

Today we look forward to the beginning of our 58th year as a college ... and through all that time (and actually years before) Chemeketa has been committed to transforming lives and strengthening communities. That language, in fact, exists in our mission statement, and it is grounded in the knowledge that education creates opportunity – empowering individuals, strengthening society, fueling innovation, and driving economic growth. Our college, as you know, has identified five defining institutional values. Opportunity is one of them. We also have an annual tradition in which we focus on one value over an entire academic year and ask all employees to consider the concept fully, think about how it shapes Chemeketa's day-to-day experience, and foreground it in the course of a year's work. For the upcoming, 2026-27 year, College Council has chosen "opportunity" as our college's value of emphasis.

As I just suggested, the concept of opportunity undergirds our mission as a whole. So focusing on this value over the year ahead could simply mean doing what we always do. But opportunity also implies a new start, an opening, a favorable chance, the promise of progress. It reminds me of the popular quote that "education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire," which captures the dynamism inherent in teaching and learning, in discovery and growth. What opportunity do we have over the next year to make an even more positive impact – on students, the community, and each other? What circumstances hold the potential for innovation, excitement, and even joy?

But let's use this theme thoughtfully. Opportunity does not need to become a catchphrase. It can simply be a useful lens for seeing what is possible, and for remembering why our work matters.

Before we turn to what is ahead, I want us to recall what we have all accomplished together. And I do mean together. One of the hazards of being a sizable college, with so many programs, locations, departments, partnerships, and people, is that it can be easy to develop tunnel vision and see only our own work. We know our corner of Chemeketa very well. But we may not always see what is happening down the hall, at another campus, in a classroom at a correctional institution, or out in the community.

So, I want to spend a little time expanding the scope of what opportunity can be.

When I look back at 2025-26, I am amazed by the myriad ways this college created opportunity. It took the form of scholarships, affordable textbooks, advisors who made time for students, faculty trying new teaching approaches, facilities colleagues preparing our spaces before most of us arrived, or IT solving a problem before we even knew about it. Often, the most important work at Chemeketa is not flashy. It is simply somebody doing what they do best, helping others.

And our students. There is so much to say here. In June, nearly 500 students participated in nine commencement ceremonies in building 7. Those ceremonies are always a joy, but there is so much more going on than meets the eye. Every graduate represents hundreds of interactions with people across this institution: faculty, advisors, financial aid staff, tutors, librarians, counselors, enrollment staff, custodians, public safety officers, technology staff, everyone

involved in student retention, clubs, and student life, and many others. A diploma may have one student's name on it, but **everyone** at the college is standing behind it.

And our end-of-year celebrations took many forms and happened in many places. Our TRIO/CCP program honored 96 graduates and recognized persistence, transfer, and academic achievement. Our Education department held a Bilingual Student Teacher graduation celebration. We held a pinning ceremony in June for 33 new associate-degree nurses. At Brooks, Fire Program Class 70 completed the demanding training that will put them directly into service in our communities. Our Prison Education and Community Reentry Program continued to demonstrate that education can change someone's life path. And I must give a shout out to the CLEAR Clinic. Our partnership has helped remove legal and financial barriers that can follow people long after a sentence is served. That is an opportunity that literally opens a door that has been closed.

Students distinguished themselves in many ways that should make us all proud. Our Storm Chasers cybersecurity team ranked 36th in a National Cyber League competition involving more than 7,500 students from 670 schools across 49 states! More than 250 students were represented in our STEM Student Showcase, which displayed over 130 student-created research posters. Our 2026 juried Student Art Show featured 65 pieces of work submitted by 51 student artists, all showcased beautifully in the Gretchen Schuette Art Gallery. We held our 32nd Engineering Student Bridge Competition and our inaugural STEM Family Day that brought families into the world of what students were learning. Visual Communications celebrated its largest graduating class ever, with 35 students in Graphic Design and Multimedia Arts sharing their work with the many guests who attended Portfolio 2026.

These were the moments when we saw that learning happened, and when students recognized they weren't just taking classes. They were on a path to becoming health care professionals, designers, engineers, cybersecurity experts, artists, and colleagues.

Our faculty and student success teams kept finding ways to strengthen the learning and experience behind those accomplishments. The Center for Academic Innovation's Summer Institute focused on reaching all learners through effective course design and inclusive course policies. Faculty across disciplines continued thoughtful work around artificial intelligence: asking hard and important questions about learning, ethics, assessment, and how we prepare students for a world that is changing quickly. The terms minefield, existential threat, and, yes, opportunity, all come to mind with this topic, and our people are engaged mightily in how to forge a path forward that puts students and authentic learning first.

Chemeketa Press marked its tenth anniversary, and this is one of my favorite statistics: approximately 130,000 Chemeketa students have saved more than \$7.6 million through Chemeketa Press textbooks and learning materials. That is academic innovation, faculty expertise, and affordability all wrapped into one extraordinary accomplishment.

Our workforce and career-connected programs also had an exceptional year. Through Future-Ready Oregon, our Community Pathways to Careers work served about 700 students, far exceeding the original goal of 487, and 86 percent had already earned industry-recognized credentials when the results were reported. Those students are preparing for careers in fields critical to our communities, including healthcare and manufacturing. Our Skills2Schools SimLab brought hands-on career exploration to students, including some very enthusiastic first and second graders who got behind the controls of an excavator simulator. Our rural high school partnerships continued College Signing Days and career-connected visits. Our pre-apprenticeship students took their skills into the community and helped renovate a building for use as a food bank. Our CTE advisory partners continued giving us the industry knowledge that keeps programs relevant, and we recognized Craig Jensen for more than 30 years of service to our automotive advisory board. All of this is what it looks like when a community college is closely connected to the local economy and to the people who live here.

Opportunity should not depend on which part of our district someone calls home. Our Yamhill Valley, Woodburn, Polk, Brooks, Eola, and Salem locations all continued to build community in ways that fit the people they serve. YVC welcomed students and families through Explore Chemeketa and celebrated its graduates with the close-knit spirit that makes that campus special. Woodburn continued traditions like its Cinco de Mayo Festival, while also welcoming new students through I-Start which connects them to advising and support. Polk and YVC held end of year celebrations that brought students and employees together. At Eola, our Wine Studies program and alumni from local wineries once again made the annual barrel tasting both an educational experience and an incredibly enjoyable community event (with owls, and sabering, no less!). And the Brooks Center held its annual blockbuster open house that, as always, wowed prospective students with all the opportunities available there.

Our student affairs team continued their focused work on making sure students can actually navigate the college experience. Advising served hundreds of students during concentrated registration efforts. New-student orientations positioned newcomers to succeed from the very start of their collegiate journey.

TRIO, High School Partnerships, Multicultural Student Services, the Safe Haven, tutoring, the Writing Center, Veterans Services and the VRC, the Student Success Center and so many other areas continued meeting students at different stages of their college journey to help them move forward. That work **matters** because access to higher education is not the same thing as access to opportunity. Opportunity becomes real only when students have the information, support, resources, and sense of belonging they need to persist.

We also continued to confront the very frequent basic needs barriers that can derail a student's education. Food insecurity, housing instability, the need for transportation and clothing, and the simple cost of being a student do not disappear when someone walks into a classroom. And that is why we created our new Student Resources Hub – because student success involves the whole student. When we make it easier for someone to find food, clothing, benefits, emergency

assistance, or a person who can help navigate community resources, we are not doing something separate from education. We are making education possible.

Our physical spaces changed too and I want to recognize the herculean work happening through Facilities, Operations, Public Safety, IT, and the many employees involved in planning and implementing bond projects. These include our incredible project teams and the CPAT team. The community entrusted Chemeketa with a significant investment in the future of this college, and now the work of turning that trust into classrooms, labs, infrastructure, safety improvements, and better learning environments is underway. Some of that work is highly visible. Some of it happens behind walls, underground, or on roofs. All of it matters.

We found new ways to invite the community onto our campuses as well. The Marion Berries began playing on our newly renovated baseball field, and suddenly thousands of people had a new reason to come to Chemeketa, many of them, perhaps for the first time. Our campuses hosted concerts, art exhibits, planetarium programs, blood drives, public forums, community classes, celebrations, markets, and gatherings. CCBI and our Small Business Development Center continued helping entrepreneurs, from providing business advising to dynamic new offerings presented through the Power Lunch Series or the Website Launch Lab. The Foundation brought donors and students together at the STARS event. Alumni connected with current students. Our employees showed up at community fairs, powwows, parades, city events, and neighborhood gatherings across the district. Sometimes community engagement means bringing people to Chemeketa. Sometimes it means Chemeketa going to them.

That brings me to a topic and an ongoing effort we are emphasizing this year: Civic Engagement. You will hear more about it this afternoon, and throughout the year, because it is becoming a more intentional part of how we think about our public mission as an American institution of higher education. Last year gave us many examples of what that can look like. Faculty began conversations about civic readiness and democracy engagement all around our college. Students from our Woodburn Center participated in civic engagement training that helped them understand Oregon's legislative and higher education systems, and how to advocate for themselves. TRIO students took part in a statewide leadership conference focused on civics and visited the State Capitol. Chemeketa hosted town halls where community members could ask questions of elected leaders. Our ESOL students visited Capital Community Media and learned firsthand about free speech, storytelling, and the power of communication. Right now, our Student Life department is placing four students to serve as interns at the state capitol – two in Democratic offices, two in Republican offices – just in time for the long legislative session. And to prepare for November's election, we are participating in the Secretary of State's ALL IN voting challenge, complete with Chemeketa student government going above and beyond on a get out the vote campaign.

Why does this matter to a community college? Because our responsibility does not end when a student earns a credential. We prepare people to participate in the communities they share. Civic engagement is not about telling students what to think, how to vote, or which causes to support. It is about helping them learn how to think critically about information, listen across

differences, understand how institutions and communities work, ask good questions, communicate effectively, and recognize that they have both a voice and a role in public life.

That responsibility feels especially important at a time when people can disagree deeply. Information moves faster than reflection and it is tempting to form smaller and smaller circles of people who already think as we do. A college should be one of the places where people learn that disagreement does not have to mean disrespect, and that participation is more useful than cynicism. When students develop civic habits, the benefit does not stop with the student. Families benefit. Workplaces benefit. Neighborhoods benefit. Democracy benefits. The whole community becomes more capable of solving problems together.

And I think Chemeketa is particularly well suited to this work because we are truly a gathering place. We serve students of different ages, backgrounds, experiences, political perspectives, goals, and life circumstances. We are one of the few institutions in our region where people from very different walks of life routinely share experiences. That is an extraordinary opportunity. Our job is not to erase differences. It is to help create the conditions in which people can learn with and from one another, and then carry that capacity back into the communities we serve.

There are so many bright spots at Chemeketa: Storm Athletics. First Thursdays. Soapbox Poetry. The Wellness Committee. The student Emergency Relief Fund. Chemeketa Chatter. Our new program coordinators. C4. The care our employees show one another. The countless partnerships that make programs possible. The people who answer phones, process applications, repair equipment, balance budgets, maintain grounds, keep buildings safe and clean, troubleshoot systems, meet students every day with a smile and the gift of opportunity, and so, so much more. This is only a small highlight of what makes Chemeketa so special.

The look back I've provided matters because our accomplishments are not a collection of unrelated good news. They show us what we are capable of when our daily work aligns with a shared mission. So, with that in mind, let's turn from the opportunities we created last year to the priorities that will guide our work in the year to come.

Every fall at this time, we make mention of the strategic plan and priorities of the college. Sometimes, throughout the year, I get inquiries like, "What are the big things we're doing, and why? Who made that decision? How long are we going to keep doing that?" These are great questions, and an important part of the answer is that the college's strategic priorities come largely from you. The process starts at the level of each department or unit, and those plans go to the Executive Team, which organizes and shapes them, and then they go to College Council, a representative body of the institution. That group weighs in, and there are accountability metrics that are followed moving forward. This summer, the process yielded five priority buckets of work for the year, each composed of a few specific efforts. I'm going to run through them and ask you to listen hard and identify which priorities involve you and your area. Under the theme of Organizational Excellence, the initiatives of focus are: 1) aligning policies and procedures across the college, 2) establishing clarity of mission for Student Conduct & Community Standards and an education/outreach plan, and 3) deploying risk management information in

new channels and conducting emergency response training. Under Community Engagement, the foci are: 1) to increase community, alumni, employer, and donor engagement, 2) to move forward in positioning the college to drive economic development in our region, and 3) to sharpen our institutional focus on civic and community engagement. Under AI and Accessibility, the priorities are: 1) to continue the work from last year to ensure all division webpages, materials, forums, and other content is digitally accessible, 2) to improve accessibility of course materials across the board, 3) to explore how to make curriculum and assessment more AI-resilient, and 4) to evaluate the online proctoring recommendation from the Academic Standards Advisory Committee. Under Infrastructure, the priorities are: 1) to acquire a non-credit registration system, 2) to continue to implement bond projects, 3) to launch EAB Navigate academic planning software, and 4) to initiate an ERP software replacement project. And finally, under the umbrella of programs and pathways, the priorities are: 1) to increase the number of degree completions in CTE areas, 2) to expand dual-credit offerings, and 3) to coordinate and explore new credit and non-credit academic programs.

All of this is discussed in the beginning-of-term President's Update which I'll send out in an email next week. College Council will be charged as usual with helping to keep the college accountable to its goals throughout the year. Please watch the *Chemeketa Chatter* and my regular college-wide emails to see how your work connects with, and amplifies these annual priorities.

So, I just talked about how unit planning, at all levels of the institution, helps to shape the college's priorities. However, the process I outlined does not capture the opportunity we've created for any employee to jump or fast forward through existing hierarchies, decision-making processes, and budget timelines to innovate quickly in support of the college's strategic plan. That opportunity is made possible through the Chemeketa Innovation Grants, or CIGs, as they are called. Each year, employees are encouraged to apply and winners are awarded with funds to try out their projects, which are designed to move a metric related to an institutional goal. Even if an effort is not successful, the hope is it will teach us something useful. CIGs are designed to empower action at the local level, incentivize innovation across the institution, and help us use data to shape our work and continuously improve. The annual CIG process is steered by our grants office and award decisions are made by a representative college committee. You may remember that last year at Kick-Off (and the year before), each person who had just won a CIG grant came to the microphone to share their concept, and then each person who had already completed a CIG project from the year before came up to let you know how their project went. We're not going to do that this year, because we want to uplift the work of these amazing employees without asking them to traipse up here and be performative.

Instead, I'll provide a quick description of what the eight new Chemeketa Innovation Grant awardees will be doing this coming year, grouped by Strategic Theme. Two CIG grant projects help address the college's efforts to provide an inclusive and welcoming culture. The first involves our ESOL faculty, who will engage in a targeted outreach and marketing strategy with Spanish-speaking community members in order to increase enrollment in ESOL classes. The second project, led by the Polk Center team, will work to reestablish Spanish GED Courses at

the Polk Center. This will remove geographical and language barriers for rural Polk County residents facing long evening commutes to Salem.

We have two CIG grant projects in the year to come that support the college's goal of providing holistic student support. The Yamhill Valley Campus team will re-establish the Chemeketa bookstore at YVC during the critical first two weeks of each term so local students can acquire course materials without traveling to Salem. And the Woodburn Center team will pair ESOL and GED students with college-level mentors to provide the academic, linguistic, and social navigation tools needed for students to transition into college.

We have three CIG grant projects in the coming year that support our college's core theme of academic quality. The Library team will expand student access to Biology lab resources by acquiring a set of high-quality and diverse biology lab items—like anatomy models— to support hands-on learning at the library. The writing faculty will expand the Writing Refresh program to outreach locations to help students refresh their writing skills before starting college level classes. And the team in Academic Development will pilot a bridge course to build the linguistic and academic skills students need to succeed in medical assisting and healthcare training pathways.

And finally, we have one CIG grant project in the year to come supporting our college's commitment to community and workforce engagement. The Mid-Willamette Education Consortium (MVEC) team will acquire Tenstar Simulators to expand access to CTE. These heavy equipment simulators (for CDL, forklift, and bulldozer training) will be brought to high schools and Chemeketa, aligning hands-on education with modern industry practices.

Congratulations to all this year's awardees, and thank you to everyone who applied.

It's wonderful to recognize the people behind these innovations, and the great news is that we are going the extra mile to invite every college employee and every student into the world of these projects. We will do so by employing a time-honored scientific tradition – the academic poster session. Each of these CIG projects will be portrayed on its own poster and placed around campus throughout the year. And not just this campus, but every one of our locations, on a rotation designed to engage everyone in this amazing work. In addition, every single CIG grant project that was completed in the past year will also have its own poster. We have also put on posters a snapshot of the most recent summative presentations to College Council, which addressed employee excellence, academic progression, student satisfaction, effective student recruitment, and employer satisfaction. And finally, because we are enthusiastic about the poster idea and because we are embracing civic engagement as a core principle at our college, you will see a few posters up in red, white and blue that share your colleagues' reflections on what it means for them, in their positions as faculty, staff, and exempt employees, to embrace civic engagement as part of our collective mission. Take a moment and read them. It is a great way to commemorate our 250th year.

The final item on our agenda this morning could well be the most important – it is a formal public recognition of the excellence within our internal community. Let's start with the faculty. In May, we celebrated our fifth annual faculty excellence awards, which recognized two deserving faculty members. One recognized a part-time faculty member's exceptional contributions to teaching and learning, service to the Chemeketa community, and excellence in content expertise. It is my pleasure to recognize Masumi Timson, who teaches Japanese on the Salem campus, as the winner of this award.

The other award recognized a full-time faculty member's exceptional contributions to teaching and learning, remarkable involvement with the broader Chemeketa community, and excellence in content expertise and professional scholarship. It is my pleasure to pay tribute to the winner of this award, Jill Lomax, a Chemeketa graduate who has been full-time faculty with us since 2017 in Dental Assisting here on the Salem Campus.

I'd also like to publicly congratulate the five faculty who completed Chemeketa's Excellence in Teaching Certificate in the past year: Thomas Frank, Laura Lawn, Alison Lutz, Frances Robbins, and Jerome Sibayan. They participated in a comprehensive program of professional development activities and created a portfolio showcasing how they demonstrate our Excellence in Teaching Competencies in their practice. I've had the privilege of reading these portfolios, and they stand as inspiring testimony to the hard work and dedication Chemeketa's faculty commit to our students' achievement.

Three years ago at Kick-off, we began our college tradition of recognizing one outstanding employee annually from the classified ranks. As with the faculty excellence awards, this process begins with nominations and a lot of internal engagement. I am very pleased and excited to announce the winner of this award, and would ask them to join me on the stage to receive the award as soon as it is revealed. The 2026 recipient of the classified employee excellence award at Chemeketa is Julia Bynum-Lewis.

I'd like to provide a summary of the comments submitted by those who nominated Julie for this honor.

Julia Bynum-Lewis is widely recognized for fostering an exceptionally welcoming, inclusive, and supportive environment at the Chemeketa Library. Colleagues highlight their dependability, extensive contributions to student support, and active role in championing neuroinclusive practices and accessibility. Additionally, Julia goes above and beyond daily circulation duties by coordinating engaging library activities, displays, and providing compassionate service in both English and Spanish.

Their dedication to institutional excellence is demonstrated through consistent reliability, proactive problem-solving, and meaningful relationship-building with students, staff, and the broader community. Nominees emphasize that Julia embodies the core values of the college through acts of everyday kindness, advocacy, and a deep commitment to equity and belonging.

Ultimately, these qualities make Julie an invaluable asset and a thoroughly deserving candidate for the Classified Employee Excellence Award.

Last year we began our tradition to recognize one outstanding exempt employee annually. As with the other awards, the process involves many nominations and evaluation by committee. It is with great pleasure that I announce this year's winner, and would ask them to join me on the stage to receive the award as soon as it is revealed. The 2026 recipient of the exempt employee excellence award at Chemeketa is our Dean of Counseling and Student Support Services, Blanca Aguirre.

I'd like to provide a summary of the comments submitted by those who nominated her for this honor. Blanca epitomizes proactive, compassionate, and student-centered leadership. She consistently demonstrates remarkable adaptability, quickly mobilizing her team to support students during times of crisis, such as organizing food distribution during SNAP benefit disruptions and ensuring emotional support is available during periods of heightened concern over immigration enforcement activity. By prioritizing the evolving needs of the student population and refining departmental processes to remove barriers, Blanca ensures that student support remains both high-quality and deeply responsive to real-world challenges.

Beyond her professional efficacy, Blanca creates a culture of belonging and opportunity that empowers her staff to thrive. As a Latina leader, she fosters an inclusive and supportive environment where her team feels valued, seen, and capable of professional growth. Her commitment to mentorship—whether providing guidance on public speaking, instilling confidence, or encouraging diverse perspectives—helps her team members navigate their own career paths with newfound certainty. By building genuine community through warmth, engagement, and intentional support, Blanca cultivates a cycle of success that positively impacts both her staff and the students they serve.

The faculty, classified, and exempt excellence awards are always very competitive and hard-won. There is a lot of excellence at this college, and a lot of which to be proud.

I have one more announcement. For the second year in a row, a Chemeketa student has been named a Newman Civic Fellow. Zuhail Atai, Student Government Clubs Coordinator and the leader of the Campus Calm Collective Club, has received this year-long fellowship in recognition of her potential for public leadership and her community work. Through personal experience and her ongoing efforts with Salem for Refugees, Zuhail knows that students at institutions like ours come from and represent the very communities the college exists to serve and uplift. In her own words, Zuhail explains that leadership and community involvement have become an important part of who she is because she knows people thrive when they feel supported, connected, and valued.

I'd like to thank the executive team for its outstanding leadership and commitment to our college over the past year. And to all of you who have come to the gathering place this morning, I cannot begin to tell you how much we appreciate you and your integral role at our institution,

which continues to find ways to serve and empower students and communities to create positive impact. Opportunity is our mantra this year; it will help inspire us to meet our mission anew as we continue to make a difference for all who call this area home.