Preus, says, “It’s often the beauty of a small, rural college that you see your instructor in the grocery store.”

Dr. Preus in no way claims, though, that the college’s nurturing environment is somehow completely inherent or independent of concerted efforts. On the contrary, she credits Dr. Scott with purposefully cultivating the college’s compassionate spirit. “Patty has helped lead the institution to this culture of care [where] everyone needs to know who the students are and be there to support them,” she says.

The endeavor has certainly worked. “Staff have become accustomed to learning students’ names and asking how they are doing,” reports Dr. Scott. “Even our dining and bookstore staff have received accolades from students because of the care they have demonstrated that made a difference for them.”

The level of care and concern shown to each individual student and the collective impact of that nurturing attention were what inspired the college’s new tagline: “United for success. One student at a time.” It has been the theme of multiple fall orientations at which Southwestern employees sign up to do one thing differently to help at least one student. Dr. Scott’s pledge was to approach every student getting off the elevator to engage with them.

Understanding how welcoming behavior translates to student success is an integral part of campus culture at Southwestern. Pains are taken in the hiring process to ensure employees are invested in a caring community and understand its connection to student achievement. Dr. Mageehon, who is involved in faculty hiring, attests: “We can ensure that the faculty who come here really want to teach. They understand what a community college mission is. They understand who we are. And they understand that student success is critically important. So, I’m hiring people who get it on day one: You need to know your students’ names.”

Dr. Scott assures that the same expectations are in place for non-faculty employees as well. “Basically, my message to new [hires] ... whether they’re the custodians, in dining services, or faculty,” she says, “is that we’re here to serve students — however that looks for your role — but *everybody* can help a student, regardless. And that it’s OK to take the time to walk with them, or direct them, or engage with them on the sidewalk.”



Nurturing Dreams

The process of applying for the Leah Meyer Austin Award was a time of reflection for Southwestern’s administration. In compiling data and sifting through a long list of reforms for the application, what struck Dr. Lund was just how much effort went into the changes that have yielded positive results for the institution

Dr. Mageehon surmises that not everyone comprehends what goes into the transformation process at a rural college. “I think it’s important for people to understand that it’s hard to do this work in rural areas,” she shares. “But through good leadership and steadiness in that leadership ... it is incredibly possible to do amazing work with very limited resources.”

According to Dr. Scott, the source of the college’s success can be boiled down to just a few fundamental attributes — key among them: persistence and bravery. “It’s about staying the course,” she says, “and not being afraid. Being a courageous leader and willing to take the risk.”

It’s also about never losing sight of the fact that every student’s journey carries the same importance. Having herself grown up in rural Oregon and graduated in a high school class of 31, Dr. Scott knows and *feels* it to the marrow of her bones. “All students matter,” she says emphatically. “Even if they come from a community of under 500 ... They want to achieve the dream just as much as somebody who comes from a graduating class of 5,000.”

Paved with an innumerable amount of those equally respected student journeys — Southwestern’s institutional journey is a testament to the transformative power of persistence, data-informed decision-making, and a deep-rooted commitment

to student success. Against the backdrop of economic shifts and geographic challenges, the college has not only adapted but thrived — proving that a small, rural college can make a profound impact when bold leadership, innovative reforms, and a culture of care converge.

It’s a viewpoint to which Dr. Stout wholeheartedly subscribes. “Southwestern’s efforts reveal that no matter the size of the college, where it is located, or the obstacles it faces, the power of data-driven decision-making, strong leadership, and a commitment to innovation will move the needle on student success in profound ways,” she proclaims. “Southwestern is truly transforming lives and strengthening their entire community, and, by doing so, they exemplify the very essence of the Leah Meyer Austin Award.”

Indeed, the award is more than a recognition of accomplishments; in the case of Southwestern, it is a celebration of a college that refuses to accept barriers as limits and instead sees them as opportunities to innovate. By meeting students where they are — whether in a classroom, online, or at a crossroads in their lives — Southwestern is not just shaping individual futures but strengthening the very fabric of its community.

As Dr. Scott so powerfully reminds us, Southwestern is a place where students — many of whom never dared aspire to greatness — are given permission to envision a different future. “I’m mindful of the people in these rural schools who ... don’t often dream for themselves,” she says. “And we provide that to people in our district. That’s what we do at Southwestern.”

And that is what true transformation looks like.

