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SCC ranks fourth among nation's community colleges

Southwestern Community College ranks fourth in the nation in a new listing of America's best community colleges, according to a just-released report in the Washington Monthly.

While four-year colleges and universities have long been rated by guides like U.S. News & World Report, this is the first-ever ranking of the nation's community colleges, said Washington Monthly writer Kevin Carey, who compiled the list.

"Our students have told us all along that we are good, but it's great to be recognized now by the rest of the country," said SCC President Cecil Groves.



Southwestern Community College faculty and students celebrate the college's fourth-in-the-nation ranking by Washington Monthly. Displaying the banner that will be hung in SCC's Balsam Center are, from left, students Frances Dickson, Eric Watts and Lauren Starr; SCC President Cecil Groves; biology instructor Eddie Lunsford; student Michelle Maness; and physics/math instructor Matt Cass.

A research and policy manager with Education Sector, an independent, non-partisan think tank, Carey used results from the nationwide Community College Survey of Student Engagement, along with federal graduation rates, in ranking community colleges. The CCSSE survey tests colleges on how well they use teaching techniques and student support services that have been proven to lead to better learning and student success, such as how often students collaborate with other students and interact with faculty.

"CCSSE is an ongoing comprehensive study of community colleges done across America," said Groves. "We place value in this study since the research findings were objectively validated to assure accuracy and comparability of data."

CCSSE uses five benchmarks in rating effective community colleges: active and collaborative learning, student effort, academic challenge, student/faculty interaction and support for learners.

"In the survey, Southwestern exceeds both the state and the national means in all five areas," said Gene Couch, SCC vice president for instruction and student services. "We think something very special happens in our classrooms, laboratories and student support services across campus. It starts with the excellence of our highly-qualified instructors but it goes beyond that – it's the care and support they give their students. Our instructors are genuinely concerned with students' success in reaching their educational goals. We're small enough that the instructors know students by name."

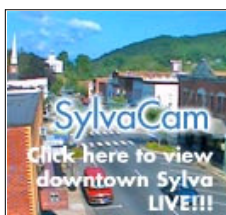
"That supportive atmosphere carries over from student to student," said Groves. "For example, at Southwestern we have a large number of health programs and these classes tend to bond together, help each other out and graduate together."

Christian Conway of Whittier, a 2007 SCC graduate with a 4.0 grade-point average, credits the encouragement from Southwestern's faculty and staff for receiving his associate degree in college transfer – and for changing his perspective on life.

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"I have always had some academic potential," he said. "But I want to say that potential is a lot easier to realize if you come across folks who care about you, stand beside you, and offer both support and challenge to do your best."

Conway already had a degree from a state university, but he said it took a community college like SCC to challenge him.

"At Southwestern they believed in me as a student and further encouraged me to tutor my fellow students in math and chemistry," Conway said. "I am an active citizen in my community because the community college centered itself on me as a citizen and not just a student. Southwestern exposed me to, and gave me experiences in, teaching and learning values that support the fundamental characteristics of citizenship. What Southwestern gave me goes much further than the classroom."

"We are committed to engaging our students to learn both in the classroom and beyond," said Barb Putman, SCC dean of arts and sciences. "Our academic and student support services make it next to impossible for a student to slip through the cracks. All of the faculty and staff are committed to students' success."

"We remove the barriers to allow students to attend and to succeed in college – our tuition is affordable, and we provide financial aid and a variety of services like academic advising, career counseling, tutoring and job placement," said Couch. "CCSSE rates those support services, and we rank really high in those ratings."

"That said, once students are here they have to work for their education. Students learn more when colleges set high expectations, and at Southwestern we set excellence as our expectation."

While many major universities focus on research, community colleges are far more focused on teaching, Carey said, and their roles are expanding, according to his report. For students to succeed in the workforce, they need to learn more than new skills, he said.

"Students need to be able to learn continuously, to think critically, to adapt to a changing economy," Carey said.

For the past two years SCC has received Superior ratings from the N.C. Community College System. SCC earned this distinction based on the performance measures utilized by the General Assembly to assess state community colleges.

"We know we ranked well in comparison to the state's 58 other community colleges," Groves said. "From CCSSE we knew we exceeded both the state and national averages, but until this Washington Monthly report, we didn't realize how high other agencies rated us, too. We are the only North Carolina community college in the top 10."

"Prestige simply isn't synonymous with good teaching," said Paul Glastris, editor of the Washington Monthly. "Some unknown community colleges offer more challenging educations than do certain well-regarded four-year universities."

The biggest lesson to be drawn from the rankings is that "great teaching can happen anywhere," Carey said.

"We know it's happening at Southwestern," said Groves. "And we're glad the rest of America now knows it, too."

For more information on the Washington Monthly's community college rankings, see <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2007/0709.careyessay.html>.

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