

# THE SOUTHWESTER

SOUTHWESTERN MICHIGAN COLLEGE | SPRING 2025

MAGAZINE



## Room TO Grow:

New Wrestling Facilities  
and Renovations to the  
Lyons Building



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Passion for Teaching



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It's Full Speed Ahead



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From First-Generation  
Student to College  
President



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## 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](http://swmich.edu).



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

SMC enters its seventh decade with a strong financial profile and growing enrollment, keeping us well-positioned to pursue immediate and long-term strategic goals.

For example, even during a leadership transition, your college has been forging ahead with an expansion that will be funded without increasing debt. As you'll read in this issue, the "Room to Grow" initiative will help support improved facilities for our championship wrestlers and creative musicians.

SMC's successful return to intercollegiate athletics in 2021 and our resulting enrollment growth sparked a demand for college housing that we have already addressed by adding 36 new residence hall spaces. SMC has the most on-campus student housing within our peer group and second most of all Michigan community colleges.

It has been my pleasure to work with four of SMC's eight presidents. Each provided a sturdy foundation upon which to build a seamless progression of institutional goals and continued success. Numerous voluntary board members have been

dedicated to our mission of providing a high quality, affordable education to the next generation. As we look forward to the exciting things to come, we'll introduce you to our trustees, featuring one member per issue beginning with Trustee Becky Moore.

Cass County voters overwhelmingly supported the creation of your community college in 1964, for which we are eternally grateful and mindful. "Knowledge for All" has always guided our mission and the development of our students.

We hope the following stories illuminate the many ways our students can chart their own course, whether it's working with Amazon, moving to San Francisco, or hiking the 2,198-mile Appalachian Trail.

SMC offers 46 degrees and certificate programs, preparing future nurses and allied health care professionals while also supplying the labor market with skilled workers through robust career pathways, such as robotics, welding, automotive technology, and construction trades green technology.

As we send our 58th class of graduates into the world to be productive citizens, let me thank outgoing president Dr. Joe Odenwald for his enthusiastic and dedicated service to SMC and express the Board of Trustees' full confidence in Interim President Brent Brewer moving forward.

I hope you enjoy this eighth issue of *The Southwester*.

Thomas F. Jerdon  
Chairman, SMC Board of Trustees



# Inspired to Share Her Passion FOR Teaching

Studying early childhood education with Professor Raneé Conley at Southwestern Michigan College “put more fire in my passion,” Noemi Reyna-Adams, SMC ’21, said.

Her career goal today is becoming a professor in early childhood education. Conley “100-percent influenced this decision,” said Reyna-Adams, who is a first-year GSRP (Great Start Readiness Program) teacher at Countryside Academy in Benton Harbor.

With 750 students in the school, “This is the first year they have GSRP. They even started with one GSRP classroom but soon saw a need for a second before the school year even started.”

Her classroom has 18 students and two teachers.

“I like that we get to help children learn and get ready for kindergarten, all through play,” she said. “Our curriculum is focused on learning through play and child-led interests. It is the last year that we really focus on learning through play before they enter a Y5-12 school system.”

## From Eau Claire to White Hall

Reyna-Adams graduated from Eau Claire High School in 2014.

“I actually attended SMC straight out of high school,” she said. “I went in with a transfer major for forensic pathology but changed it to secondary education. I was familiar with the campus, the class systems and some teachers. I also saw that they had a more in-depth early childhood program than other colleges I was looking at.”

She lived in William M. White Hall for two years, working the front desk for almost the whole time.

“I attended a few dances they had with some friends on campus,” she said. “But I was not very social in college and wish that I would have explored more of what SMC had to offer.”

Reyna-Adams returned to SMC in





the child care center at Whirlpool's global headquarters in Benton Harbor. She was there from 2020-24.

"I worked as a toddler assistant, toddler lead teacher, preschool lead teacher, school-aged lead teacher, and then as a program specialist with management," she said. "I was able to do all my observation and clinical hours for my associate and my bachelor's degrees there thanks to the director, Brooke Boone."

Reyna-Adams pursued her bachelor's degree through CMU-Online Global Campus. "I obtained a bachelor of science in education/teaching early childhood education B-K and special education. I did all my classes online while working at The Eddy-KinderCare Learning Center."

She is the only teacher in her family and the first to earn a bachelor's degree. But she is not done. In fact, she has registered for CMU's Online Global Campus master's program in education with a focus on curriculum and instruction and plans to start classes this fall.

2019 from Central Michigan University.

"I took a year break from CMU and moved back down to southwest Michigan," she said. "I majored in secondary education English and special education" to teach high school.

"After I moved back down from Mount Pleasant, I got a job as an assistant toddler

teacher at Immanuel Early Childhood Development Center in Bridgman. I spent about a year at the position and learned a lot, including how to work with children and the importance of working on skills such as social emotional development and literacy."

Being promoted to toddler lead teacher, Reyna-Adams needed to get a CDA (child development associate) credential or an associate degree. She chose the degree.

"When I got promoted to toddler lead teacher, I attended the MIAEYC (Michigan Association for the Education of Young Children) Early Childhood Conference in Grand Rapids."

During the conference workshops, "I learned and was inspired by many presenters who have been in the field for years," Reyna-Adams said. "I would say in all, I was influenced by the job, the director (Barb Ackermann), and the conference. They all went hand-in-hand to show the potential and importance of a career in early childhood education."

Following Immanuel, but while she was still a student, Reyna-Adams worked at The Eddy-KinderCare Learning Center,

### **She sees herself in Conley's shoes**

After taking just one of Conley's classes and connecting with her, Reyna-Adams was able to see herself in her teacher's shoes. "I have a passion for early childhood education and a passion for teaching adults the importance of this career and how we make such an impact on all young lives, even infants!

"What intrigued me the most with the classes I took was the textbooks that I have kept to be hands-on resources in my career, as well as the use of real experiences and open conversations in all the classrooms. There was always open communication, especially if we didn't understand or if we needed help applying the learning to our specific work environments.

"I also think being a program specialist helped solidify my decision to pursue a master's degree," Reyna-Adams said. "As a program specialist at The Eddy, I worked with teachers on how to execute and understand the curriculum. Essentially, I was teaching them and helping to become teachers."



Robotics Engineer Hikes  
Appalachian Trail—

# the Entire 2,198 Miles

**D**iamond is the hardest naturally occurring material known, which robotics control engineer Brooks Diamond (Class of 2014) certainly proved hiking the Appalachian Trail.

Diamond, who grew up in Dowagiac, was hired right out of SMC by JR Automation in St. Joseph, and in January 2020 he followed his job to Nashville, where its headquarters is located. Today, he travels the globe for his job.

"We have customers all over the world," Diamond said. "The division I'm currently with in Nashville focuses mainly on medical, government, and aerospace applications. The Michigan divisions handle more automotive, while the Utah division designs amusement park rides, such as roller coasters."

A controls engineer designs, develops, and maintains systems to control dynamic processes and machinery, ensuring they behave predictably and optimally, often using mathematical modeling and software tools.

"Controls engineers 'breathe life' into the machines so they function as

designed. Mechanical engineers create the mechanical parts of the systems, while electrical/controls engineers design the electrical schematics and write code to ensure they behave in a repeatable and predictable way. There's a lot of data acquisition, data tracking, and adherence to tight tolerances and customer specifications involved," he said. "Our company functions as one large team, divided into smaller project teams. The size of each project team depends on the scope and complexity of the project, ranging from just a few to many people."

"I work for the same company where I did my internship right out of college in Stevensville 11 years ago," Diamond said. "At that time, the company was called Dane System. Now it's JR Automation—a Hitachi Group Company. We were acquired by Hitachi about six years ago."

"I've also had the opportunity to travel with the company. About five months ago, I was in Florence, Italy, and in a few weeks I'll be in Dublin, Ireland. I transferred from Michigan to our Nashville division five years ago, so I'm working on becoming a Tennessean while

still retaining my Michigander heart."

Diamond loves his job. "It's such a great company to work for," he said. "That's why I transferred rather than looking at other companies. They've been really good to me over the years, and I'm thankful for the opportunity to work there. I'm always learning new things, too. The innovative automation solutions we design and build as a team make it truly enjoyable."

## Hiking from Georgia to Maine

His employer granted him a leave of absence to pursue his quest.

"I hiked the entire Appalachian Trail—the entire 2,198.4 miles from Georgia to Maine," said Diamond. "I even completed the approach trail, another 8.8 miles, but who's counting, right?"

"It was, to say the least, an incredible experience. At the same time, it was the hardest thing I've ever done. It took me just over five months to complete. I'm grateful that I was able to do it and be one of the roughly 25 percent who attempt it each year and succeed. It definitely boosted my confidence."



“Looking back, I believe that working at JR Automation helped me more on the trail than I initially thought. Many things didn't go as planned, and I had to figure them out on a day-to-day basis. Problem-solving when things don't go according to plan and overcoming hurdles is part of my job. It was the same on the trail. I had to determine where to camp, how much food I had left, and how far it was to the next town. All the while it rained for days on end. I would plan, and sometimes something wouldn't work out. But it never bothered me as much as it did others. I learned to take a different approach to get where I needed to be. I owe a lot of what I learned on the trail to the experience I've gained working.”

**Training for a five-month odyssey**

“I trained as much as I could in Tennessee. I joined a backpacking club and hiked the mountains as much as possible. It helped, but unless you're hiking every day—going up and down mountains all day long—it's hard to fully prepare for long-distance backpacking. That said, I still highly recommend training if you can. Using a stair stepper and hiking as often as possible helps avoid early injuries on the hike.”

“JR wanted to help me out and gave me a leave of absence. They also wanted me to come back after I finished. I'm incredibly grateful. It shows what kind of company JR is and another reason why I love working there.”

Diamond has not seen the 2014

Reese Witherspoon movie “Wild” based on a real woman who solo-hiked the Pacific Crest Trail in 1995, but he did read *A Walk in the Woods* by Bill Bryson. “That was a funny one,” he said. “Anyway, there were many people on the trail. We all had our reasons; some were more complex than others. Some did it purely for the challenge. I met all sorts of people out there—some who actually lived on the trail. They would work at hostels for a while to earn some income and have a free place to stay for a while, then they'd head back out on the trail. I met doctors, lawyers, scientists, and executives from Fortune 500 companies—all walking the trail.”

“Despite our diverse backgrounds, we all had one shared goal, and that goal brought everyone closer to make it to the top of Mount Katahdin in Maine.”

**SMC won out over Oklahoma**

Diamond had been working at National-Standard in Niles for five years when he realized he wanted to do something different with his life. “Things worked out in a surprising way,” he

said. “My department at National-Standard was being relocated to Oklahoma, and the company announced layoffs. I was given the choice to move to Oklahoma or take the layoff. I decided to take the layoff and hit the books at SMC. Looking back, I'm so glad I made that choice. I really enjoy what I do now. There's a sense of gratification every time I get to solve a problem with the team. It's been a truly rewarding journey to get here.”

When he first started at SMC, Diamond was taking prerequisites and considered studying biology, but he wasn't entirely sure about his path.

“I kept walking past the robotics classroom and was intrigued by the robot sitting inside. I've always been fascinated by electricity as well,” he said. “One day, I stopped in and Mike

McGowan was there. I asked him about the class and what it was all about. I decided to take a few classes and was immediately hooked. I really enjoyed working with the instructors, especially Nathan Kramb, the welding/robotics instructor at the time. He was an incredible mentor during courses, and I learned so much from him.”

**Big dreams sprout in small towns**

Diamond grew up five minutes from SMC's Dowagiac campus.

“It's amazing how small towns like my hometown, Dowagiac, have connections to such fascinating pieces of history and inspiring achievements! Five Titanic survivors—that's worth seeing when I'm at Pigeon Forge again, especially with all the Titanic exhibits they have there.”

“Seeing people from your hometown make it to the NFL, whether as a player or a cheerleader, is also incredibly motivating. It's a reminder that big dreams can sprout from even the smallest places. Makes you wonder what other untold stories Dowagiac holds, doesn't it?”

MAKE  
IT A  
**LAUGHING**  
**MATTER**



**A**utomotive Professor Kyle Schrock isn't ready to give up the day job he's held for seven years, but at the same time he's serious about nurturing his fledgling comedy career.

Stand-up comedy implies a fusillade of jokes. That's not Schrock. Whether he has a five-minute set or 25 minutes

to amble on about "falling off" the Appalachian Trail hiking it last summer, this clean comic is more of a storyteller.

"As a kid, I remember telling people I wanted to be a comedian when I grew up," Schrock said

Even though he has started opening for professionals, comedy "is not very

stable. It's hard to have as a real job,"

Schrock's influences include Nashville's Nate Bargatze, "The Nicest Man in Stand-Up" for avoiding profanity, sexual humor, and controversial topics. Schrock will be in Fort Wayne in May to see Bargatze perform.

"A guy I opened for in Goshen came up with Nate," Schrock said. "He is a professional New York City comedian. It's all he does."

Schrock tested the water for his act at a fundraiser for his church. That led to competing at Niles' Underground Laugh Lounge in the former Carnegie library that had been Four Flags Area Chamber of Commerce.

"I ended up winning that," Schrock said. "They had a competition called 'Funny Over 40' with roughly eight comedians a night for four weeks. The top two made it to the finals the fifth week. I won my week and the finals."

"A lot of funny people I know say they couldn't get up on stage," Schrock said. "I don't know if I'd have done very well if I'd pursued this before I was a teacher. I like having a good time and injecting laughter into everything. It's hard to fall asleep in class when you're laughing."

### His turning point toward laughter

The oldest of three, he chose laughter's path in high school after a house fire in 1992 claimed his brother's life.

"Not to get dark," he said, "but the single thing that shaped my life was my youngest brother passing away in the fire. That kind of changed my mindset on things and altered my brain chemistry immensely. There are two routes after a major event—fall into a deep depression or try to make light to cope. I chose comedy and really started honing my craft, if you will. I've said a lot of stupid things in my life trying to be funny and had to take a lot of things back. At my last show, I told a joke the first night and didn't get the laughter I thought I was going to, so I left it out the second night."

"I think roasts are terrible. I can't stand watching people rip on somebody, even though the jokes are hilarious. The person getting roasted might seem like they're okay, but that stuff hurts."

Schrock's stories "are about 90-percent true. Obviously, you embellish a bit. The club in Goshen (Funny Farm) is a clean comedy club. They don't want

R-rated stuff, so I talk about life things. I haven't touched things I've learned as a teacher yet. I have another set in Goshen coming up in April." As many performances as he'd like to book, he also has to pass on dates once in a while, like one in May which conflicted with SMC's graduation and his daughter's wedding.

With his comedy career not yet a year old, Schrock ponders comedians he admires, such as Jerry Seinfeld.

"The way he tells jokes, it's like he's out there just talking with the audience instead of presenting," Schrock said. But Schrock also steers clear of politics, although he enjoys Dave Chapelle, who started in Chappelle's Show.

"I like sketch comedy," like Saturday Night Live. "I always felt that people who felt the glory days of SNL were a long time ago are the ones who don't want to change with the times. Your sense of humor should evolve as a person evolves. My wife and I had this conversation during the 50th anniversary. Lorne Michaels has run the show the whole time except for a few years."

Schrock began watching SNL in the '90s when the cast included Adam Sandler, David Spade, Chris Farley, and Norm Macdonald. "Those guys will forever be my favorites, but I love the new shows as well. It's still funny. Kenan Thompson is hilarious. He's been on the show for almost 20 years, which is wild to think about."

### Sets expand from five to 25 minutes

"When I started, I got five to seven minutes in Niles," Schrock said. "I did a second set at my church and did 12 minutes. I ended up doing 25 minutes in Goshen. I try to reference previous jokes into the story I'm telling. I don't write anything down, although as most new comedians do, I use a cue card. It's an index card with ideas to refer back to if I get lost. But for the most part I don't use it. I can tell like four stories with little jokes interjected here and there."

"For five minutes, you've got to bring it, be funny right off the bat and keep being funny," Schrock said. "Some



comedians think the crowd is laughing all the time when they really aren't. Others think the crowd isn't laughing enough when they really are. I'm the latter.

"My wife will tell me after the show I did a really good job, they were all laughing, but I don't hear it. I have two daughters in college, and I do like to pick on them a bit in my set."

"I try to stay away from degrading my wife. The day after our anniversary last year, she had foot surgery, so I say I got her the most expensive gift I've ever gotten her, but I don't want her to ever feel like she has to hide at a show."

With a 50-minute commute to campus, he runs through his routine in his mind, records it, and listens to it. He also plays back live performances to gauge crowd reaction.

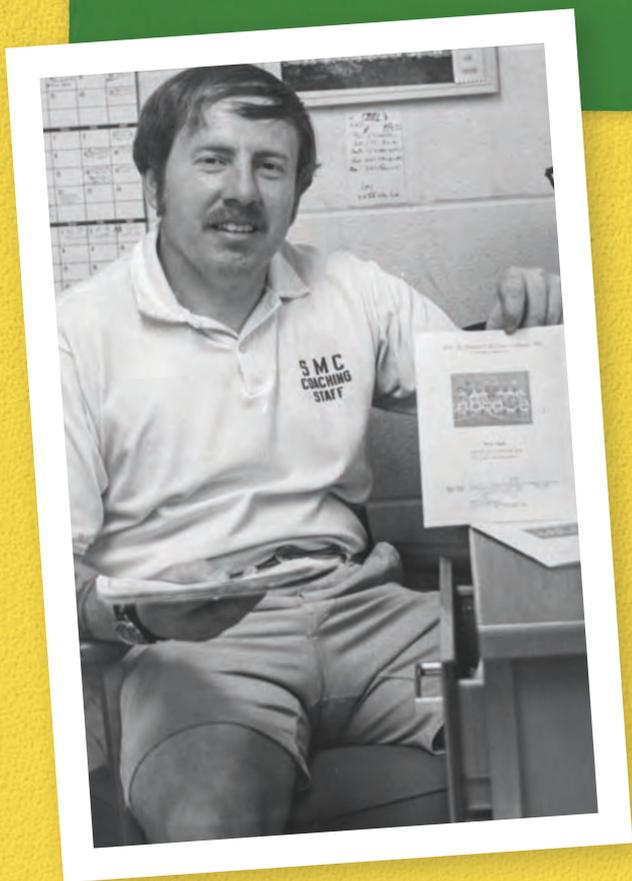
To take comedy to the next level would mean going to Chicago or Indianapolis and doing open mic nights. Clean comedians are in demand for corporate events.

Familiar faces dot his audiences. "I've had students come see me," he said. But faculty and staff have also attended Schrock's performances, including "(Dean) Karen Reilly, (Director of Institutional Research) Angie Evans, Andrew Churchill and Chip Weeks (from the business faculty), and Jeff (Robson)," the other automotive instructor. "It felt awesome that SMC people came."

Schrock's office in the Jan and A.C. Kairis Building devotes space to car stuff, Chicago White Sox bobbleheads, and axe-throwing trophies, which so far he hasn't had to place onstage as a warning to hecklers.

# WRESTLING COACH Jim Judd

## SMC's Ted Lasso



James Judd casts a towering shadow over Southwestern Michigan College wrestling and probably always will. That's the impact of a good coach mentor.

Coach Judd spent 38 years with the college, continuing to teach physical education until 2006. He was named to the NJCAA Wrestling Hall of Fame in Stillwater, Okla., in 1990. More than 150 of his former wrestlers went on to four-year colleges and universities. Nine former Roadrunners served as coaches in the immediate area, including John Johnson and John Green, Judd's SMC assistants. His 1972-73 team received an NJCAA award for its number of academic All-Americans.

"He was like Ted Lasso," Judd's son, Todd, said. "It's nice to win, but he was more about developing good young men than winning and losing." Todd was at SMC from 1982-85.

But how does one become a Lasso-like inspiration? Let's go back to the beginning ...

Coach Judd, who passed away on Christmas Eve 2021 at 83, was born Dec. 29, 1937, in North Baltimore, Ohio, to Kenneth and Elsie (Nigh) Judd. He graduated from North Baltimore High School in 1956.

"My grandfather, my uncle, and dad are all in the North Baltimore Sports Hall of Fame," Todd said.

### Army paratrooper and 'Honest John'

Following high school, Jim Judd enlisted in the U.S. Army and served from 1956 until 1960 as a paratrooper, making more than 50 jumps.

Judd, who spent three years in Germany, was one of eight men commonly referred to as the "Honest Johns," entrusted to guard atomic bombs.

Once honorably discharged, Judd continued his education by earning a bachelor's degree in elementary education from Findlay University and a master's degree in physical education from Bowling Green University.

"I also became an actor by chance at Findlay," Judd said in a previous interview. "I took a couple of classes in play production and drama."

As an actor, "I played Inspector Hearne in 'Witness for the Prosecution' by Agatha Christie. The whole football team came and sat in front opening night," Judd said.

### Football was initially his main sport

Early on football was Coach Judd's main sport. He also played baseball and basketball as his high school lacked wrestling.

As much as he loved sports and his time at Findlay, it wasn't his life. On June 11, 1961, before Jim's senior year of college, he married Beulah "Bea" Carpenter, his wife of 53 years. Family and loving what one does were most important, and he encouraged giving the best—in sports, in academics, and in other experiences.

### Becoming a Roadrunner

Before SMC Judd taught and coached football, baseball, and track with the Spencerville Public School System, Ottawa-Glandorf, and Otsego Schools, all in Ohio.

Judd was one of three original SMC coaches, along with Cross Country/Track Hall of Famer Ron Gunn and Jim Tansey, who played basketball for John Wooden in South Bend.

Judd and Tansey tossed a coin which decided that Judd would coach golf, along with wrestling.

### Judd's Studs

The team, "Judd's Stud's," were known for wearing colorful singlets and for classroom success.

"Those shirts were so popular" among all the athletes, Todd Judd, himself

a retired 32-year physical education teacher and coach, recalled. "Wrestlers, basketball players, cross-country runners, we all hung out together. They all wanted Judd's Studs shirts. My dad would tell them, 'Pick out a wrestler. If you can take them down, I'll give you a T-shirt,'—but no one ever could."

### Encouraging well-roundedness

"He encouraged my brother and I to do different things to be well-rounded," Todd said. "I was a thespian, too," with the Union High Drama Club. "My brother could play piano well and was giving lessons on the side to make money. I was in 'Fiddler on the Roof,' 'The King and I,' 'Li'l Abner.' Small parts, built sets, and ran lights. (Wrestling Coach John) Lewis made me run to Drama Club practice."

Jim Judd's example is impacting the next generation. A third generation of Judds is at SMC in Todd's son, Gavin. "My dad had a big influence on him, too," Todd said. "Gavin wants to teach and coach. During break he's also going to parachute out of an airplane." After all, his grandfather was a paratrooper.

### Judd and his wife contributed 50 years to SMC

Coach Judd had a great partner. It's a coincidence that creation of a \$5,000 Bea and Jim Judd Endowment for wrestlers coincided with SMC's 2014 50th anniversary, but 50 happened to be how many years the Dowagiac couple contributed to the college. They also supported their community with Judd serving on the Dowagiac City Council for four years.

### The legacy continues

SMC's current wrestling coach Todd Hesson was a wrestler under Coach Judd. Hesson's Roadrunners have three-peated the Michigan Community College Athletic Association championship and captured the 2025 Great Lakes District Championship in Illinois in the three years since the sport's revival at SMC.

Hesson, Great Lakes District Wrestling Coach of the Year, emphasizes academics just as his mentor did. It's not surprising. In fact, Hesson and Todd Judd grew up in the same Dowagiac neighborhood before



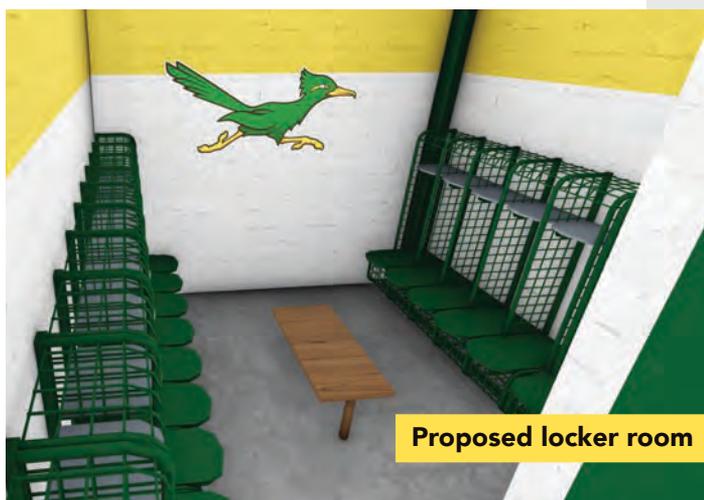
Hesson moved. Todd Hesson, Todd Judd, and Judd's brother also all attended Findlay. They know each other well.

"He's quiet and laid back, but Todd's done a nice job. He has a lot of my dad in him as far as coaching philosophies," Todd Judd said of Hesson.

That bodes well for the future of SMC wrestling.

# ROOM TO GROW

## AT SMC



The whole college experience is what impacts a student to make a lasting impression, because not all learning takes place in a classroom and not all funding needs can be tied to a specific program, curricula, or technology. That's why Southwestern Michigan College launched the Room to Grow capital campaign.

### A Dedicated Wrestling Space

Room to Grow provides dedicated space for SMC's growing wrestling program, including a larger competition and training area as the program grows and women also join the mix this fall. Only 29 NJCAA schools offer women's wrestling. SMC will be the first in Michigan to offer this increasingly popular sport to all men and women alike.

National Coach of the Year Todd Hesson's wrestlers are currently housed in the visual and performing arts building across from the Dale A. Lyons Theatre, space which was never meant to be the team's permanent home when the sport returned in 2022 after a 30-year absence. The Room to Grow's upgrade will provide SMC wrestling space of its own in a new wing of the Charles O. Zollar Building.

This expansion quadruples available space from 2,688 to 11,195 square feet. It also more than doubles mat capacity, providing enhanced opportunities for training and competition. The Roadrunners will be able to host regional and conference meets on campus—something SMC has not been able to do.

Since wrestlers will occupy the same building as other athletic programs, there will be increased interaction among all student athletes, creating camaraderie as our teams “run as one.”

The new facility features locker rooms for men and women wrestlers, a dedicated fitness and warm-up area for conditioning with treadmills and bikes, additional restroom facilities to accommodate more athletes and spectators, and offices for the head coach and assistants.

### Updated Band & Choir Spaces

Room to Grow also addresses fine arts needs in the Dale A. Lyons building, where the long, rectangular choir room was originally set up for offices, not musical instruction. A new expanded choir room will feature an in-the-round design, allowing singers and Director David Carew to see and hear each other while practicing.

A flexible multipurpose classroom will host music theory classes, and four ensemble rooms and six practice rooms will give groups more flexibility and practice space.

Director Mark Hollandsworth’s band room is more than 30 years old and needs to be enlarged for additional rehearsal and practice space. The band room, containing instrument storage space, is too small, accommodating chairs for just 40 members.

The new band room will provide an additional 1,980 square feet to accommodate 20 additional members and a more open rehearsal space. The Jazz Ensemble will also gain a dedicated practice area.

A renovated lobby area and bathrooms will feature modern lighting, flooring, and a lighter color palette to create a welcoming atmosphere for students, guests, and the community.

The new space allows both programs, which welcome students of all majors, to host larger community events and clinics, to help recruit future students, and to enhance the sense of pride current students feel in their programs and in the college.



Proposed lobby area



Proposed choir room



Proposed band room

## How You Can Help

Every contribution, no matter the size, makes a difference. While our goal covers only a portion of the total project cost, we’re counting on the support of friends and donors to help us provide these much-needed facilities for our students.

To give, visit [givebutter.com/roomtogrow](https://givebutter.com/roomtogrow) or contact Emily Schrock, Manager of Development, at [eschrock02@swmich.edu](mailto:eschrock02@swmich.edu).

## Another SMC Alumna Is

# Hitting

## ALL THE



Not only did Russell appear in two spring musicals, she met her husband, Tanner, in the winter of 2011 in the chorus of “How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying.”

She also performed in the pit orchestra for “Little Shop of Horrors” in the winter of 2012.

### Spring performing arts tour recruited her

“SMC has a long-standing tradition of sending its band, choir, and drama students on a spring performing arts tour,” Russell said. “The tour includes stops at various area high schools and serves as a recruiting tool for the performing arts department. I looked forward to this performance every year and couldn’t wait for my turn to perform with both the Jazz Band and the choirs!”

David Carew was her SMC choir director, but her band director was Dr. Jon Korzun, who retired in the spring of 2019 after 28 years. Yet she enjoys a connection to current Director of Bands Mark Hollandsworth.

“Mark used to work at Buchanan as the director of bands,” she said. “When he landed the job at SMC, I applied at Buchanan and stepped into his role. I also played in Mark’s ensembles as a community member after moving to Buchanan, and even assisted with clarinet sectionals. He is a great director, and I love when I get the opportunity to play in ensembles under his leadership.”

### When dancing’s door closed, another opened

“I knew I wanted to be a band director since I was in high school, and I knew I was going to be a teacher much earlier than that,” she said. “The original plan was to become a dance teacher and choreographer, but after having corrective surgery for scoliosis just before entering high school, that was no longer a career option.

“I was always in love with music,” she said, “and when I had to take a step back from dancing, I threw myself into playing clarinet and eventually picked up piano, trumpet, and saxophone.

“I realized that I liked playing instruments just as much as I liked dancing, and I liked teaching music to younger students even more—so becoming a band director made sense.”

After graduating, Russell transferred to Western Michigan University and studied clarinet with Brad Wong. She graduated with a bachelor’s degree in music education in 2016.

Russell moved to California and taught band at Standard Middle School in Bakersfield. “I even taught competitive middle school marching band,” she said.

In 2019, Russell returned to Michigan for the Buchanan job.

“I was the director of bands my first two years,” Russell said, “then became director of bands and choirs my third and fourth years there.”

**D**eanna (Phillips) Russell, a graduate of the Class of 2012, did it all for

Southwestern Michigan College Performing Arts. Today she’s a director of bands at Portage Central.

Originally from Three Oaks,

Russell graduated from River Valley High School in 2010.

She performed in Symphonic Band, the Jazz Band, Select Voices, Concert Choir, Women’s Choir, and Show Choir. She also played clarinet in Symphonic Band, tenor saxophone and piano in the Jazz Band, and was part of a saxophone quartet her freshman year.



# Notes

# Right

## **Mixed emotions about becoming a Mustang**

Russell began working at Portage Central in the fall of 2023, when one of the three director of bands positions opened.

"The opportunity was appealing because it presented me with the chance to team teach alongside one of the first and all-time favorite teaching mentors I've ever had," she said. "If you get an opportunity like that, you have to apply."

"I was overjoyed when I learned that I got the job, but I was sad to have to break the news to my Buchanan students. We had come off of a nearly undefeated scholastic marching season, and a very successful concert season. Our newly-developed choir was also celebrating successes after their first festival season."

"It was hard to leave them, especially when it felt like we were at the beginning of what could be something really special, but my students are great people and were very supportive of what was best for me."

Portage Central employs three band directors, two full-time and one part-time, who assists with marching band.

"When your marching band often has over 160 members it requires as many hands on deck as possible," Russell said.

She teaches a full load of band classes and band for all grade levels,

6-12. "Both Bryan VanToll and I teach all of these classes together," she said. "We each have classes where we take the lead and the other assists. I tend to take the lead more often in the middle school classes, and he tends to take the lead more often at the high school."

Portage Central also provides a number of extracurricular band activities in which she participates, including Indoor Percussion, the William Short Jazz/Rock Ensemble, and the High School Jazz Band.

Russell also advises the PCHS Aquarium Club. "It isn't related to band at all," she said, "just another thing that I enjoy doing."

## **Roadrunners making their marks**

Russell reels off Roadrunners she knows, such as Benjamin Van Roekel, Dowagiac's band director, and Jake Blaylock, Edwardsburg's band director.

"Jake got to SMC after I graduated, but we overlapped at Western," she said. "Emily Perkins is an SMC alum who was involved in the choirs and sings professionally with the U.S. Army Field Band. Krystal Davis works at Sweetwater Music in Fort Wayne, Ind., and is also the front woman for a couple of bands that are really taking off. She was also involved as an audio engineer in both the recording studio and in the live event space at Sweetwater for a long time—and for a while was one of very few women in the business of making records in

the country. She was in band, choir, and just about everything else."

## **Jotting down Doc Korzun quotes**

Russell, who lived in Keith H. McKenzie Hall and now lives in Portage, took at least 18 credit hours every semester.

"Most of my activities were related to my classes. I loved being involved with the spring musical, whether on stage or in the pit. That is where I made most of my friends. Most of my best memories happened in the band room or nearby. Doc Korzun was very quotable. Both Jazz and Symphonic Band were a great time with him, and I remember writing some of his best puns and one-liners on my sheet music."

Given her immersion in the fine arts, she's excited about SMC's Room to Grow campaign and what it will mean to students and the performing arts program. "I can't wait to see the space when it is finished. The renovations sound like they will serve the students for generations to come. I wish we had facilities like that when I was a student!"

Making music, especially with her students, is still the best part of Russell's day. "Getting to see their 'light-bulb' moments when they master a new concept brings me a joy that is hard to describe. I can't imagine doing anything else," she said.

**Cassidy Bourdon:  
A Roadrunner Who**

# Set Herself Up For Success



After earning an associate degree in social sciences and admission to Phi Theta Kappa in 2015 at Southwestern Michigan College, Cassidy Purucker Bourdon seemed poised for a career in social work.

She transferred from this SMC to the other local SMC, Saint Mary's College, from which she graduated in 2017.

"A personal childhood encounter with a social worker" influenced Bourdon's decision to pursue social work.

"I had the chance to talk to her about my future and how college is an option. She made an impact on my personal life, giving me hope that I could achieve and go anywhere.

"Since meeting with her in a short period of time, the amount of care and interest she took into my well-being made everything shift. I knew then that this is something I wanted to do for those in similar situations. To give them hope that life can be changed, that they can take charge of their life and provide a better outcome no matter the circumstances," said Bourdon, who came to SMC from Brandywine High School in Niles.

Bourdon moved to California in the summer of 2017 for a year of service as community resource coordinator of Boys Hope Girls Hope.

"I located the organization through my social work professor," Bourdon

said. "I knew working with children after school and finding them a mentor to help them pursue their dreams would be meaningful."

After working as a community resource coordinator through Boys Hope Girls Hope, a registered behavior technician (RBT) with MeBe, and a dog walker/sitter through Rover, Bourdon has settled in the Bay Area of California as Team Lead and Senior Permit Coordinator at GoPermit, a small six-person niche company in the sign industry that started as a sign permit expeditor and branched into construction permits.

## Signing in California

"I ended up in this industry due to my best friend from high school who worked in this field," Bourdon said. "I started as an RBT during COVID and just going back-and-forth into

people's homes took up a lot of time. I really wanted something different due to some family issues back home that would allow me to travel but still work so I wasn't doing a disservice to the children I was working with.

"She [my friend] mentioned that GoPermit was hiring for someone to work remote. I knew about what she was doing for a while, and it piqued my interest because I thought how is there a company that specializes in permitting?"

"I told her that I'd apply because I'd been very interested in trying to figure out what she does and would be open to considering it as an option for a career path." What we do here at GoPermit is a special kind of expertise," Bourdon explained.

"We fill out all the paperwork, do the research on what's allowed, who needs to sign applications, what documents are

needed for the submittal, and we help see that from start to finish," Bourdon said. "We get everything together, create the package submitted to the city, and work with the city to address any comments along the way so our clients can have the proposed sign that they want.

"I deal mainly with sign permitting, as well as the specialized permits for warrants in the City of Miami currently," she said. "At first, when I began working with them, I had no idea what I was doing. But over the years, you learn the ins and outs of permitting and then it comes to you naturally as you continuously do it. I never thought that I'd be so passionate about learning and researching several different codes and requirements for each municipality."

### Social work skills still applicable

Bourdon believes the skills from her degree as a social worker and time as a community resource coordinator have transferred well into this new role. "I feel like I am able to communicate and provide clarification to the clients, as well as talk them down if something is getting overly addressed or that's super concerning and they need answers immediately," she said. "You have to be very patient and flexible and willing to do anything and everything you can to provide the best possible outcome for your client, and that's what I do here at GoPermit.

"My role is to manage our two permit coordinators by holding weekly all-hands team status meetings and conducting one-on-one meetings with team members to provide feedback and helping unblock permit bottlenecks. I have enacted training

guides and co-designed internal company systems to promote smooth and structured process-flow for the permitting lifecycle. I also plan and execute quarterly employee appreciation events."

### Setting myself up for success at SMC

Serving as an RA in White Hall, working on the decorations or helping plan fun hall events are some of Bourdon's fondest memories as a Roadrunner. "I enjoyed the community and how easy it was to make friends. I also loved working in the office alongside Kathy, Sara, and Brenda. The impact we made and the genuine support I received was amazing. I still adore them to this day. I could count on their help navigating what classes would suit best.

"My decision to attend SMC was very easy for me," Bourdon said. "I wanted to stay local and start off where I wouldn't be as much in debt, and touring and talking to the admissions counselor there really helped solidify my decision to wait a couple of years and then transfer to a bigger university.

"I worked closely with the advisor on my game plan to start out on what classes I should take in order to transfer to the other SMC that was also very close to where I live.

"A lot of people when they first start out think they need to go to big-name schools, but you don't have to. You can get a really good education at a local community college which I did for two years, got my associate degree and then transferred to get my bachelor's degree in social work. I set myself up for success by attending SMC and then transferring. Since doing that I have completely paid off all of my college debts."

## Becky Moore

Certified Public Accountant Becky Moore has served on the Board of Trustees since 2012, but her Southwestern Michigan College roots run much deeper.

For nearly ten years, the Cassopolis resident worked as a bookkeeper in the Lyons Industries office, then in downtown Dowagiac.

Dale A. Lyons, who served as the Board of Trustees Vice Chairman, saw her potential and steered Moore toward college. Working with an auditor at Lyons convinced her to become an accountant.

"It took years of night classes, but I finally finished my SMC degree," Moore said. She continued her education earning her baccalaureate degree in 1984 from Western Michigan University.

Moore began her career in Kalamazoo in 1985 with Alexander Grant, then joined BDO Seidman. She later became Lewis Cass Intermediate School District finance officer.

In 1992, she founded Accounting Consultants, PC, which she sold in 2019. Today, she continues using her accounting degree as a consultant working with second stage businesses around the country for the Edward Lowe Foundation System for Integrated Growth program.

Over the last decade, Moore has contributed her time, support, and philanthropic energy in

numerous ways—from helping to expand the nursing and health services building, to supporting the startup of the bass-fishing team, to championing the return of Roadrunner athletics behind the scenes and in the stands.

In the broader community, Moore has always been active. For example, her quarter-century involvement in the Cass County Fair began in 1981. At the apex of her service, she managed the livestock sales. For its 150th anniversary in 2001, she organized a retrospective,

collecting over 5,000 pieces of fair memorabilia.

"The fair showed me good families. Kids worked hard, most often saving their money earned

from their exhibits and projects for post-secondary education," she said.

Since 2019, Moore has served as the Treasurer of Cass Kickstart to Careers establishing College Savings Accounts for all incoming kindergarten students in Cassopolis. "An educated community brings great value to an area. Helping our youth save for post-secondary education and realize their full potential will provide great rewards."

Education and community service continue to resonate with Moore. "Everything we do for our community helps us all, whether we give financially or give somebody an opportunity," she said.





# It's Full Speed

**W**hether it's teaching a Junior Achievement (JA) class, graduating from Southwestern Michigan College during a global pandemic, joining Amazon, or buying her first home at 20, Carly Kolean thrives on challenges.

Kolean graduated from Thornapple Kellogg High School in 2018, arriving at SMC that fall. She earned her associate degree in business with honors in 2020 and hopes to own a spa someday.

## Set on SMC since she was 16

Now 24, Kolean came to Dowagiac from Middleville, a small town near Grand Rapids. "I actually found out about SMC from my mom, who had a co-worker who raved about this school to her," she said. "My mom's co-worker had a daughter who said she loved it and that she had the best experience. I ultimately chose SMC not only for the positive reviews, but I was especially sold on how the dorms were set up. I loved the idea of having my own bedroom and a 'home away from home' with the dorms set up like apartments."

Once she made up her mind, there was no going back. "I was so set on the idea of SMC since I was 16 that I actually

worked at the Caledonia McDonald's for two years before attending" she said. "Going in as a first-generation college student, I saved every penny I made to be able to pay for my SMC tuition. I also worked there two additional years on all of my college breaks."

Kolean joined Amazon in June 2020, a month after graduating.

"Originally, I started working there to try and save up money to eventually pursue a bachelor's degree at Western Michigan University, but I saw so much potential career growth within Amazon that I decided on staying and planting my roots there.

"When it comes to business," she added, "the only clear idea I had was that I wanted to learn the ins and outs of what it takes to be a business owner to eventually start my own. I've always loved the idea of being my own boss and challenging myself.

"When I was a kid, I always thought that being my own boss looked like owning my own bakery, but now I feel my future goal is to someday open my own spa, as I'm currently obtaining my esthetician's license."

## Graduating during COVID-19

"Finishing college during a global

pandemic definitely had its challenges," Kolean said. "The biggest challenge was wondering what the future would look like and what this meant for so many of us young adults whose lives felt as though they were just getting started. Having to adapt to a new learning style had its own challenges too. I feel as though I am the kind of person who thrives with in-person, hands-on learning, so having to finish my degree 100-percent online definitely took some getting used to."

Kolean believes this might be why she didn't "jump right back into schooling following my SMC graduation, as a lot of colleges adapted to 100-percent online schooling for quite some time. I often wonder how different my life would look today if it weren't for the pandemic."

## A unique experience at Amazon

Kolean feels "blessed" she was able to purchase her first home in a mobile home park at such a young age.

"I get to be close to my family, which I'm really thankful for," she said. "My work is at the GRR1 fulfillment center in Caledonia. My Amazon experience is a unique one to say the least. I first started working at Amazon as what's called a Tier 1 Associate. I was doing a lot of manual labor in assisting in putting together all of our online customer orders. I did this



# Ahead for Carly Kolean

for about six months before I decided I wanted to challenge myself and apply to be what's called a Process Assistant for our Inventory and Quality Control department that operates as a large-scale 'checks and balances' auditing system in accordance with SOX compliance. (The Sarbanes Oxley Act aims to prevent corporate fraud and protect investors). I did this for a little over three months before I was promoted to an on-site Area Manager. As an Area Manager, I manage a direct reports team which varies in size between 30 and 50 people with a total oversight of roughly 150 each shift on my side of the building."

As Kolean explains, "An Area Manager II helps run the department they oversee to make sure it operates as smoothly and efficiently as possible. We do everything between managing safety, cost, and quality to insuring employee and customer experiences are positive ones."

### Teaching JA while at SMC

"I was nervous doing this course because teaching was never something that was on my radar as my career goal in life," she said. "I was hesitant over the idea at first. I originally wondered what teaching a third-grade class had to do with business, but after having finished the classwork, I realized I simply lacked perspective. Not only was I able to teach a group of students

everything I was learning in college about business and see the interest and excitement grow within them each class, but I also learned to adapt to different learning styles, which is applicable to running a business as well.

"Celebrating our differences and getting to hear everyone's different perspectives on how they interpret things holds a lot of value in every aspect of life. I learn this more and more every day."

### Coming out of her shell

Prior to SMC, "I would say I was a very quiet and shy individual," Kolean said. "I struggled a lot with anxiety and imposter syndrome, often doubting my own capabilities. I had a lot of anxiety about being a first-generation college student, not knowing what to expect. I always knew I wanted to challenge myself and not limit my capabilities out of fear, and SMC helped me in doing just that.

"Becoming an on-campus Resident Assistant (RA) in organizing activities and on-campus engagement really pushed me out of my comfort zone for the better," she said. "Having to tackle a variety of situations and having the duality of the job kept me on my feet and readily prepared for just about anything. I had a lot of classes that offered me this same growth of confidence and perspective as well—between my public speaking course, law, and marketing courses—and curating a fully-operational business plan project and collaborating

on ideas with other students."

Kolean juggled her RA duties with two other jobs in the Student Activity Center and at the residence hall front desk. She was nominated as Student Worker of the Year in 2019.

Her mentors included Jeff Hooks, Hailey Sheets, Branden Pompey, Jorge Ramos, Teesha Conley, and Angie Palsak.

### So many good SMC memories

"Time management was definitely a learned trait as I have ADHD and have to find ways to work with how my brain is rather than against it, and SMC is very inclusive," she said. "I gained a lot of time-management skills from my time there that I still use.

"I have so many good memories from SMC, but some that stick out are all the summer activities between cookouts, outdoor Zumba, group bonfires, career fairs, and all of the fun monthly events. I made so many friends there and will forever cherish the memories we made.

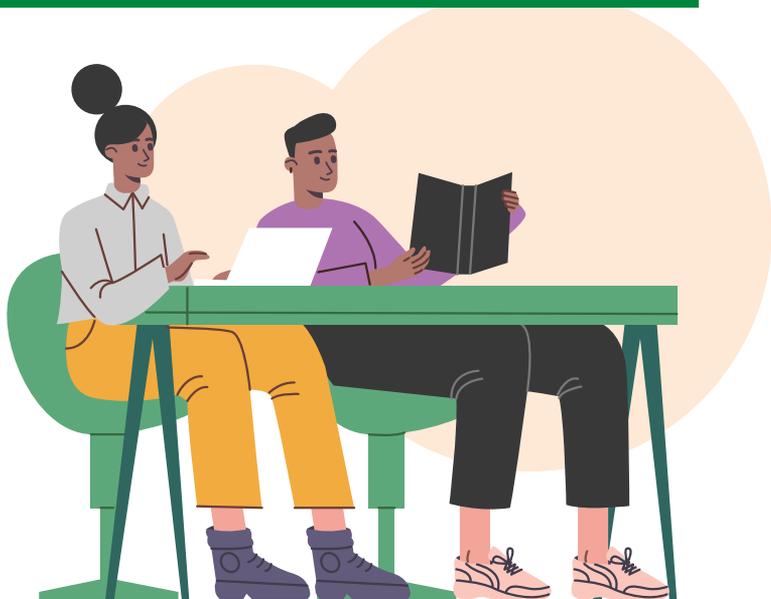
"One of my biggest life accomplishments within the last two years was being able to hike over six miles up the Swiss Alps near Oeschinen Lake, with my fiancé. I've done quite a bit of traveling since 2018 and still have so much of the world left that I would love to see and explore. With every trip I gain more knowledge of the world around me, and I'm incredibly grateful for every opportunity."

# FROM FIRST-GENERATION

# Student

TO COLLEGE

# President



**O**n March 1, 2025, Sedgwick L. Harris, who attended Southwestern Michigan College from 1988-90, became the new president of Bristol Community College in Fall River, Mass.

Harris came to SMC from Albion for general studies and to play basketball for the Roadrunners. At that time he had no aspirations to lead a college. In fact, as a first-generation student, he struggled his first semester. "It was Carol Churchill at SMC who taught me the process and kept me informed of the student support services and academic resources on campus. I think this relationship is what led me to returning to higher education and community colleges specifically."



Harris selected SMC

because "I was told that my classmates, Tiffany Dees and Dan Coleman, were going to be on the track and cross country

teams. They had basketball, and I knew I could play at this level as my local community college, Kellogg, was recruiting me to play. I also was encouraged by a university that this would be a good option to increase my academic and athletic outcomes."

His time at SMC "didn't start off great," he recalls. "My first three days I lodged at the Skyline Motel (Castle Inn and Suites, M-51 South) due to Hamilton Square Apartments overbooking, but I did find housing in Eau Claire for the first semester. By spring, I was back in an apartment with my new basketball teammate, Jeff Goodman. Jeff and I are still friends to this day.

"I also remember working for Coach Ron Gunn in athletics and the fitness center, as well as my work-study job scoring wrestling matches for Coach (James) Judd," Harris said.

After graduating from SMC, Harris went to Northwestern Oklahoma State University for a bachelor's degree in mass communications and a basketball scholarship opportunity.

"I enjoyed the radio and television program once I arrived at NWOSU," he said. "It was a great work-study position and a lot of fun. I was intending to be a history teacher, but this was more interesting and different than education."

Returning to Michigan, Harris earned his master's degree in educational leadership at Western Michigan University. "I worked in the non-profit and private sectors my first few years," Harris said, "but was still interested in education, so I enrolled at WMU with the intention to become a high school principal or athletic director."

Harris spent more than two decades at Kellogg Community College, Kaskaskia College (Vice President of Student Services, 2007-13) in Centralia, Ill., Kishwaukee College (Vice President of Student Services, 2013-16) in Malta, Ill., and Northampton Community in Bethlehem, Pa. (Vice President of Student Services, 2016-25). "It was my goal to become a college president to positively impact student success at the highest level. My mentors, Dr. Ken Atwater and Dr. James Underwood, encouraged me to get my doctorate as this would be the only barrier.

"Therefore, I was focused on giving back to students what Carol Churchill did for me during my time at SMC. So I enrolled in the Ferris State University Doctoral in Community College Leadership cohort six, and it was a wonderful program and an even better experience.

"I will be forever grateful to Dr. Roberta "Robbie" Teahen and Dr. Sandra "Sandy" Balkema for their support throughout the program as well as my cohort mates Dr. Vicki Gardner, Dr. Moaty Fayek, and Dr. Tina Hummons."

Harris also served as an adjunct instructor at each of his stops, where he taught communications and first-year college experience. "I enjoy engaging with the current student population, as it keeps me aware of what the real needs are of the community college student," he said.

Asked about what influenced him to enter education, Harris said, "My experiences at SMC and my other educational institutions, but other than my parents, it was my godfather, Harry Bonner Sr. He always gave me his time, resources, and wisdom to encourage me to reach the top. He stressed that by working hard at your craft, you will achieve what people told me was unobtainable and impossible,

mainly because, as a kid from a low-income housing unit, becoming a community college president would only be a silly dream. I would hear the naysayers often say you have average grades, you are from Albion, and you're too short to play basketball in college, so you will never amount to anything.

"Nevertheless, with the support of my parents, Mr. and Mrs. Bonner, and my classmate Paula Langston-Ware, in addition to the right combination of effort, support, and resiliency, I became an example for all those students like me who didn't think education was possible to know it is, just believe."

Last year Harris was awarded an Aspen Institute fellowship as a "Rising President."

"The program has been great, as I'm at the final stage," Harris said. "There was a competitive application and interview process before being selected. The program has expanded my professional network to connect with other aspiring presidents as a generation of community college presidents are retiring. The primary focus is on how we can continue increasing the value of higher education, and why it is essential in today's job market."

Of applying to Bristol, Harris said it "is an institution that has great people within as well as the communities that we serve. The college has had a history of providing accessible, affordable and innovative education, and workforce development within the region. Bristol has a history of being a student-first institution, which has been a cornerstone of my educational philosophy.

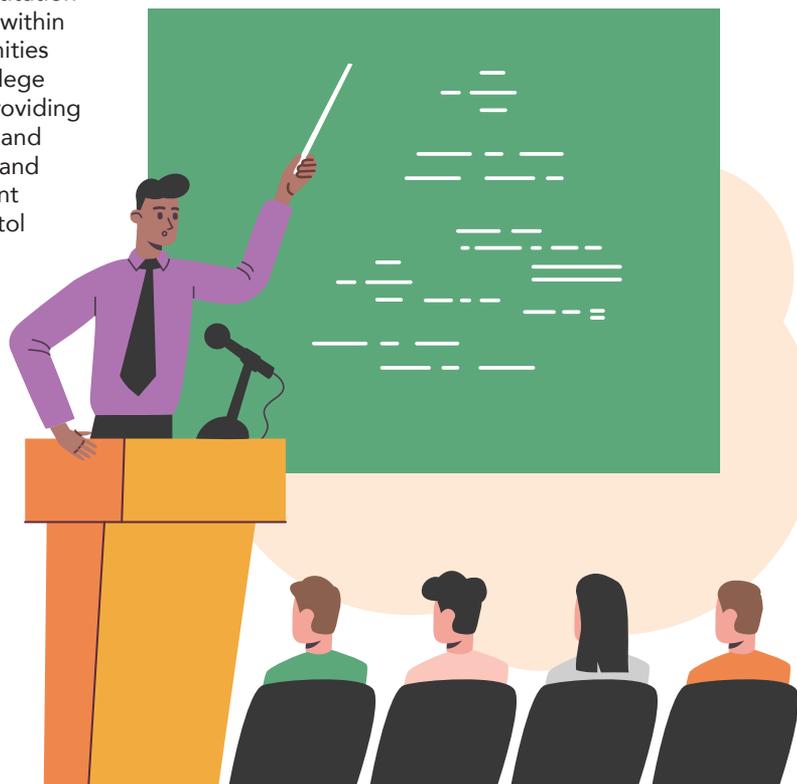
"My goal," Harris said, "is to continue the work of my previous presidential partners, which is to carry out the institutional mission. I also believe that we will continue to elevate visibility of the college at all levels. Dr. Douglas

did an excellent job leading the institution through the pandemic, so it will be my job to take the torch and keep the path clear and lit for the next generation of students, faculty, staff, and community stakeholders."

As for juggling four campuses, Harris "has a great blueprint from my time at Kaskaskia College, where we had five educational centers, vocational/tech center, and workforce development center in addition to the main campus.

"Therefore, I plan to meet with the staff at each location to align our institutional strategic plan and goals for positive outcomes for our commonwealth and all who want to partake," Harris said. "I will reapply the knowledge from my experience at Kaskaskia that each community is unique and has differences, so there is not a one-size-fits-all plan. Each location will have strategy specific to their population and community needs.

"Bristol will also continue to work closely with all business and industry partners," Harris said, "while seeking approaches to expand in ways to be creative in the ever-changing landscape of technology and AI."



# Earning A Ride



# ASA

119TH ASA ANNUAL MEETING

**Intersectional Solidarities:  
Building Communities of  
Hope, Justice, and Joy**

## ON THE **Law Enforcement Side**

Cooper Christner experienced quite a year in 2024, earning his Southwestern Michigan College criminal justice degree, presenting a paper at the American Sociological Association (ASA) conference in Montreal, finishing the police academy, and becoming a road officer with the Baroda-Lake Township Police Department in Berrien County.



He's 19.

The 2023 Berrien Springs High School graduate knew he wanted to follow in the footsteps of his father, who's going on 20 years with the hometown Berrien Springs Oronoko Township Police Department.

"I knew I wanted to go into law enforcement since I was little," he said. "I saw how much my father was a helping hand to the community."

Christner's research essay for Dr. Barbara Karwacinski's SOCI 201 class, "Help Me Grow! Pursuit of Happiness at the Workplace through the Lenses of Generation Z," earned him a coveted spot in the prestigious ASA 2024 Honors Program last August.

Out of more than 2,000 national and international applications, only 30 students are selected each year. Christner presented alongside peers from Harvard, UCLA, and Texas Tech. SMC is the only community college inducted into the (ASA).

"It was a little intimidating. I was out of my element," he said. "Honestly, sociology was the one class I was nervous to take. I didn't even know what the word meant going in. It opened a new lane for me.

"But her class really grabbed my eye. Sociology and criminal justice aren't the same thing, but they look through the same lens almost in being able to analyze why people do what they do in a community," said Christner, who took most of his classes at the Niles campus.

"I'm not one to wear a suit, so it was a little weird dressing up nice to go to a conference," he said. Christner was accompanied by Karwacinski and Criminal Justice Director Dr. Donald Ricker.

"Dr. Ricker is a great instructor," said Christner. "He's got a lot of experience to teach criminal justice. He makes it more relatable for students and makes them want to go into it for a career. It's not a paper-to-pen class. It's interactive, and you talk about real-world things instead of hypotheticals."

Before joining SMC in 2014, Ricker served as a patrol officer, criminal investigator, and probation counselor in the Houston, Texas, area. In addition, he taught criminal justice and sociology in New Mexico, Ohio, and Michigan.

"Dr. Ricker is an exemplary educator who is making a profound impact on his students' lives. Through his dedication, passion, and innovative teaching approaches, he is not only imparting knowledge but also inspiring and empowering students to reach their fullest potential," said Karwacinski, who chairs the social sciences department.

"I feel incredibly privileged to have the opportunity to work with the students at SMC. They continue to amaze me every day, and after more than 20 years, I still find myself in awe," she shared. "What I love most is watching our students grow and spread their wings. It is incredible to see how intelligent, dedicated, and goal-oriented they are. Their drive and potential are truly inspiring. Cooper's determination and work ethic are remarkable. He is such an amazing young man, and I have no doubt he will continue to impress everyone around him."

"I had a full-time job as a sophomore," Christner said, "so I really wanted to focus my paper on how the workplace looks through the lens of someone my age and how that can develop a work-life balance for our generation.

"I started working at the Berrien County Youth Fair as a maintenance worker. By the time I graduated, I applied for the supervisor job and they made me in charge of the entire

maintenance crew at only 18. I had shown that I could do everything that needed to be done."

Christner's pace through school was hastened by Early Middle College, a partnership between SMC and select schools that lets students earn a full associate degree (60+ credits).

"It was a big convenience not to have to pay for any college," Christner said. He likes another partnership SMC has too—the Ferris State University bachelor's degree in criminal justice. He expects to add that credential at some point.

"My dad didn't really want me to become a police officer," Christner said. "He tried to talk me out of it. I was persistent and wouldn't back down.

"It's a very competitive market. Everybody's hiring but fewer want to do the job," Christner said. "At Baroda we have take-home cars, so it's different from pretty much every department other than the state police. I drive a police car to my station (on Shawnee Road near Bridgman) and do any training I have to do online.

"I don't have a given patrol route. We don't get a ton of calls in my jurisdiction. Because of that, we're able to do traffic control and be proactive in a way you can't at a busy department, going from call to call. I'm able to do a ton of traffic stops and public interactions and when you get a call, you respond."

Employment of police and detectives is projected to grow 4 percent through 2033, adding about 63,000 openings for police and detectives each year. Police departments and sheriff's offices across America are clamoring for new recruits after grappling with a sharp drop in applicants and a wave of retirements.

"If you talk to kids in lower elementary schools, they all want to become police officers," Christner said. "By high school, people who want to become police officers are fewer and farther between. It's not glamorous like TV shows make it out to be. The stuff on TV you'll probably never see in your career.

"A lot of students also say they want to be forensic investigators because they saw a TV show. Then they go through some criminal justice classes and learn that's not what it is, so they switch. To be a detective is not as easy as people might think. It's not a job you get. It's a job you earn," said Christner. And he has.

**SOUTHWESTERN  
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As a Michigan public community college, Southwestern Michigan College operates under the supervision of a locally elected board of trustees. The board members serve six-year terms and represent a broad range of backgrounds and geographic locations within the college's service area. Members of the board serve their constituents without compensation.



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**Notice of Non-discrimination**

Southwestern Michigan College does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, disability or age in its programs and activities. For inquiries regarding Title IX, contact the Director of Security and Conduct (student-related), Briegel Building, Room 2104, 58900 Cherry Grove Road, Dowagiac, MI 49047 | 269.782.1321 | [titleix@swmich.edu](mailto:titleix@swmich.edu), or the Director of Human Resources (employment-related), Briegel Building, Room 2106, 58900 Cherry Grove Road, Dowagiac, MI 49047 | 269.783.2110 | [titleix@swmich.edu](mailto:titleix@swmich.edu). For inquiries related to the Equal Opportunity Policy and/or Title VI, Section 504 or the ADA please contact the Vice President for the Student Experience, Briegel Building, Room 1104, 58900 Cherry Grove Road, Dowagiac, MI 49047 | 269.782.1276 | [civilrights@swmich.edu](mailto:civilrights@swmich.edu).

TTY: Individuals who are hearing-impaired, hard-of-hearing or speech-impaired can communicate with Southwestern Michigan College by calling the Michigan Relay Center at 1.800.649.3777.

Southwestern Michigan College is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission ([hlcommission.org](http://hlcommission.org)), a regional accreditation agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education.