THE SOUTHWESTER MAGAZINE

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SMC Construction Trades

Program Poised to Grow


4 'Leap Of Faith' Pays Off


14 Teaching at Her Alma Mater


16 Mead's New Direction



CONTENTS

3 Greetings from Dr. Klint Pleasant

4 Maxwell's 'Leap Of Faith' at SMC Pays Off

6 Wallace Found Her Passion in Small Businesses with Family

8 'Choir Suite' Worth the Wait

10 SMC Sports Management Evolving in Second Decade

12 SMC Construction Trades Program Poised to Grow

14 Navy Aviation Mechanic Teaching at Her Alma Mater

16 Mead's New Direction at SMC Landed Him in Georgia Hall of Fame

18 It's New Year's Day for President Pleasant

19 New Profile for Development Office

20 Wheaton Took 'Unconventional Path,' Illinois to South Carolina

21 Board of Trustees—Member Spotlight

22 2016 Graduate Works in Accounting Software



Welcome to the Southwester!

The Southwester—written as Sou'Wester early on—was Southwestern Michigan College's newspaper for more than half a century. The paper was developed and distributed by SMC journalism students. In 1994, the paper won first-place national recognition from the Associated Collegiate Press at the University of Minnesota and from the American Scholastic Press Association in New York under 1989-1999 journalism adviser Dr. Chris Robinson. In 1999, color was incorporated into the paper and, in 2013, the paper was transferred into an electronic format. Today, the news stories are distributed on the college's website and shared on social media. To keep the tradition alive, The Southwester was transformed into this bi-annual magazine for the community, alumni, and donors to enjoy.

In this issue of The Southwester, you'll be introduced to SMC alumni who have made a success in their careers by building on their degrees from SMC. You'll also learn about some of the exciting things happening at the college.

To learn more about the college and programs featured in this publication, visit **swmich.edu**.



Dear Taxpayers, Alumni, and Friends of Southwestern Michigan College,

I am thrilled to have the opportunity to introduce myself to Southwestern Michigan College's district. I began my service at SMC on April 6, 2026, and have enjoyed every moment thus far. Not only have I enjoyed the SMC campus and my new colleagues, but I have also enjoyed getting to know the community (including all its districts) and meeting new friends in each respective township. Speaking of the local community, I am a proud new resident and taxpayer myself as I purchased a home in the district in early July. Therefore, I am delighted to now be able to call you all "neighbors."

I have spent my entire professional career working in higher education. Oftentimes higher education subject matter is synonymous with English, math, and history. Yes, we provide these educational options at SMC and do so with excellence. But at SMC, we are equally excited to offer opportunities in trades, workforce development, career and technical education, and professional services in nursing and other health fields. In fact, it is this very reality that played a part in drawing me to SMC. I was intrigued to serve at an organization in which all these educational opportunities coexist. Do we invest in the humanities? Yes! But we don't stop there. We invest in **welding**, and **automotive technology**, and **robotics**, and **construction trades**, and **agriculture**, and **nursing**, and **MRI technology** just to name a few. The very things that help make our district, and region, stronger.

At SMC we are proud of our motto: "Knowledge for All." A group of visionaries came together in the early 1960s and had a dream to provide educational opportunities for the district's residents and the entire southwest region of Michigan, and beyond. At SMC, we work hard to make that a reality. Whether it is business management, accounting, history, or construction; we take the call seriously to provide "Knowledge for All" in our region. And we are just as passionate when it comes to making this educational opportunity ***accessible***. With the **Green Light Guarantee** we have committed to making tuition free to our in-district students as well as all our Michigan high school graduates.

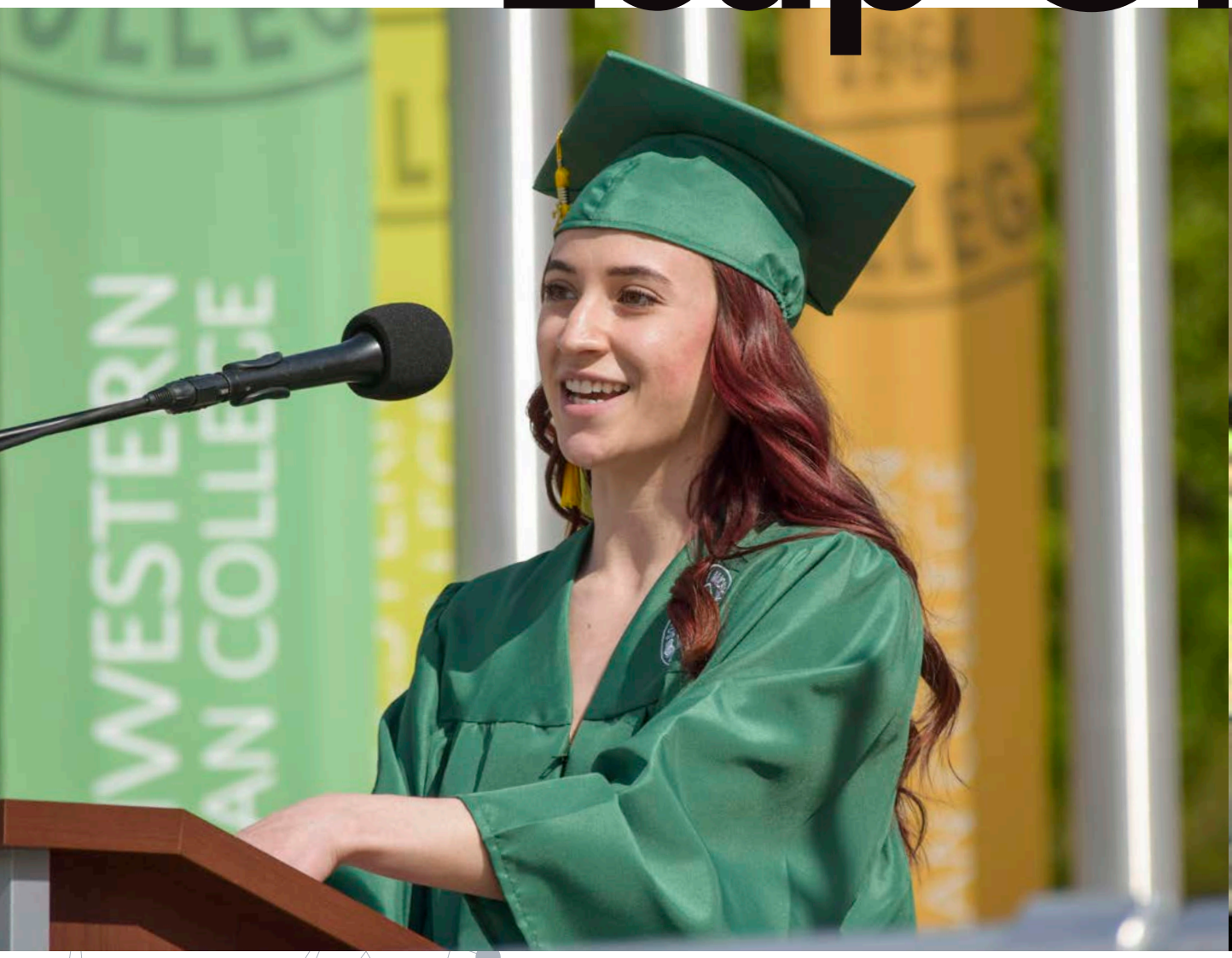
I trust you will enjoy the stories and highlights in the *Southwester*. In this issue, we continue our spotlight on SMC Trustees, featuring Dr. Elaine Foster. We're also excited to provide updates on two of our academic programs—construction trades and sports management, how we've surpassed our enrollment goals for a ninth consecutive semester, and how we're expanding and improving our physical plant. (Check out the story about our new choir suite on page 8.) We're also expanding, and moving, our Development and Alumni Relations Office to better serve our alumni and our community. Most important, we're always happy to share how our alumni are making an impact in their communities as a result of their time at SMC because "Knowledge for All" is part of a cycle that serves us all.

Thank you again for the warm welcome and for being good neighbors. Please stop by campus and visit. What you will find is a beautiful physical plant that you will be proud of. But the one thing that is even more impressive than our beautiful campus is our people. A dedicated faculty and staff who show up every day and work to make a difference in the lives of our students. And, in doing that, we are making a difference across the entire region.

Warmly,

Dr. Klint Pleasant
CEO/President

Maxwell's 'Leap Of





Five years after speaking at Southwestern Michigan College's 2021 Commencement, when she received her certificate in Welding Technology, Brenna (Lewis) Maxwell is a year and a half into her career as a controls engineer.

"Being a controls engineer is very satisfying," she said. "We come across many interesting challenges that force us to think outside the box for days or weeks. At the end of the day, once we solve that challenge and see our discoveries working as planned, we get a great feeling of accomplishment."

Maxwell started at SMC as a dual-enrolled junior from Edwardsburg High School (Class of 2020). The Lewis Cass Intermediate School District's 2020 Outstanding Career/Technical Education Student completed her welding certificate from SMC and opted to stay for an additional year. She received the Lewis Cass Intermediate School District Career/Technical Education Scholarship, an SMC Presidential Scholarship, an SMC



Faith' at SMC Pays Off

Advanced Technology Talent Scholarship, and a Futures for Frontliners state scholarship, allowing her to graduate debt-free with an associate degree in robotics from SMC in 2022.

"All I knew was that I wanted to go to school for something fun and interesting, therefore helping me avoid a job I'd hate going to for the rest of my life," she said in her graduation speech.

Upon graduation, Maxwell worked at Eagle Technologies (now Convergix) in Bridgman/St. Joseph as a controls engineer intern for one year, then a robotics engineer for 2½ years.

She has worked at Edgewater Automation in Buchanan as a controls design engineer for almost two years now. "At Edgewater we develop, design, program, and install custom automation," she said.

"The engineering field is still primarily male-dominated," she said, "but I have a female mechanical engineer, mechanical engineer intern, mechanical builder, communication specialist, and many other females working around me.

"I would definitely recommend that women venture outside the box and try trade-driven careers or engineering career fields," Maxwell said. "There are so many more opportunities in the world that that aren't always promoted to women…or students in general. Sometimes it just takes a career fair, or LinkedIn, or an article to pique our interest and show us other career options. I highly encourage high school and college students to try something new and out of their comfort zone."

At SMC Maxwell discovered welding and robotics, programs that helped her find a career she is passionate about.

"In high school," she said, "not knowing what to do with my life always stressed me out. I would hear students talk about what they were going to study in college and their dream jobs, but I was clueless.

"SMC really came through for me," she said. "The variety of programs and courses gave me a better grasp of the possibilities and options for my future." She chose the welding program because it sounded interesting and fit her hands-on learning style.

"My choice to attend SMC as a dual-enrolled high school student was a leap of faith. I knew so little when I first started my classes, the instructor had to come into the welding booth with me. I had no idea what I was supposed to be doing. Throughout the program, all of the instructors made sure that we understood the tasks completely and were able to do them comfortably.

"SMC made it possible for each of us to grow and learn so much more about our fields of study," Maxwell said. "Through SMC's welding program, my world expanded. I became exposed to the robotics program. The rest is history. I guess you could say SMC instructors helped prepare me for life beyond campus."



Wallace Found Her Passion

in Small Businesses with Family

Wayne Township Trustee Mandy Wallace, treasurer of Greater Dowagiac Chamber of Commerce, began developing her "business mind" at Southwestern Michigan College.

"My priorities will always be God and family first, but my passion for small businesses follows closely behind," she said.

Today, Dowagiac Union High School's (DUHS) 2007 salutatorian is building two businesses alongside her husband, Shane, and homeschooling five children.

"It never crossed my mind that I might become an entrepreneur," Wallace said. "I was an average person from an average family in an average town. I thought I would grow up to have an average job and an average family."

An exciting time to be at SMC

Wallace's SMC journey began by taking dual enrollment classes while at DUHS.

"I have great memories at SMC," she said. "As a Dowagiac local, attending SMC allowed me to see familiar faces and meet lots of new ones. I was close to home but still spreading my wings. I was at SMC in 2008 when the economy crashed and the state launched the 'No Worker Left Behind' program to provide training for high-demand occupations.

"I found myself in classes not only with students my own age but also with students

my parents' and grandparents' ages. It was awesome!

"I was also there when the student housing initiatives started, along with the renovation of the Student Activity Center. SMC was transitioning from being a typical community college to an educational destination."

Wallace first became employed as a student worker, then moved into a full-fledged employee in Enrollment Management as the department was known.

"Working at SMC—both as a student worker and as an enrollment specialist—was foundational and quite a different ballgame from my high school jobs as a babysitter, store cashier, or hair salon receptionist.

"I learned a lot in my classes, but I think I learned even more in my work experience at SMC."

A safe place to explore

"Even though I was a straight-A student, I had no career plans," she admits. "Not for lack of ambition, but simply fear of making the wrong choice. SMC gave me a safe place to explore my options instead of making a rushed decision that would affect the rest of my life.

"I truly had no plan to pursue a business degree—it just made the most sense. It was general enough that it gave me different options and would easily transition into the (Ferris State University) business administration program to get my bachelor's degree while continuing to live at home and work at a job that I enjoyed."

To D.C. and back

At the time of their engagement, Shane, a union crane operator, was employed by a company that dredged Great Lakes shipping channels. The same friend who introduced the couple at SMC had moved to Washington, D.C., and, in 2010, he invited Shane to come out and work for him. Wallace had never spent any measurable time outside of Dowagiac, but they packed up and hit the road.

During high school and college, Wallace had been involved in a mentorship program through the Rotary Club's RYLA (Rotary Youth Leadership Awards) program. When they arrived in suburban Washington, she stumbled upon a Rotary newsletter with an article written by someone in the same town where she was searching for an apartment. She used the RYLA connection to help find a job. That job (office administrator for an architectural and construction firm) is where she learned how to use QuickBooks, do bookkeeping, run payroll, and manage an office.

Home to start a family

"In 2014 we decided to start a family, and that came with the decision to move back to Dowagiac," Wallace said. "Thanks to social media, another coworker from my SMC Enrollment Management days suggested to her CPA husband that his employer consider hiring me. That employer was (SMC Trustee) Becky Moore. She truly took a gamble on me: No public accounting experience, no desire for a CPA license, and pregnant. My advantage was that I had worked on 'the client side' of public accounting.

"When Moore retired in 2019, Accounting Consultants was acquired by Jansen Valk Thompson Reahm of Kalamazoo. In 2022, JVTR merged with UHY Advisors Inc.

"I am still employed there part-time, two days per week. I am a Client Accounting Services Manager now. My experiences, both within and outside of public accounting, strengthen how I can help clients."



The origins of Acres of Grace

The Wallaces started homeschooling their children and then started a homeschooling group. Through the group, she was offered a home-based soap business.

Because of lifestyle choices, Wallace had spent years making nearly everything she could from scratch. Not just food, but body care products, too. Adding handmade artisan soap to that equation, and then selling all of it to other people made sense.

Today, she offers 32 varieties of soap—including body soap; facial soap; body, lip, face, and beard butter; shampoo bars; and more—that she makes throughout the year. October 2026 marked the third anniversary for her business Acres of Grace.

"I continue to sell at craft shows and online. It is just one more opportunity for me to pour into the business what I've learned elsewhere—and take away from it things that I can apply elsewhere."

And then came Faithful Hauling

In the fall of 2023, the same SMC friend who introduced Wallace to her husband, then encouraged them to move to Washington, was back in the area because his mother, a hoarder, passed away.

"He called on us to help him clean out her house to get it on the market," she said. "We had a truck and a couple trailers and were happy to help. That's when we discovered that there was an unmet need in our community for a locally-owned dumpster service.

"Most of our community was only serviced by big corporate names in the trash industry, yet there seemed to be a desire for local folks to do business with a locally-owned company. After that, we started renting out the trailers and dumpsters. We got busy. We bought actual roll-off dumpsters.

"For a time, my husband kept his full time job and fully embraced the definition of a 'side hustle,' delivering and picking up dumpsters every evening and all weekend. He is now running Faithful Hauling full time."

Small businesses walk a line

"When compared to Acres of Grace, building Faithful Hauling has expanded my entrepreneurial experience," Wallace said. There was no blueprint.

"We are building this business together as a family. It is one of the most incredible experiences I could imagine."

A decade with the Chamber

"I've been involved with the Chamber for the last decade," Wallace said. "My belief in the importance of local, family-owned businesses in a small community like Dowagiac demands that I be involved with the Chamber."

Every challenging day is also a gift

Juggling family and businesses is "where divine intervention comes in, seriously," Wallace said. "Busy season for public accounting is January-April. Busy season for dumpsters is April-October. Busy season for soapmaking is October-December.

"Life is busy and demanding, but it works because there is balance. I stay thankful for all of the amazing opportunities that I have had. Two things can be true at the same time: Every day is a challenge, and every day is a gift."

'Choir Suite'

Worth the Wait



Southwestern Michigan College has been offering degrees in music and providing free choral and band concerts to the community for more than 30 years. Our students, who have always been our focus, have been led by stellar faculty since the beginning of our music and band programs. However, the spaces in which they learned and practiced were not ideal. They worked for a time, but they weren't set up for optimum musical instruction, acoustically or space-wise, mainly because they were initially designed as office space.

Along the way, the college promised Director of Choral Activities David Carew a new choir room. Thanks to a major gift from the Frederick S. Upton Foundation, that promise has been fulfilled. The new Frederick S. Upton Choir Room is now complete and filled with the students for whom it was built.

"I'm calling it the choir suite," Carew said of the maze of rooms in subdued earth, gray, and sandstone tones with a pop of SMC green on the entrance wall.

A Buchanan resident who previously taught for Edwardsburg and Dowagiac, Carew is excited about what the new space will mean for students. "This space was purposefully designed as a choral rehearsal room, and that makes an enormous difference," he said. "It gives us an environment where students can listen to one another, connect as an ensemble, and do our best work together."

Room-length risers provide flexibility in how the choirs rehearse and allow singers to see and hear one another more effectively with enough room to rehearse in the round. This also gives Carew greater opportunity to make visual contact with singers throughout the ensemble while conducting.

The ceiling, which resembles rows of shark teeth, is part of the room's acoustic treatment. Additional acoustic materials throughout the space help control the sound of a large ensemble rehearsing together. "A choir has to be able to hear clearly," Carew said. "So much of what we do depends on listening, to your own voice, to the singers around you, and to the ensemble as a whole. The acoustics of the room support that kind of listening."

In addition to the large choral rehearsal space, the suite features studio classrooms for groups of 10 to 12 students, a large music library adjacent to Carew's office, a kitchen that can support concerts and special events, six practice rooms, and a student seating area.

"The entire suite gives us opportunities we simply didn't have before," Carew said. "The kitchen and gathering spaces will be especially useful for concerts, camps, receptions, and other events that bring students and the community together."

Mirrors have also been placed strategically throughout the rehearsal areas. While they make the space feel larger, they serve an important instructional purpose. "Singing is a physical art," Carew said. "Breath, body alignment, facial engagement, and communication are all things students need to monitor. Having mirrors gives them another tool for developing that awareness."

The "smart" choral space also includes audio-visual technology for recording, playback, and instruction. Speakers are suspended from the ceiling, with a large projection screen positioned between them to display group sight-singing content and rehearsal goals. An enclosed vocal studio within the suite provides an additional space for recording students, auditions, student compositions, and other projects.

"For me, the most exciting thing isn't any single piece of technology or any one feature," Carew said. "It's that we now have a space that reflects the quality of the work our students are doing. It gives us room to grow, and I think it will be an important part of recruiting students and welcoming the community into what we do. It is demonstrative of the college's commitment to the choral program."

Senior Vice President and Chief Strategy Officer Brent Brewer puts the choir suite in context as "part of the larger vision for the Dale A. Lyons Building. We began work last month on the new development office near the History Gallery and bookstore. That project is scheduled for completion in November.

"Phase two of the Lyons construction project is the band room. We have already begun the design phase of that. Construction will begin in January 2027 with completion anticipated next August. Phase three begins in the spring of 2028. That will encompass the corridors, lobby area, and bathrooms to freshen up and lighten up the entire space and make it more inviting for our students and our community."









SMC Sports Management

Evolving in Second Decade

Eleven years ago, SMC joined a handful of community colleges nationwide offering an Associate in Applied Science degree in sports management. A panel of five professionals helped Southwestern Michigan College unveil the new degree.

Panelists ranged from fourth-year Dowagiac Athletic Director Brent Nate to Ric Norton, who retired after serving 20 years as the Swiss Valley Ski and Snowboard Area snow sports director. Other panel members included Vicksburg Athletic Director Michael Roy; Dr. James Lewis of Portage, director of Western Michigan University's Sports Management Program; and Dr. Heather Kesselring-Quackenbush, chair of the Aquinas College Sport Management Program and former president of the Michigan Statewide Sports Management Association.

Dr. Ritch Reynolds developed the program's curriculum, which features a practicum so students get valuable field experience, and has overseen the program throughout its first decade. Today, he serves as chair for health services in the School of Nursing and Health Services, professor of sports management/physical education, and internship coordinator.

Graduates of the program can immediately enter the workforce. "Just going out and working with an associate, such as the one we offer at SMC, students are well prepared for positions in local recreation, fitness facilities, parks departments, and minor league sports teams' sales and marketing departments. It is very close to a business degree but emphasizing the sports world," he said.

Pursuing a bachelor's degree after graduation, Reynolds explained, provides even more hands-on experience and increases career opportunities, such as job possibilities with a professional sports organization or NCAA college athletics.

For example, New Buffalo native Nikki Maroney, SMC '20, continued her degree at Trine University in Angola. She recently started a new job with the Professional Women's Hockey League Detroit team as an



account manager for ticket sales, service, and activation. Prior to that, she served as a senior account executive of membership services for the Detroit Red Wings, a position she held for four years.

"Growing up as a hockey player and now working in the sports industry, this is a dream come true," Maroney said. "I'm excited to build Detroit's fanbase from the ground up and continue to grow within the sports industry."

"She's done quite well for herself," Reynolds said. "I touch base with her occasionally, and I've Zoomed her into class to talk with our students."

Maroney has been able to share her experience in the industry with students as well as well as the opportunities and experiences she had while an SMC student. In 2019, for example, she was one of the sports management students who organized a Special Olympics basketball tournament that involved the Bobcats from Heritage Southwest Intermediate School District of Cassopolis.

After the COVID-19 disruption, that partnership has been reaffirmed. "In fact, we recently added a Special Olympics basketball collaboration to our curriculum." Reynolds said.

Ben Evans is the Student Activity Center coordinator at SMC, which includes oversight of intramurals. After graduating from SMC, he transferred to Grand Valley State University and is pursuing his bachelor's degree. "Ben had an amazing opportunity to work for Scott Correira and Notre Dame Sports Properties assisting with marketing and hospitality for Notre Dame Athletics media productions, including the football program's weekly coaches show," Reynolds said.

Students in the sports management program are also able to benefit from the real-world experiences of faculty and visitors.

For example, a new adjunct in the program, Amanda Bender, works as a collegiate Division I referee. Bender, the former athletic manager for the City of South Bend Venues, Parks and Arts, has officiated high school volleyball, high school and collegiate basketball, and high school and collegiate football.

Reynolds has also brought in many guest speakers. Ron Winter, for instance, is a retired Western Michigan University physical education professor. Winter, an alternate referee for Super Bowl XLIII served as an NFL official from 1995-2013.

According to Reynolds, Cass County Parks Director Scott Wyman is another great resource for students. "He's always willing to come in and talk to students and to show them opportunities," Reynolds said.

Reynolds friendship with Roadrunner Jonny Reinhardt of 99.9 Y Country for Mid-West Family has laid the ground for other student opportunities as well. One student even worked with the station's sports director to produce a commercial that was used on the air.

For Reynolds it's all about giving students a complete experience and introducing them to the field in as many ways as possible. He drove a van full of students to Little Caesars Arena the year after it opened to tour the facility, do a meet-and-greet with various operational departments, and take in an NBA game between the Detroit Pistons and Toronto Raptors.

Another time he traveled with students to Milwaukee for a behind-the-scenes peek at the Bucks operation, thanks to a Roadrunner working in ticketing.

"We've had the wellness center person from the Pokagon tribe come in. SMC Wrestling Coach Todd Hesson and Athletic Director/Men's Basketball Coach Rodell Davis have also shared their experiences. It's important to connect students with people who have been successful in the field," Reynolds said.

Looking ahead

"We've added advanced coaching. We're going to add a sports safety class so students can obtain their certification for Heart Saver CPR, blood-borne pathogens, concussion protocols—things coaches need to be competitive in the job market. We're also planning an officiating class to give students a broader perspective, more options, and a better understanding of the rules of the games," Reynolds said. "There has been a dire need for officials in our area since I was in high school. People are aging out with not a lot of influx."

Reynolds said the program averages 20-25 students. It went as high as 41 when SMC reinstated athletics in 2022.

"We also offer athletic training and sports medicine studies," Reynolds said. "That's put some of our students on another path—if they want to be an athletic trainer, a personal trainer, or a strength and conditioning coach. It's a competitive industry, and a lot of students transfer to Western or Grand Valley for advanced degrees."

Gavin Smith from Decatur, a member of the first new-era cross country team, tracked statistics and learned to operate the scoreboard in the 1st Source Bank Fieldhouse at SMC before continuing on to Western, where he joined the sidelines chain gang.

"Gavin originally thought his path was going to be in journalism or broadcasting, but he shifted his focus into facilities and game management. I wrote him a recommendation letter for grad school," Reynolds said. "As we look toward the next decade of our program, we'd like to build that kind of connection with all the program alumni."

SMC Construction Trades

Program Poised to Grow



According to Professor John Tinker, "The whole artificial intelligence (AI) boom is doing great things for the trades. As I tell my students, for the foreseeable future, construction is an AI-proof job. The clever use of tools that make it easier for one person to do the work of several people has led to a lot of downsizing, not so with construction."

He's right. AI can streamline office workflows and enhance efficiency, but it has not been able to replace hands-on skilled labor—the human judgment, expertise, and manual dexterity a craftsman brings to each job.

"In my classroom, people are really engaged and want to do this work. They're looking for jobs that feel secure. And this country needs tradesmen right now. Just consider what your wait time is when you try to find a carpenter or a plumber," he said.

Again, he's right. Infrastructure projects, manufacturing, and housing all need skilled tradespeople, and there are severe shortages nationwide. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment in the trades is expected to continue to grow over the next decade. That's good news for students in the construction trades program, especially with the advancements and new equipment Tinker is introducing to the program.

The first new piece of equipment is a Wood-Mizer MP360 planer/moulder. About the size of a copier, it planes and moulds all four sides of a piece of timber in a single pass, turning rough lumber into finished products, such as flooring, siding, or trim.

Tinker is also adding a new lathe. Like the planer/moulder, the lathe will create more hands-on build opportunities for the 44 students currently in the program.

"My students are fine with theory," he said, "but they are construction people who very much want hands-on instruction. I want to make an advanced building class for fine woodworking, interior stuff. The new equipment will help with that. We might even get into bookcases and cabinets.

"We build a house (over the course of three semesters), but we've always purchased the flooring, the trim, and the cabinets. The new equipment will allow students to create their own."

Summer internships

The construction trades green technology program is offered in two phases: a certificate phase and an associate degree in applied science. An internship falls in the summer between the second and third semesters of the associate degree.

"I advise my students to find a company that's doing something that they can see themselves doing," Tinker said. "They build a relationship with the company, which has a small risk hiring summer labor. But it allows them to try out the student, get to know them and see if they're a good fit with



the company. The students are doing the same thing. As often as not, the student gets an offer to go to work."

Concrete work

Students built the sheds behind the Jan and A.C. Kairis Building, including for automotive storage, and poured the concrete pads. They have even poured some of the sidewalks on which they and their fellow Roadrunners walk. In 2024, for example, construction trades students collaborated with SMC's Building and Grounds department to pour two Dowagiac campus sidewalks.

"We're going to be doing more concrete this year," said Tinker, citing the ground beneath the soccer field bleachers as a good opportunity for hands-on experience.

Actually pouring the concrete closes out lengthy classroom preparation in building layout and exercises, squaring up mock buildings, and deciding whether to cut or fill the ground to get it to a specified elevation.

"Then we do test concrete pours in the lab," Tinker explained, "We talk about what slump is and why it is important to every project." Each step is aimed at providing students with real-world experience they can use when they graduate.

Construction Club

Students in the program are encouraged to participate in the Wednesday Construction Club as an extra-curricular outlet for individual projects, kind of a wooden products incubator. A significant number of crafted pieces are produced—everything from cornhole, chess, cutting and charcuterie boards to keepsake or memory boxes, bowls, and honey dippers.

The McLoughlin Family Foundation Suite at the 1st Source Bank Fieldhouse also features tables made by the student club from the original gymnasium floor.

Raw material is not a problem. The Woodmizer LT 15 sawmill unveiled at Sawdust Days in October 2022 keeps the club in wood from donated logs. The week before fall semester started, Tinker was busy restocking the club's wood racks with a variety of species.

Dramatic flair

A partnership that Tinker continues to nurture is with SMC Performing Arts; students in construction trades often work on props and sets for the college's spring musical. The most recent examples include the sturdy prop piano Schroeder danced on in "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown" last March, the revolving four-scene set for "Shrek" in 2025, and Mushnick's brick flower shop for 2024's "Little Shop of Horrors."

In 2023, program students built sets for "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee, plus items for an escape room at Fred L. Mathews Library and Conference Center.

"We're always looking for opportunities to make partnerships that will help students grow," said Tinker. He does "creative brainstorming" and internet research when he learns the title of the upcoming musical "so we're ready when performing arts is ready. It's fun and an interesting, creative outlet."

Sawdust Days

The biennial Sawdust Days returned Oct. 16 and featured two successful recent graduates—Andrew Ickes and Ivan Alvarado from Berrien Springs.

Ickes, the 2023 Construction Club president, graduated from high school in Saranac, east of Grand Rapids, and the construction program at an Ionia County tech center.

He has worked with Dan Vos Construction full time since graduation. "They've been an amazing company to work for. My title is carpenter, but I've been able to be part of the construction industry in many ways due to the variety of work the company performs."

In contrast, Alvarado, Tinker's former student assistant, started with a hardwood flooring company after graduation but now works for himself.

Both alumni were happy to share their experiences. They represent how successful the program has been, and continues to be, in preparing students for their journeys after graduation.

Navy Aviation Mechanic

Teaching at Her Alma Mater



With her military career fondly behind her, navy veteran Liz Powers (SMC '24) finds herself not only in her first year of teaching high school English but also sitting across the desk from where she sat one decade ago.

"Returning to Constantine High School as an educator rather than a student has been very enjoyable," she said. "The Constantine community is close-knit, warm, and welcoming; in that way, it is just as I remembered. I graduated from Constantine High School in 2015. Several of my teachers have become my colleagues, and they have been just as helpful and enlightening as they were when I was in school."

The Navy years, coast to coast

Powers served in the Navy from May 2018-May 2022.

"I needed more purpose, more adventure, and more opportunity," she reflected. "As much as I adore living in a small town, there are not always a lot of opportunities for growth bigger than yourself.

"I had absolutely no history with or knowledge of aircraft engine maintenance or aviation in general. I simply love airplanes and have a natural mechanical inclination. It's just how my brain works," she said of her time as a naval aircraft engine mechanic.

"My grandpa and great uncles were in the Navy, as well as my cousin. My great-uncle Joe O'Neil Powers was killed in the bombing at Pearl Harbor. Although my family is full of sailors, I talked to recruiters from every branch before I decided to join the Navy," she said.

"The Navy recruiters were honest, trustworthy, and helpful. Recruiters sometimes embellish things to recruit more candidates for military service, but my recruiter made sure to prepare me for the experience I was signing up for. Once I talked to him about my expectations and he could nearly guarantee me a job working on airplanes, I was in.

"The Navy made me a better person," Powers said. "I had so many experiences that gave me knowledge and wisdom that I couldn't get anywhere else. Not to mention the opportunities! In the Navy, life is truly what you make it, and I was able to make it an adventure."

Coronado Island, San Diego

One her most memorable experiences in the navy centered around Coronado Island. "It's amazing," Powers said. "San Diego, in general, is an awesome place. There is so much adventure to be had there. I didn't spend much time at the beach. I was mostly riding my horse–I had her shipped out to San Diego from home, taking unbeaten paths, and exploring the sights.

"While I was there I missed the seasons of the Midwest and, of course, the people, but San Diego is a place I find myself constantly thinking about."

She boarded the USS Theodore Roosevelt in San Diego and spent several days along the West Coast learning the ropes of her rate at sea. It was, according to Powers, an unforgettable experience not only because it was a new adventure but the "TR" is a Nimitz-class, nuclear-powered supercarrier, and when fully deployed,

it carries well over 5,000 personnel—more than twice the population of Constantine.

East to Virginia

After training, she moved east. "Norfolk was simply the place I was stationed, as I spent most of my time in Virginia Beach," Powers said. "I also really enjoyed being there. It was a lot more like home, and I loved the people I met and the relationships I built."

After the Navy

"As I was pursuing my career in the Navy and raising a child, I realized I didn't want my life to be at the mercy of someone else's unforgiving schedule. I wanted to spend weekends, nights, and holidays with my child, and the people I love which, in the military, is not always possible.

"I decided to separate from the Navy and had to think of careers that would allow me that time with my child while also maintaining the bigger purpose I desired in life."

Roadrunner memories

"I enrolled in SMC because of its close proximity to home and its great reputation," she said. "My dad graduated from SMC in 1980 with an Associate in Science, so being able to follow in his footsteps was also compelling.

"I loved SMC. It provided me with the 'small community vibe' I appreciate and allowed me to form close relationships with faculty and fellow students. During my time at SMC, I was highly focused on my academics and not as much on extracurricular activities.

"When I started going to college again after the Navy, I had my son, Morgan, to take care of and spent most of my extra time with him."

Powers recalls her most influential professors—Dr. Jeffrey Dennis and Dr. Maria DeRose. "Dr. Dennis was one of the most impactful because of his kindness and generosity. His classes were always intriguing and truly helped me maintain and grow my passion for history," she said.

"Dr. DeRose is someone I still reach out to regularly. She opened my eyes to so many perspectives that I couldn't have found elsewhere. She taught me more than just English. She constantly went above and beyond as a professor and a person."

Charting her own course

After SMC, Powers completed her bachelor's degree in English literature and language at Western Michigan University in the spring of 2025, minoring in history.

At WMU, Powers benefited from a $5,000 Operation Hat Trick (OHT) scholarship. The non-profit organization generates awareness and support for the recovery of service members and veterans impacted by both visible and invisible war wounds.

"The OHT scholarship was something I applied for. It was a scholarship for veterans who have a service-connected disability, have outstanding academic achievement, and apply to be considered. This scholarship required an essay about a veteran's pursuit toward higher education, which I wrote and submitted. My essay told my story about graduating, trying college, joining the military, separating, going back to college, getting my first degree at SMC, ending up at WMU, and where I wanted to go from there. I highlighted my family's sacrifices as I continued my educational pursuit and how much my son means to me."





Powers finished her master's degree in the Art of Teaching Secondary Education in Summer 2026.

"As I finished my master's with an endorsement in teaching English, I also began the pursuit of endorsements in teaching history/social studies, also from WMU, as well as CTE endorsements in aviation," Powers said.

"My grandma was a teacher in a one-room country schoolhouse and has a reputation of being a wonderful person and a wonderful teacher. I have always wanted to be like my grandma.

"Teaching obviously had an attractive schedule with summers and holidays off. I also recognized that my time as a civilian in the workforce, a community college student, a university student, and a military member allowed me varying perspectives and made me a resource for people who are looking to steer their life in any of those directions. I wanted to help people, and I wanted to help the world be a better place through the people I help."

Ten-year retrospective

Powers' permanent residence has always been in Union. "I live on a small family farm that has been in my family since the early 1800s. Our land is rotated between corn and soybeans each year. We have cats and dogs, a plethora of chickens, a Jersey cow, and an American Paint horse. Our family history is what motivated me to want a teachable minor in history.

"Morgan is now 6 and is in school. Among all of his good qualities, he is kind, curious and resilient. He is still my top priority and constant motivator," she said.

Reflecting on the last 10 years, Powers said, "Life is such an adventure and for high school students it's important that they begin their lives by doing things that are important to them. Teaching high school allows me to be that resource and help students while also spending quality time with my child. It also helps that, so far, I'm not too bad at it."



Mead's New Direction at SMC

Landed Him in Georgia Hall of Fame

It's been 50 years since Mike Mead (SMC '78) arrived at Southwestern Michigan College from Stevensville's Lakeshore High to run cross country and track for Ron Gunn. It was a rebuilding season in the fall of 1976 for the Roadrunners; they were fresh from an unprecedented third straight national cross country title. Five departing sophomores achieved All-American status, leaving behind a team dominated by freshmen. Even in a rebuilding season, the Roadrunners finished third in the nation that year. Mead didn't know it then, but SMC would set his life on a new trajectory, taking him to Georgia, Arkansas, and a hall of fame.

Business and bylines

"I had not really thought about why I was going to college academically," Mead said. "The plan was to study business."

Enter Dr. Dan Stenberg, one of Mead's freshman English professors and SMC mentor. "Whatever he saw in me, he brought it out. By my sophomore year, he got me interested in journalism, where I took the classes he taught." In 1977, Mead pretty much wrote the campus newspaper's sports section.

"Dr. Stenberg was always an encourager," Mead said of the man whose 1971-2001 SMC tenure spanned teaching English, advising *The Southwester* newspaper, directing developmental education, directing institutional research, and serving as executive assistant to President Dr. Marshall Bishop.

"We stayed connected and I made frequent visits to his Buchanan home every time I returned home to Michigan," he said.

Off to the Peach State

After completing his associate degree, Mead transferred to the University of West Georgia, where journalism was blended with broadcast media, speech, theatre, and filmmaking.

At West Georgia, Mead wrote for the student newspaper. "They always spelled my name wrong, with an 'e' on the end, like the Civil War general, George Meade. I was news editor for one term but didn't feel comfortable with that, so I went back to sports and started writing for a weekly newspaper in the area. Eventually, before I moved out of Carrollton, I became like the beat writer for West Georgia.

"Then I went down to Americus,"



he said. "I followed my wife Alison, we weren't married yet, down to Georgia Southwestern State University. I worked part-time with the newspaper and worked in sports information for the university."

In 1988, Alison took a job at Kennesaw State University. "I couldn't get on with the local Marietta paper," Mead said, "but after about a year I was hired by *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*." While there, Mead worked with guys like Tony Barnhart, the college football insider for CBS Sports, covering baseball, basketball, football, wrestling, tennis, golf, and swimming.

On the ground floor at Clayton State

In November 1990, Mead arrived at Clayton State University in Morrow, Ga., home of the Lakers. He started his new position, assistant director of public information and sports information director, days before the first men's basketball season began and was part of the inaugural season of athletics at Clayton State.

As the university transitioned from NAIA to NCAA D-II in 1995, Mead founded the men's and women's cross country teams, advancing to the NAIA championship meet during that first season. His 1996 women's cross country team advanced to the NAIA championships as he earned his first of six Peach Belt Conference (PBC) Coach of the Year honors with the team placing second in the conference.

Then in 1997, Mead started track and field programs. He was also promoted to assistant athletics director.

In May 2006, Mead was inducted into the Clayton State University Athletics Hall of Fame as one of the original department founders, the first sports information director, and track and field and cross country coach.

"I was destined to be at Clayton State," he shared. "In 1977 during the spring semester of my freshman year at SMC, one of my English professors was a guy by the name of Dr. Will Tomory.

"Fast forward about 18 years later," Mead said. "I had been working as public information assistant at Clayton State. One morning I was helping my boss move some archival materials from one building to another. I came across several newspaper clippings. A photo and cutline from one particular clipping caught my eye: Dated 1976, it announced that a professor was leaving Clayton Junior College for a community college in Dowagiac, Mich. His name, Dr. Will Tomory. Small world."

It may be a small world, but big dreams still come true. Over his 32 years at Clayton, Mead has had a lot of success in terms of his teams and his athletes. His cross country teams combined for two PBC Championships and 10 trips to the NCAA Championship, while his track and field teams combined for 27 trips to the NCAA Championships.

In all, as the cross country coach, Mead has coached four All-Americans, one regional champion, five conference champions, 68 All-PBC athletes, and 35 All-Region runners.

On the track and field side, he has mentored 13 All-Americans and a pair of top-five finishers at the National Championships.

He also earned multiple accolades for his service at Clayton and as part of the NCAA, where he served as president for Division II cross country, member of the track and field sports committee and track and field rules committee, as well as being on the USTFCCA Board of Directors.

Mead retired in March 2023. Since then, he's moved to northeastern Arkansas, bought a "fixer-upper," and is researching the history of West Georgia track and field and cross country. But he has never forgotten his first college experience. "I have fond memories of my two years in Dowagiac," Mead said. "I am glad SMC is still helping individuals achieve their goals through quality higher education."

It's New Year's Day for President Pleasant



Six months into his tenure as ninth Southwestern Michigan College President/CEO, Dr. Klint Pleasant is beginning his first full academic year as a Roadrunner.

"It's been a long time since I felt like the new kid in school. At the same time, it feels like New Year's Day," he said, "There's an excitement in the air for the possibilities a new school year brings… along with a flurry of activities. I've been able to interact with college and community members across our district, and it's been great."

From his first day, Pleasant immersed himself in enrollment activities for fall, a realignment of the Office of Development and Alumni Relations, strategic planning for the college, and numerous community and philanthropic activities. He even managed to squeeze in some fun activities with students during Welcome Week.

Pleasant, who recently purchased a home in the Niles area of Cass County, brings a wealth of experience in academics, enrollment management, fundraising, and athletics to SMC, his sixth college in a 29-year career. He previously served 21 years at Rochester Christian University in Rochester Hills, Mich.

In addition to his experience as a college administrator, Pleasant was also highly successful as a college basketball coach. He is enshrined in the Michigan Basketball Hall of Fame and was recently inducted into the United States Collegiate Athletic Association Hall of Fame.

Only a few months in, Pleasant recognizes there's still so much to learn. "It's my desire to understand SMC and its culture, history, heritage, and rhythm," he said. "And I'd be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the close community spirit I've enjoyed. For example, I don't know how I would have navigated these first few months without (Senior Vice President and Chief Strategy Officer) Brent Brewer's wisdom, hospitality, and willingness to help me understand SMC. He has been kind and gracious and not only a colleague but a friend."

The on-campus spirit along with local support have only added to his initial impressions of the college. "SMC is healthy and thriving," Pleasant said. "We have enrollment growth, outstanding faculty committed to our students and quality instruction, an absolutely beautiful campus, capital improvements ongoing, and sound fiscal management. Full residence halls and, occasionally, a waiting list. A strong scholarship program, a foundation dedicated to supporting the college, a second campus in Niles with limitless potential, a dedicated staff who go above and beyond, and a highly competent senior leadership team.

"My job is to come alongside and support the good work that's been done and the good work that's being done," said Pleasant. "In some ways, I see myself as the chief executive cheerleader. Each and every day we have the chance to play a part in the transformation process of a student's life."

More About No. 9

Dr. Klint Pleasant earned a bachelor's degree in kinesiology from Lipscomb University in Nashville, a master's degree from the University of Tennessee, and his doctorate in educational leadership and strategic change from Lipscomb.

He and wife Rachel have been married for 26 years and have two daughters. His wife has her master's degree in exercise physiology from Kent State University. Julia is in high school. Abbey is finishing up college at Pepperdine University in California and starts law school in January.

New Profile for Development Office





Southwestern Michigan College's Office of Development and Alumni Relations is being reimagined…and relocated. New Executive Director of Development Scott Samuels and Manager of Development Emily Schrock can soon be found in the front of the History Gallery, adjacent to the bookstore. Alumni and community members who attend Founders Weekend in November are invited to stop by the new office for a visit.

Samuels, who joined the college this fall, began his career as an investment consultant but switched gears after 9/11. "After I left the financial services sector, I taught business courses at Rochester College, now Rochester Christian University, for four years. Then I was asked to join the college administration. Over my 24 years there, I led admissions, marketing, fundraising, oversaw student retention, and served as the Dean of Students." Although he is new to SMC, Samuels is excited about the opportunity to help advance the College's mission.

Schrock, a 2016 SMC graduate, is also excited about the changes in SMC development. "Our new location mean we'll be more accessible to our alumni and donors," she said. The proximity of the office to the historical repository allows visitors the chance to reminisce about the beginnings of SMC as they discuss current and future opportunities with Samuels and Schrock.

"Development is building relationships," Schrock said. "We are constantly building relationships between friends in the community, businesses, and alumni.

"Our work is matching people's passions with what SMC is trying to accomplish—an affordable and quality education for all of our students. For example, if someone is interested in the arts, we can connect them however they're comfortable, whether it's renovating the band room or attending an art gallery reception."

One of the first "reimagined" events coming out of the office will be Founders Weekend. "The initial event began with the College's 60th anniversary in 2024, but we're expanding it to encompass three events," Samuels said.

"Friday afternoon will feature a luncheon for all employees. Friday evening we're holding a formal reception for legislators, major donors, and board members, and Saturday we're hosting a brunch where we will give out the Distinguished Philanthropy Award and our annual Outstanding Alumni Award."

"With our renewed focus on development," Schrock said, "the biggest change is what defines development. Our department, like marketing, supports all of the operations at SMC."

Samuels agreed. "Yes, people typically think of development as fundraising, but it's also overall relationship building, connecting partnerships with academic programs. We're going to run with it and take all our friends and everyone who has a passion for SMC along with us, being able to help educate our community on what SMC needs and what we offer to our community.

"The first part of that is setting up working relationships with the community at large that support what SMC academics, arts, and athletic programs are trying to accomplish, and continuing to promote the good work the College is already doing," he said.

"When you think of two outward-facing groups on campus," he continued, "it's admissions for bringing students here and the development office to bring corporations, local businesses, individuals, and alumni who want to have a passion for education and want to be part of our mission."

According to Samuels the first of many steps involves the addition of a CRM (client relationship management system) to better analyze SMC's active donor base. This can help avoid donor fatigue and also provide insights into growing opportunities. The office is also creating a framework to guide potential donors to available needs to which they can contribute. "We're laying the foundation for the future. It truly is an exciting time to be a Roadrunner," he said.

Founders Day Brunch

Saturday, November 14

Time: 10-11:30 a.m.

Place: The Fred A. Mathews Conference Center
Dowagiac Campus

RSVP: swmich.edu/foundersday

All donors, friends of SMC, and employees are invited to a special community celebration honoring the people who shape SMC's story. Enjoy the Founders Day Brunch, where SMC will present the Distinguished Philanthropy Award and Outstanding Alumni Award.

Wheaton Took 'Unconventional Path,'



Eau Claire native Shane Wheaton came to SMC with the intention of transferring to a four-year institution. That was the plan. Instead, he chose an unconventional path that, although long, has proven incredibly rewarding.

A commuter student, Wheaton also worked off-campus throughout his time at SMC. At that time he was working for Best Buy, the consumer electronics retailer, envisioning using a bachelor's degree to climb the corporate management ranks. "I worked at Best Buy all during my time at SMC" at the stores in Benton Harbor for two years, and after a promotion, in Mishawaka for one year," he said.

After graduating, he chose not to pursue a bachelor's degree and started applying for jobs. "Benistar called me for an interview, and I leveraged my associate degree to secure an entry-level role at Benistar Administrative Services Inc."

Benistar is a nationally-licensed, third-party administrator, operating in the group retiree medical and prescription drug benefits sector. By working in a consulting and administrative role on behalf of broker and consultant partners, Benistar provides retiree medical and prescription drug solutions for companies and organizations nationwide.

A couple of weeks after the interview, Wheaton had given his notice to Best Buy and was moving to Chicago. "For the last ten years, I've grown with Benistar, moving through several roles and ultimately into my current position in South Carolina, where I serve on the executive board and directly lead a team of eight," he said.

"There are basically three departments in the company," Wheaton said. "I run one of them.

SMC got his foot in the Benistar door

Wheaton had interned for SMC's Human Relations (HR) department, which helped him stand out to Benistar. "I highlighted my SMC internship in HR on my resume," he said. "What my company does is carve out some of HR's responsibilities to the retiree population. They liked that I had HR experience because they felt that I would better understand the folks I'm working with.

"I'm the only executive in my company who doesn't hold a bachelor's degree," Wheaton said. "Because I worked full time while I was at SMC, I had a lot of experience. I haven't been held back because I don't have a bachelor's. What I have is a broad understanding of how a lot of disciplines work. My associate degree got me in, then I worked to prove myself within the industry."

It took ten years of learning and late nights, plugging away until things finally began to click. "I'm very grateful that I stuck with it and that they stuck with me," he said.

Regular travel a perk

"What I learned to value most is the people—both the team I get to lead and the leadership group I continue to learn from," he said. "My role also gives me the opportunity to travel regularly across the Midwest, New England, Texas and once in a while, the West Coast. I split my time between sales meetings, leading my team, and working directly with retiree groups to helping them better understand and maximize their health care benefits.

"One of the most rewarding parts of my work is the opportunity to serve as a trusted advisor—ensuring organizations are delivering the level of care and support their retired populations deserve. That's also led to some unique opportunities, including being invited to provide input on a State of Michigan health plan proposal as part of a review with Priority Health.

"Overall, I feel incredibly fortunate—both to have found a career I genuinely enjoy and to be in a position where I can make a meaningful impact while continuing to grow," he said.

SMC memories

Wheaton did not live in the SMC residence halls, but that didn't keep him from enjoying campus life. He spent a lot of time at the Student Activity Center and other areas of campus too. "I hung out at the SAC or in the art building after class. Sometimes, I'd go jogging on the trails," he said.

"I lived in an apartment in St. Joseph, which meant a 45-minute commute. But I chose to attend SMC because it felt like big things were coming," he said. "The whole time I was there, it felt like there was a standard people held themselves to. I've always remembered that."

He married Katie, who also works at Benistar, while at SMC. They knew each other from high school in Eau Claire.

"I met a lot of folks at SMC that I'm still in contact with today. In fact, I hired two of the people I went to school with," he said. "The sales pitch was pretty easy, starting with the temperature and lack of winter." Because winter is another thing Wheaton remembers about his time at SMC…beautiful but cold.

Dr. Elaine Zeilke Foster

Board of Trustees—Member Spotlight

Trustee Elaine Zeilke Foster, Ph.D., MSN, RN, brings 43 years in the nursing profession, including 27 years at Southwestern Michigan College, to her service on the Board of Trustees, which began in January 2019.

Foster has spent the majority of her professional life in nursing education. She retired in February 2026 from her most recent position as Vice President of Nursing for Education Affiliates in Baltimore, Md., where she was responsible for the vision, direction and oversight of all nursing education, with a focus on student learning and overall program outcomes for 7,000 nursing students at 21 campuses across the country.

She previously served as Dean of Nursing and Health Science for American Sentinel College at Post University in Connecticut, and Associate Dean and Director of Curriculum for the School of Nursing at Kaplan University in Chicago.



"American Sentinel was based in Aurora, Colo., right outside of Denver," she said. "I loved that job, including the travel to the large health care organizations we were partners with, like Mayo Clinic."

In fact, much of her career was spent in her home office and traveling. "From 2011 until February 2026, I worked remotely and traveled a lot," Foster said. "One year, I was on the road for 120 days. I got to work from home, and I didn't have to move, but I was gone a lot. There were times I would be gone for 10-14 days. Most stints were five to seven days. I bounced from Chicago to Denver, to Connecticut to Baltimore. I had a great experience. I would have never thought when I contemplated nursing in high school it would lead me to such a career opportunity."

27 years at SMC

During her time at SMC, Foster served in various leadership positions, including Dean of the School of Nursing and Human Services and Dean of Academic Studies.

"My time as dean incorporated nursing and arts and sciences," Foster said. "Everything but technology—automotive and welding."

Foster, a first-generation college student, imagined herself becoming a teacher, but jobs were scarce in the 1970s. Her high school advisor encouraged her to look at other things. She considered becoming a veterinarian or going to law school.

Her mother was a Lakeshore High School secretary. Her father was in management at St. Joseph companies. He obtained his GED after going off to the Army.

"My parents were amazing cheerleaders," she said.

Dean Eileen Parks hired Foster at 23 as adjunct faculty 1½ years removed from the University of Michigan. She got married on Sept. 10 and started teaching at SMC on Sept. 12.

After U-M she worked in cardiac care for South Bend Memorial Hospital before becoming a full-time SMC nursing faculty member in 1984.

"Feeling unprepared to teach made me work 10 times harder. I loved my patients, but when I walked in that classroom, I never looked back. There was nothing better than watching the students learn, their excitement, starting out with no skills, then getting pinned. We built such a good program at SMC," Foster said.

Throughout her career Foster has been actively involved in the nursing community. She has been a member of the Advisory Council for the National League for Nursing Foundation, functioned as a program evaluator for the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN) and an item writer for the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX), and served on the Organization of Associate Degree Nursing Foundation Board of Directors.

Additionally, she participated on the Kaplan Innovation Advisory Committee, the Purdue Global Nursing Advisory Committee, and belonged to Sigma Theta Tau International.

Foster's community service includes five years as president of the Cass County Council on Aging (COA) Board of Directors. She has held several other positions within national and state nursing education associations as well.

Foster earned her doctorate in educational leadership and administration and master of science in nursing from Andrews University and her bachelor's degree in nursing from the University of Michigan.

She also holds a certificate from the Institute for Management and Leadership in Education from Harvard University.

She has been married to Pokagon Township farmer Scott Foster for 42 years. They met showing cattle at the Berrien County Youth Fair in Berrien Springs when she was 12. He lived in Niles, and she resided in Stevensville. They have two children who both attended SMC—Andrew and Danielle—and five grandchildren.

The Fosters' farm, Seldom Rest near Niles, grows corn and soybeans and raises purebred Angus show cattle.

Foster, a 1978 graduate, was honored as Lakeshore's 2025 Distinguished Alumni Award recipient, speaking at graduation on the topic, "Don't Underestimate Yourself." That and her status as a national leader in nursing, led her to miss SMC's 2026 Commencement—to serve as Blossomtime Grand Marshal.

Although she's retired from nursing, she has no intention of slowing down. In addition to continuing her service as a trustee, she plans to do more volunteering, from COA to animals—rescue dogs or therapy dogs. "That would combine my love of nursing with my love for animals," she said.



2016 Graduate

Works in Accounting Software



Alex Horning (SMC '16) has been working remotely since before the COVID-19 pandemic. On paper, he spends his days in Birmingham, Ala., but in real life he works and lives in South Bend.

Horning attended SMC from 2012-16, graduating with an associate degree and his bachelor's degree from academic partner Ferris State University.

He came to SMC from Penn High School (PHS) in Mishawaka and commuted from home in Granger for the entire duration of his college experience.

"SMC was a happy accident," he said. "During my junior year, PHS had an optional field trip to SMC for anyone who wanted to go. To me, that was a way to get out of a boring day of school. I was an unsure high school student in 11th grade without a plan, so I really didn't know what to do.

"During the trip," Horning said, "SMC and my counselor at Penn informed me that I could dual-enroll at SMC during my senior year. Once I learned about the dual enrollment and that Penn would pay for the courses, I thought it was a no-brainer. I realized I could knock out general education courses while I was deciding a major."

Horning started his college career with a history major, taking two history courses during his dual-enrollment period. "I took a full load of general courses, so I wouldn't say it was focused. But during that time, I learned that there was an SMC/Ferris State University (FSU) option that would allow me to complete program on the Dowagiac campus, and there was no risk of losing any credits when transfering to the Ferris degree. Once I learned that, I needed to choose a major, and accounting made the most sense for me."

Two faculty played important roles in Horning's time at SMC—Professor Clifford "Chip" Weeks and Dr. Jeffrey Dennis. "Professor Weeks taught multiple accounting courses and connected with students through his real-world industry experience and an interesting life," Horning said.

"Dr. Dennis was also a great professor because he was able to describe things in such detail and almost in a captivating, story-like way. He had excellent study guides."

Horning began his first position in January 2017, shortly after graduating from the SMC/FSU program. "My first job was working at the University of Notre Dame in their tax department," he said. "Having an interest in software, I then transitioned to working directly with financial software.

"Since 2021, I have been a consultant for ERP (enterprise resource planning) software, or Microsoft Dynamics 365 Business Central. It is a comprehensive business database that includes payables, receivables, banking, inventory, etc. I am the person who meets with clients to find out exactly what they need, from analysis and design through the complete handoff and completion of the software and database."

Horning works for Warren Averett, an accounting firm with approximately 800 total employees. "I am a member of a smaller team that works only with software, such as ERP," he said. "While I am under the WA umbrella, I do not conduct any accounting services, and on paper I am located in Birmingham.

"I do travel to Birmingham occasionally but am content to work fully remote here in South Bend," he said.

That's not a happy accident but a purposeful choice like the many Horning has made since his time on the SMC campus.

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