



SWOT Paragraphs

Southern Oregon University

Strengths

Scenic and Cultural Locale

Students, faculty, staff, and community members overwhelmingly identified the unique location of SOU as one of its strengths. The location was noted as a strength for its beauty, mountains, proximity to outdoor adventure, remarkable biodiversity, emphasis on the arts, and for the region's emphasis on sustainability. Multiple respondents described the "bioregion" as a key strength of the institution as a whole. Stakeholders additionally noted that one of the strengths of SOU is the way in which the institution has connected to both the arts and the environment in its academic programs as well as through student life programming. Stakeholders identified the campus landscape, gardens, emphasis on trees, campus farm, and community gardens as all taking appropriate advantage of our unique location.

In addition to location, stakeholders identified SOU's clear emphasis on sustainability as a key strength of the institution. Individuals identified several aspects of sustainability including solar energy production, sustainable landscaping, ECOS, The Farm at SOU, the Environmental Science & Policy program, the Biology program, and our LEED buildings (including Raider Village) as key components of our sustainability efforts. Further mention was made of the way that our emphasis on sustainability fits within the context of the broader region and the role SOU plays in providing research and support for resources such as Crater Lake National Park and the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument. Several of SOU's most recent accolades in sustainability were noted as key strengths in this discussion.

Kind and Accepting Place

SOU is viewed by many who participated in the SWOT process as a kind and accepting community that promotes diversity, inclusion, and social justice along with working to make our campus community a safe place for all. To that end, the university has several outreach and scholarship programs in place aimed at recruiting a more diverse student population. It is proactive in training administration, faculty, and staff in recognizing and addressing bias, sexual harassment and assault. One of the ways we support the members of our campus community is through a vigorous reporting process – SOU Cares – that is available to faculty, staff, and students who are concerned for the wellbeing of another person on campus. Respondents spoke of the comradery, long lasting friendships made, the kindness and generosity of faculty, and the inclusive student body. Because of this, it is noted that SOU offers programs that attract students from all over Oregon and other western states along with a substantial population of international students.

Ideal Learning Community

SOU is an ideal learning community. Its small size, accomplished, dedicated faculty and staff. Innovative academic programming inspires students to form close personal connections with faculty and staff. Mentorships develop that serve as the basis for a lifetime of development and success. What emerges from the SWOT forums is a picture of SOU as a welcoming, inclusive campus where small classes and one-on-one interactions build a sense of belonging and possibility for faculty, staff, and students alike. SOU is not a “faceless” institution, but a living, evolving community that is flexible and adaptive to each member’s strengths and needs. As the cost of higher education continues to escalate, the ‘value for money’ of SOU’s ideal learning community experience is on the rise as well. Affordability was repeatedly noted as an essential trait that distinguished SOU.

Extraordinary Activities and Events

Southern Oregon University is a hub of indoor and outdoor activity for students, faculty, staff, and community members. Ever-changing campus events are sponsored and presented by faculty groups, campus clubs, residential life, student life (EPIC), etc. These extraordinary programs cover a wide range of interests and include educational activities, cultural events, social programs, and community-service projects. The majority of campus events are promoted in SOU Connect – a single online location within the SOU website. Using this one-stop site, students, faculty, and staff discover and sign up for campus and community events. It is recognized that The Oregon Center for the Arts (OCA) is the epicenter of arts and culture at SOU and serves as a community arts presenter and partner. The affiliated Schneider Museum of Art engages with the visual arts through exhibitions and programs that support interdisciplinary study, research, and discourse for both the academic and public communities.

It was also identified that SOU provides event opportunities centered around science themes, environmental issues, outdoor adventure experiences, and annual international trips (both for students and community members), The Farm at SOU hosts environmental-based activities and events for our students and the community. All campus academic programs and service departments offer events and outreach programs to encourage and celebrate people’s interaction with the environment.

Another strength noted in the SWOT process was that the SOU Raider Athletics contributes to the vibrancy of university life. It was noted with pride that these teams have earned multiple national championships and rankings. It was mentioned that this success is tied directly to campus and community attendance at various sporting events, both at home and away. Availability of Club Sports provides students the opportunity to train and compete at a high level with spectator attendance at home and away events.

Also noted are the endless possibilities for activities in the Southern Oregon region – whether it be wine-tasting at wineries around the area, visiting Ashland’s world-renowned Oregon Shakespeare Festival and the Britt Festivals or partaking in outdoor activities throughout the area – mountain biking, hiking, camping, fishing. Southern Oregon University is seen as both a contributor to the vibrancy of Southern Oregon, as well as, a beneficiary of the surrounding

community and the locale's cultural and outdoor ethos.

Distinguished Academic Programs

SOU academic programs that distinguished themselves as strengths among SWOT participants were those with the ability to create connections by 1) interacting, collaborating, and partnering with the local community; and 2) mentoring and building relationships between faculty and students.

Comments regarding the mentioned academic programs embodied a common theme that strong connections exist between the program and local community, and program faculty with their students. Comments expressing this theme included "Interactions and collaborations that arise between the Shakespeare Festival" and SOU's "drama department"; "The personal relationships and mentoring I got from the faculty in the Art and Education departments"; "Community connections and arts programs (BFA, Theatre Arts, Music)"; "Partnerships with OHSU, OSF"; and "Our Business and Education departments are great. The local economy is filled with business leaders and entrepreneurs from SOU."

Many SOU academic programs were identified as strong during the SWOT process with some listed several times. It should be noted that respondents did not generally include qualitative reasons when recognizing the program as a strength, i.e., "The theatre program is very good" or "SOU offers online learning for distant learners." It was this lack of qualitative data with additional comments that revealed the ability to create connections is what distinguished these programs from others that were not named during the SWOT analysis. Two general statements of interest regarding academic programs were "SOU is the only highly academic school between Davis and U of O" and "SOU has great academic programs that sell themselves."

Collaborative Academic Team

While there were not a large number of responses regarding the administration and faculty team, those that did respond felt that there were sufficient strengths to be noted. There was enthusiastic support for the establishment of the Board of Trustees and the selection of our new President. A feeling of confidence in leadership was expressed and that this leadership has the opportunity to move the institution forward. There was a feeling expressed that the administration is progressive and forward thinking. Several responses identified faculty collegiality across campus as an important strength of the university. Also noted as a strength were faculty retention, tenure and faculty benefits. Finally, it was expressed that there is strong data reporting on campus which has allowed the university to reflect on trends, growth patterns and snapshot understanding of its current status in enrollment, retention and student activities. Two statements that should be noted are, "everyone cares" and "there is a sense of inclusivity and a willingness of all to listen to the feedback of students." The university is a resilient community, having survived three rounds of retrenchment and in the process becoming nimbler and flexible. Faculty, staff, and administration have become adept at working with available resources.

Weaknesses

Communication

Communication seemed to be of less concern than other items identified in the “weaknesses” category, but tended to pertain to cultural or systemic aspects of the university. Trust, disrespect, and transparency were frequently identified as either affecting or preventing communication on campus, and were connected to other processes, such as leadership and decision-making. Among faculty and staff, characteristics such as “close-minded,” lacking in vision, and lacking in transparency were attributed directly to administration. Policies and effective communication about changes to campus policies and procedures were frequently identified as a weakness by faculty and staff, as well as members of Executive Council, while student concerns in this realm focused more specifically on communication about campus policies and procedures that affected their progress or experience as a student. Inter-departmental communication and communication between administration and “academics” were mentioned several times.

Decision-making & Administration

Concerns around decision-making and administration differentiated between several aspects of the institution and tended to sort by reporting group. Students and community members focused on operational aspects of the institution that connected to administrative structures: financial aid processes, advising, and registration were most frequently mentioned and tended to be reported from experiences. Weaknesses in such procedures were ascribed to administrative failures or shortcomings. Faculty and staff, however, converged around more cultural or systemic issues that characterized administration and decision-making procedures. Most prominent among these were: lack of trust; turnover or inconsistency in administration; inability or resistance to change, adapt, or adopt new ideas; and “red tape” or unnecessarily cumbersome procedures or bureaucracy. A lack of a customer service orientation was mentioned by students, faculty and staff, while Executive Council members reported higher level concerns such as inconsistency and turnover in administration, lack of accountability, lack of transparency, and adherence to the belief that the overall culture can be changed by altering the structure. Trust, transparency, accountability, and administration’s ability to respond and adapt permeated across all groups reporting.

Campus Life and Culture

Ashland’s night life scene for college students is lacking. Entertainment and activities for a younger audience are not available in this small town. Without a music club, café, or bar, students have nowhere to go on evenings or weekends to socialize, listen to live music, or dance. This makes it challenging to keep students engaged and involved in the area during the school year. Students at SOU lack school spirit. The remote location of SOU is a culture shock for students from larger population areas because there is no night life. There is no express transportation to cities having major league games and concert events that attract students. Campus events, rather than being lively and engaging, are boring and poorly attended by students. There are few spaces on or around campus that promote social interchange among students, including a lack of recreational space and a small and unwelcoming student union. Coffee spots, shops, stores, or entertainment venues close to campus are minimal.

Diversity

From the nearly two dozen comments made about diversity from all groups, the majority mentioned lack of diversity on campus as a weakness. The need for more diverse students, staff, and faculty was cited. A greater emphasis on social justice, on ally trainings, and on issues of inclusion was suggested by some respondents. More support for diversity, including better accessibility for students having special needs and more gender inclusive housing, was also recommended. One respondent mentioned that foreign students aren't well integrated on campus. With such little racial diversity and representation on campus, there is a perception that diverse students don't feel welcome at SOU and in the community. There are "very real challenges for anyone who is not White living in the Rogue Valley." Most respondents value diversity and want to see more diversity at SOU, but there are a couple of dissenting opinions from alumni and community members suggesting that SOU is too liberal and inclusive of diverse identities; these concerns are explained in the Attitudes section.

Finances

For many years SOU has been financially beleaguered, in survival mode, with resulting caution, insecurity and uncertainty. Funding of the seven universities has declined by x% over the past ten years, and the adoption of a new funding model by the HECC, which effectively discriminates against SOU, has only exacerbated the situation of our university. There is a perception that things students want are not prioritized by the university (e.g., the Farm) and vice versa. On one hand the uncertainty has created a fear of growth, on the other, there is a lack of funding for strategic opportunities. The loss of state funding and the recent retrenchment have led to a lack of faculty and too many adjuncts. Past cuts have also left the university with fewer majors. On the administrative side, it has resulted in a staff that is too lean to do the work demanded of it. Staff and faculty at SOU are always having to wrestle with how to do more with less, and having to cut programs is heartbreaking. A lack of funding means that there is not enough financial latitude to make all campus employees feel supported, and there are not enough employees to cover all jobs time-wise and support-wise to fulfill university goals. The recurring need to focus on budget cuts has been distracting at best. Because of pressure to expand and take in more money, SOU sometimes loses focus and tries to serve out-of-state and out-of-country populations to the same extent it serves Southern Oregonians. The lack of adequate and stable public financing means that the budget squeeze continues to force campus leaders to choose between dramatically raising tuition and risking a drop in enrollment or cutting staff and salaries, eliminating low-demand academic programs and risking damage to the overall educational product. With the already very limited budget for athletic scholarships, adding the challenge of recruiting students to attend a university with a brand new gym that is inferior to the local high school gym is not going to help; lesser level athletes invariably result in less success for the teams and round and round we go. This matters because it all directly impacts student retention, graduation rates and additional tuition for the university. We now have very little support/funds for faculty scholarship. Not having a large endowment fund limits exploring creative educational alternatives, and this is not helped by a limited pool of local philanthropists and weak support from alumni.

Space, Facilities, and Infrastructure

Many of the SOU campus facilities are outdated, and hours of operation are not always optimal (e.g., library, rec center, ...); there are very real concerns about the conditions of some buildings on campus (e.g., Taylor, Cascade...), and a perception that some classes are being held in unsafe buildings. The enormity of keeping old buildings in a presentable state is exhausting but the custodians at SOU keep trying. The buildings that most classes are in have issues that are band-aided together. We may offer the very best education ever but if it is packaged in a poor box we will lose students. Unfortunately, some remodeled buildings miss the mark, creating situations that require workarounds. Not including a pool in the new gym means that current students get no benefit from that construction. There are many accessibility problems on campus; up-to-date disability access is not available in all buildings. Our classrooms reflect a 1970s viewpoint on how students learn – we do not have different kinds of spaces for what we know about teaching and learning in the 21st century. There's not enough parking. The Student Union is way too small and unwelcoming. The technology platforms for enrollment, registration and Moodle are terrible. Many classrooms have inconsistent access to instructional technology. There is not enough lab space and equipment. Social spaces for faculty and staff are very limited.

Attitude

While faculty/staff and the Executive Council mentioned attitude as a weakness, the majority of respondents discussing attitude were alumni and the community. The majority of responses described SOU as being “too liberal” or unfriendly. Respondents felt the focus on liberal values and diversity resulted in conservative campus members feeling unwelcome and often unable to express their view-points. Although the majority of sentiments focused on a liberal / conservative divide, several respondents also described a feeling that their views / needs / interests were not being heard on a broader set of campus issues such as policy decisions and curriculum planning. The second most common concern came from alumni and the community specifically. They focused on the Arts program, suggesting the program’s view is too narrow in focus. A sentiment of low morale was also common. The focus tended to be on the morale of faculty. Although less common, respondents mentioned a lack of connection between the campus and the community; perhaps the result of mistrust.

Housing

All groups surveyed mentioned housing at least once. The majority of housing mentions came from students, followed by faculty or staff. The overwhelming sentiment expressed by respondents reflected the ongoing housing crisis in the Rogue Valley. Housing was discussed in terms of high cost, lack of availability, negative social climate and instability. Generally speaking, respondents felt both on and off campus housing was too costly and generally unavailable. Several respondents described a negative climate, in terms of discrimination, and a lack of opportunity to connect socially or professionally in the community. It was also mentioned that available housing was of poor quality. Notable, some students and alumni / community members also referenced poor quality of food options on campus.

Identity and Marketing

Many people – primarily Alumni/Community responders – identified Identity and Marketing

as a weakness. Internal constituents mentioned this only occasionally and not in great detail; Alumni/Community members contributed long responses centered on several recurring themes. SOU tries to be “all things to all people”; we do not have a strong identity outside of the Rogue Valley; we do not invest properly in marketing the University outside of Southern Oregon. Closer to home, our regional identity suffers from a lack of integration or connection to the community, especially to employers, as well as a “liberal” identity that, for some, doesn’t gel with the region. These factors lead to weaker reputation and respect than our external audiences do believe SOU should be accorded.

Retention

While not cited as frequently, Retention surfaced as a weakness in every SWOT discussion group. Most comments simply noted a retention problem and moved on without identifying any underlying cause(s). Comments at the executive/board level ventured that the retention problem is due to an inability to meet the needs of today’s students. Community/alumni identified weakness in our ability to assist students in finding internships and help with job placement prior to or after graduation; while these responses did not tie that issue to retention, current thinking in K-20 education indicates the importance of connecting academic to real-life experience in order to foster continuation (retention). Overall, it appears SOU has a widely-recognized but poorly understood problem with retention. One benefit of our lack of clarity in who we are is that a number of people noted they don’t know what our weaknesses are!

Cost and Affordability

Unsurprisingly, the topics of cost and affordability were frequently cited as weaknesses for the university. One community respondent noted that tuition has gone up nearly thirteen percent annually since they graduated. Other commenters noted having to work, but still not being able to afford tuition, fees, and books. Current faculty, staff, and students also raised the issue of affordability, sometimes with suggestions to spend less on other university functions they deem less important (e.g. athletics). A few respondents brought up the issue of value; whether students were getting their money’s worth for the relatively high cost of tuition and fees. Finally, the relative health of the local economy as compared to wealthier urban areas was noted in relation to cost.

Academics

Alumni and community members, students, faculty, and staff all frequently cited various aspects of academics as one of the university’s most significant weaknesses. For faculty and staff respondents, the most common statements related to a lack of academic focus, alignment between actions and professed values, and questions of mission. Sometimes this was expressed as SOU’s commitment, or lack thereof, to the liberal arts. Students, overwhelmingly, commented about the cutting (“slashing” and “disintegrating” were other adjectives used) of academic programs, the small size of programs and academic departments, and the number/type of courses available within most disciplines. Standing out from a very large number of comments made by alumni and community members were concerns about the academic quality of departments, programs, and faculty; the relative small number of course and degree offerings; the relevance of some academic programs; and

whether the university is too committed, or not committed enough, to the liberal arts.

Opportunities

Leadership/Government

Maybe the most often cited opportunity related to leadership was our new governing board. This was seen as a rare opportunity to start afresh with people keenly interested in the success of SOU. The independence of the new board was also seen as a positive as Ashland has always been rather removed from Salem. Coincident with a new board we also have a new President which was mentioned often as an opportunity to move forward with new leadership. Tying both of these together are comments about strategic directions and a new mission and vision initiated by our leaders. Some comments indicated that we should grasp the opportunity to “develop a clear vision” and decide “who we want to be” and directed energy coming from the new President and Board can accomplish much in this regard.

Buss/Community Partnerships

This was a popular category of comments and, not surprisingly, the single most important opportunity mentioned here was to enhance our relationship with OSF. Also frequently mentioned was to expand our outreach to alumni and to better utilize internships for our students with local businesses. Tourism and viniculture/pears were mentioned by some as ripe opportunities, as was partnering with and serving local government agencies. The idea of connecting better with local schools and teachers was mentioned along with the possibility of partnering SOU students with community mentors. Connect with the community through the Farm, and take advantage of the regional health care industry. Draw in local lovers of the arts and social change activists for events on campus. Expand the ability of our research centers (SOULA and SOURCE) to engage in projects which benefit the community. Finally, Mt. Ashland, the cannabis industry, and Scienceworks round out the list as potential opportunities for connecting with the local community.

Location

Our location was considered an opportunity that could benefit SOU’s mission and vision. Many comments highlighting the bioregion and the local environment. This included such things as the proximity to the Cascade Siskiyou National Monument, outdoor recreational opportunities, ecosystem and organismal biodiversity and resource management collaborations. These can be used to our advantage in relation to academic programs and internships as well as attracting students interested in environmental stewardship and outdoor activities. Our region can also be a mecca for cultural opportunities especially with OSF, Britt Festival, art galleries etc. that are unique for a town the size of Ashland and represent real opportunities for students of the arts as well as benefiting locals with high quality cultural activities. Other location opportunities revolve around our quality of life here to attract students and faculty, our proximity to California and I-5, these together with cultural and environmental advantages should make SOU a “destination campus” rather than an afterthought as it may be for some.

Communication/Marketing

The predominant sentiment expressed across campus, community, and alumni SWOT

sessions was the need to define the identity and branding of the university, which would enable us to better 'tell the story' and 'change the narrative.' Suggestions included using inspiring stories and slogans, raising 'Raider' visibility, and improving our reputation.

The second most common theme across all groups was encouragement to engage in more outreach to the region, defined variously as Southern Oregon, Northern California, Portland, and Eugene. Outreach methods suggested included newspapers, social media, hosting events, and utilizing alumni. Suggestions for messaging centered on emphasizing SOU's location, small size with personal attention by quality faculty, a safe and bike friendly campus, support for gender diversity, and environmental achievements.

Recruitment

Targeted marketing to specific demographics was the most cited as critical for effective recruiting. These demographic niches include Hispanic students, international students, community college students, transfer students, WUE students, and veterans. Locations suggested for recruiting include Portland, Eugene, Bend, California, and the 'larger region.'

The importance of pre-college pipeline programs was emphasized, as well as the need for flexible, innovative, and creative recruitment methods. Free textbooks would attract students. A community member suggested restricting admission and requiring admission to majors.

Institutional Partnerships

Regional and more distant (including international) institutions, agencies, and organizations offer ongoing and potential opportunities for SOU's students, faculty, and staff. Closer to home, potential regional partners include RCC, the HEC, JPR, OIT, OSF, SOHS, the US Forensics Lab, Oregon's nine federally recognized tribes, and others. Further afield, partnership opportunities include WUE, University of Guanajuato, Dan Kook University, University of Winchester, and Lyon University. Purposes for pursuing and enhancing partnerships include providing student abroad experiences, potential efficiencies and cost-savings, creating pipelines leading to student enrollment. Partnerships with high schools' present opportunities to prepare students for college and to introduce them to SOU.

Funding

This area is, perhaps surprisingly, a bit vapid in terms of responses. Most responses centered primarily around the issues of fundraising and enrollment. General consensus was that we are behind the curve on Foundation and other fundraising efforts, which puts us at a competitive disadvantage especially in recruiting and retaining students. It was also noted multiple times that increasing general enrollment, and paying more attention to enrollment mix (nonresident and international, most prominently), are potentially very important components of ensuring sufficient funding. Other notions include increasing our competitive stance within SSCM, as well as seeking additional potential funding streams via increased grant activity and potentially by increasing community activity (concert sales, sponsorships, etc).

Infrastructure

Respondents see great opportunity in our new state-of-the-art infrastructure such as the Medford HEC, the Hawk dining hall and new residence halls, the Lithia Motors Pavilion, and the new outdoor Thalden Center for Outrageous Innovation, the Farm @ SOU, and the soon to be completed recreation center. These cutting edge, and at times, award-winning, structures, lend themselves to better opportunistic marketing and utilization.

Climate/Morale

The respondents see great opportunity in SOU's shared sense of community in Southern Oregon. The intimacy of this community can allow for individually based and caring customer service for our students, provide distinctive research opportunities for our faculty and students, and allow for developing initiatives towards sustainability, both as a campus orientation and a research agenda. The close knit and distinct campus community in our region is also an opportunity for recruiting top notch staff and faculty, and to fostering diversity and inclusion.

Retention

Respondents see opportunities for improved retention and completion in campus sustainability initiatives, in freshman workshops, and in developing programs geared towards international and transfer students. Utilization of open textbooks would ease some student financial challenges. Efforts should be made to collect and analyze exit interviews of graduates, transfer students, and students who drop out.

Curriculum

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Other

While most of the comments received fit well into the previous categories, some of the external (community) comments did not; we felt that they should be included nonetheless, even though they appeared only once or twice. This "category" will therefore resemble a list more than it will a summary. Some members of the community felt that SOU should continue to support students with a low GPA and appreciated the inclusion of older students. One person proposed offering the same tuition for in-state and out-of-state students while another felt SOU should pay student teachers. Someone voiced the opinion that we should go back to being the school of education and business.

It was also suggested that we empower young adults to make a difference in the world by preparing them well for graduate school and that we expand career centers to support our graduates in finding better jobs.

Sustainability and environmental activism seemed like obvious opportunities to a couple of the respondents, while another questioned the value SOU brings not only to the state but to

the PNW, West Coast and beyond.

Threats

Funding

Funding is indicated as a top threat in a number of ways. As external state and federal funding decreases, tuition increases, affecting students with limited financial means who might not be able to support large student debt. The cost of PERS and health care affect SOU's budget, as well as attempts to fund an increase in programs in an effort to compete. External funding based on student retention and degree completion calls for greater investments in support services. The cost of housing is another concern, both for students and for employees of SOU; city planning and policies related to SOU can affect these costs.

Competition

Competition exists at the state level for limited funding. Among colleges, competition exists as a growing threat, as there are fewer high school graduates, an increasing number of jobs that do not require a college degree, and more affordable educational opportunities at community colleges and online. Larger, better-funded colleges compete for both students and faculty – recruitment being challenged due to salaries, workload, housing costs, and cultural climate. These competing universities may offer additional majors with better job connections. As tuition continues to rise, students perceive greater incentive to choose a more well-known school or a school with a specialized niche. The lack of majors at SOU can result in increased transfers; however, as two community members pointed out, SOU's "trying to do too many things at once without adequate funding" might lead to "the greatest threat . . . having to grow just to become bigger to compete."

Place

The concept of Place is referenced in a variety of ways. With relation to geography, threats that were mentioned include the small size of the city of Ashland, its distance from urban and more densely populated cities, and its absence of identity for being a "college town."

Value of Higher Education

Value of Higher Education emerges in the feedback collected from various members who mention the perception that the value of higher education is diminishing. Reasons provided include: local hostility toward higher education, the uncertainty and support for higher education at the national level, and the lack of employment opportunities within the counties Jackson, Josephine, Douglas, Klamath, Coos, and Curry where a significant portion of our students reside. Reasons provided that address the weakening value of higher education include: cumulative costs of higher education, the disinvestment from the state, the lack of available state aid/national aid, the high amount of debt owed after graduation (\$30,000 on average), and low availability of jobs in the region. This leaves an inevitable question of "Is this really worth it?"

Identity

The category of identity came up as threat. Externally people perceive that our institution is in an identity crisis and depending upon who you ask they have a different vision for the

institution. Some people believe that we should focus solely on being a liberal arts or performing arts institution. Others believe that we should ride the STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics) wave with a heavy emphasis on science and technology.

Additionally, there are identity implications as to how “progressive” we are in a “conservative” region, or whether being in a “conservative,” rural region poses a threat to yielding a more diverse campus community. People perceive that because we strive “to be all things for all people,” that we have spread ourselves too thin to be a high quality and sustainable institution.

Perceptions

Amongst the threats facing SOU are the various negative perceptions that persist regarding the university. We have been called a ‘party school,’ an expensive school and a school with low-standards that offers a second-rate education. Our faculty has been called old and out-of-date and also young and inexperienced. We have been considered inaccessible to our community and region. One way we have historically reacted to this perception is to put time and money in branding and marketing. It might be more effective to strengthen SOU from within and ensure that we offer the best possible education at optimal value and guarantee that our faculty is well-trained and well-supported. Ideally faculty will be excellent teachers who truly understand the needs of our students. There is also much we can and must do to mend our relationships with Ashland and Jackson County.

Affordability

Affordability is also a matter of perception. People are willing to pay dearly for things that they believe are necessary and valuable. SOU is perceived as expensive and considered poor value for the return. Students complain that they cannot easily get financial aid or must go through too many obstacles to get the help they need. They complain of hidden, inflated fees for services they do not use. Students are dismayed by the cost of textbooks they say they do not need and cannot return. We have just received approval to raise tuition; this will exacerbate the problem unless we can demonstrate that SOU returns students’ investment in their education through accessible and generous financial aid, valuable support services, mitigation of the high cost of textbooks and the best college education, for all, that is possible.