What Made America Great is Being Built in Southwest Louisiana by People Like You.
The Lake Charles Veterans Memorial Park with Old Glory unfurled in the breeze, the tributes to our service men and women, and the 9/11 Memorial are evidence of a citizenry proud of its heritage. Observable across the lake are the industries producing and transporting the materials used to build and fuel a global economy.

All this reflects a sense of pride and dignity of a people in love with a country where anything is possible. They are not afraid to redefine what this area is and what it can become.

At SOWELA, we are helping redefine college to mean a four year degree, an associate degree, a diploma, a certificate, business and industry training, or anything that is going to help you get a job and better prepare yourself to take care of your family and make a decent living.

Lake Charles is fortunate to have a community college and a university in strong partnership to meet the growing needs of a diverse student population and a burgeoning economy. SOWELA and McNeese, together with our secondary education partners, strive to deliver educational programs and services that will guarantee the future success of Southwest Louisiana.

SOWELA has achieved many new milestones, from record enrollment growth to impressive campus revitalization projects. The “old vocational school” is no longer our image. Our commitment is and will always be to provide high-quality and relevant education to our most important customer – our students. Because of a committed and educated faculty and staff, SOWELA’s students are being prepared to participate in the economic vitality of our great state and nation. They are part of a heritage built on a sense of pride, duty, workmanship, and a commitment to be part of something bigger and better than themselves.

Southwest Louisiana Technical Community College (SOWELA) is in the right place at the right time. Each day, we find ourselves with more opportunities to walk alongside students who are intent on building their careers and securing the futures of their families. Ours is a high calling and one we do not take lightly, for men and women come here to learn and depart as well trained, highly educated, and motivated employees and leaders intent on keeping America great for generations to come.
Learning To Do the Work I’d Like To Do for a Living

Workforce Development provides students with hands-on training to master the practical skills for the trades.

When you first walk in to the new machine shop on the SOWELA campus in Lake Charles, you’ll notice it is immaculately clean. The students and faculty show tremendous pride by keeping the area spotless; as it should be. Rows of brand new GMC lathes, Kent grinders, and GMC mills are providing students with the skills they need to enter the workforce.

“It is exactly what you would expect to see in a new training facility filled with the latest equipment,” said Kevin Ardoin, the machinist instructor. “I’ve worked in the industry my whole life. This shop has everything, from traditional lathes and mills to leading-edge CNC equipment and simulators.”

Dr. Joseph Fleishman, Vice Chancellor of Workforce Development, sees the new machine shop as a model for providing high-demand workforce training. “We met with several machine shop owners throughout the region and asked them how they thought our new machining program should be run. We wanted our program to fit their needs.”

The only down side for students is the price, as non-credit courses offered through SOWELA’s Workforce Development program are not eligible for financial assistance. Thankfully, Capital One Bank in Lake Charles stepped up and provided $80,000 in scholarships. The gift funded 83 partial scholarships for students enrolled in short-term, non-credit training programs.

Industry partnerships and corporate funding have allowed SOWELA to reach more students eager to pursue careers in the trades. “I like to work with my hands,” Austin David, a workforce development student said. “This is what I want to do for a living. After I leave SOWELA, I’d like to work in a machine shop to gain experience and eventually work in one of the plants. I can’t wait to get out into industry.”

For Chuck Thompson, SOWELA offers a chance to follow a dream of a lifetime in the making. “I’m 50,” he said. “I got a late start. After serving in the Marine Corps, I did a lot of different things. Now I am doing what I really wanted to do. My goal is to finish here at SOWELA, get a good job in a machine shop, and someday work in a motorcycle machine shop.”

Adjacent to the machine shop is the recently refurbished welding facility. Equipped with 64 welding booths, the facility supports both credit and non-credit welding programs. SOWELA also is expanding its welding instruction capacity at the Morgan Smith site in Jennings.

In a portion of the hangar near the machine shop, Mr. Lloyd Landry teaches a class of soon to be millwrights. With years of industry experience, he provides the instruction they need to master various types of equipment, technical data, and mechanical tasks they will face in the real world. “Our program at SOWELA is designed to take our students’ mechanical abilities to the next level as they become craftsmen,” Mr. Landry said.

“A quality education should give students more choices in life.” – Dr. Joseph Fleishman

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Spring 2014 

For the first time in its history, SOWELA enrolled more than 3,000 full-time students this academic year in both the fall and spring semesters. This represents a 21 percent increase from last year.

At the heart of this growth is an enrollment management department focused on customer service. Mr. André Farley, the new executive director, has developed processes that make enrollment easier, more exact, and much more student-friendly.

"First we enhanced our student services by making sure every team member was cross trained," Mr. Farley said. "Now, when a student comes to the enrollment office, the staff can help with admission, financial aid, making community support increasingly important. Outreach to military personnel and veterans also will help fuel growth. With more than 150 veterans already enrolled, a Veterans Affairs Center has been created and will be staffed with two full-time counselors with prior military experience. "Veterans are thirsty for knowledge," Mr. Farley said, "but they see things differently." As a former U.S. Army Medical Evacuation pilot, Mr. Farley understands veterans’ unique needs. "We must realize that most of the veterans are older than the traditional students, and they have worlds of experience. Many have been on the war field and have operated and maintained multi-million dollar equipment, such as tanks, airplanes, and helicopters. They understand the importance of discipline. Veterans are very focused, and they bring highly developed skills and leadership experience. Data shows that once a veteran enrolls, they have a greater rate of graduation than the civilian population."

Student success staff has been added to the enrollment team to ensure sustainable growth. They add value to retention efforts by working closely with students to help them get plugged in to student organizations like the Student Government Association. They also provide counseling and intervention. As a result of their efforts, students stay involved and engaged, which directly impacts graduation and completion rates.

"It will take a campus-wide effort to make Operation 5,000 a reality," Mr. Farley said. "We have the infrastructure in place, and we’re making the adjustments needed to streamline the enrollment process and create a service-oriented culture. We’re working closely with our academic affairs team to ensure classes are available so that we can serve traditional and non-traditional students, adult learners, veterans, and online students better and more effectively. We need to market what we already do well and build on that success."

Executive Director of Enrollment Management, André Farley, is building a customer service team to provide students with a seamless enrollment experience.
Developing a Culture of Education

As career opportunities require higher levels of skill and Associate Degrees become increasingly important, being fully accredited increases the value SOWELA has to offer.

Five years ago, Dr. Rick Bateman, Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, arrived on campus to find a College still recovering from the effects of Hurricane Rita. It was struggling to evolve to fill an expanded mission. “We find ourselves pretty lean and mean today in academic affairs,” Dr. Bateman said. “There is a new culture here of higher education, and Southwest Louisiana Technical Community College (SOWELA) has been blessed with faculty that have embraced the comprehensive community college mission.”

Thanks to Chancellor Dr. Neil Aspinwall’s vision and accountability and tireless efforts of Dr. Bateman and many others, the College is on the brink of full accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC).

“The accreditation process has focused the College on evaluating and strengthening its internal processes in light of standards set by colleges and universities throughout the southern region,” Bateman said. “These efforts are changing the public’s perception of the College and the high quality programs and services SOWELA offers.”

SOWELA is quickly becoming the first-choice college for non-traditional students seeking a career change and for high school students looking for a two-year degree leading to well-paying jobs in our area. Additionally, the College is providing transfer-oriented coursework for students that helps them transition to a four-year institution.

As the accreditation process draws to a close, there is a collective sigh of relief around campus and a palpable sense of anticipation. Faculty and staff carry themselves a little differently, knowing they are months away from being part of a fully accredited institution. The soul of the College appears to be coming into its own.

The accreditation process will allow the College to grow and meet the broader mission expected of community colleges. It will allow SOWELA to provide greater opportunities for learning in a rapidly changing marketplace.

“Students connect with SOWELA more than they did five years ago,” Dr. Bateman said. “We like to talk about the quality of academic programs, programmatic accreditation, and institutional quality, but you can see the new SOWELA in the quality of students making us their first choice.”

Dr. Bateman is most proud of his decision to invest in leadership. It has set the tone and created an educational atmosphere that attracts the best students to SOWELA. By encouraging and developing a cadre of like-minded administrators and faculty, Dr. Bateman has helped the College build capacity from within. “I am confident,” he said, “that the work we have done has established a solid foundation upon which SOWELA will continue to build.”

SOWELA is an open and friendly campus that provides learning opportunities to a diverse population of students, preparing them for employment or university transfer.
“Life is recognizable in its expression, that form ever follows function.”

Louis Sullivan

The new Nursing and Allied Health building is scheduled to open in April of this year. When we took the above photo of Paula Hellums and a group of her nursing students a few months ago, the steel girders of the new Nursing and Allied Health building were beginning to lattice upward. Today, the building is almost totally bricked on the outside, and work is moving so rapidly on the inside that the date of the grand opening keeps slipping to earlier than expected. Once it opens this April, it will be the third new building at SOWELA since Hurricane Rita virtually destroyed the campus.

Aided by a generous donation from the H.C. Drew Foundation, the Nursing and Allied Health building will be the second new program-specific building completed as part of a comprehensive campus revitalization effort. As impressive as the building will be, Paula Hellums, Nursing Department Chair and Interim Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, said the focus has always been on the students. “The focus has always been improving the curriculum, the programming, and the delivery to enhance student learning and success,” Mrs. Hellums said. “That’s always been at the forefront. Will we have a great simulation program? Absolutely. But why? What’s the foundational reason? It is because we want to enhance instruction. We want to give students the opportunity to walk into labs and feel like they’re in a medical setting. We want them to build their confidence in the lower pressure environment of the classroom so that they’ll be comfortable and confident in their performance when they enter the real world as professionals.”

“The courses offered at SOWELA are specifically geared to get you out into the workforce,” said nursing graduate Danella Taylor. “My favorite instructor didn’t just come to school every day with plans to teach and then go home. She guided us through our ups and downs during the course of the program and encouraged us to continue. She had been in our shoes and was not afraid to tell us what we needed to hear. The hands-on skills and seasoned nurses who taught us made the transition to employment so much smoother.”

The new Nursing and Allied Health building will allow for even more personalized instruction and have all the bells and whistles expected of a first-class nursing program. What will make it extraordinary, however, is the quality of education delivered within its walls by a passionate and highly qualified group of teaching nurses led by Mrs. Hellums. “We are always looking for better ways to prepare our students so that they can get their degrees in a timely fashion and confidently pursue the careers they are called to serve.”

A Place Where Student Nurses Can Learn to Do What They Were Placed on Earth to Do.

“In the Summer of 2013, when only the foundation and steel girders to the Nursing and Allied Health building were in place, Mrs. Paula Hellums, Nursing Department Chair and Interim Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs (center), posed with several of her nursing students. Left to right: David Cox, Brenda Guernes, Rachael Bennett, Robin Ducat, James Lune, and Sharlene Lavine-Williams. The new building will be completed by spring 2014.

(Left to right) Nursing instructor Rachael Bilbo participates in a high-fidelity clinical scenario with students Rachael Bennett, David Cox, and Brenda Guernes.

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Many would be bewildered by the maze of pipes, gauges, and tanks in the new building provided by Phillips 66 for Process Technology. Inside, however, you’ll find students in the Process Technology program methodically maneuvering in and around the equipment as they apply lessons learned.

The future looks bright for SOWELA’s Process Technology program. In one year it has grown from 381 students to more than 645. The rapid growth signifies the instruction’s relevance in an ever-expanding market for trained process technology operators. “We’re seizing the moment,” said David Lafargue, department chair. “As a school and a region, we’re on the upside of enhancing the program to meet industry needs.”

Students graduating from the Process Technology program face a bright future for employment. Process technology technicians in the petroleum, chemical, L&G, and other process-related industries are driving the region’s economic expansion.

There is no shortage of good, solid, and mature students. Students are transferring into the program, recognizing that the number of baby boomers retiring means job growth and economic stability. The mean average is 25 years old, and many in the program have bachelor’s degrees already. With years of field experience, instructors bring a wealth of real-world knowledge to the classroom. They use hands-on instruction to show students the tasks they’ll be required to master on the job. As they leave SOWELA and start out as entry-level operators, typically outside operators, they’ll be well versed in monitoring plant processes and be able to use their knowledge and experience to become console operators or unit supervisors.

Proof of the program’s worth is in students’ success stories. One recent email read, “Mr. Lafargue, I wanted to let you know Citgo offered me a job. I would like to thank you and all of the instructors for a wonderful learning experience.” SOWELA alumnus Mike Williams wrote, “I wanted to tell you thanks for always keeping us informed about job openings. I just received official word from PPG yesterday that I start next month. I finished the Process Technology program in 18 months and graduated as a national honor society graduate. I really enjoyed my time there; I just thought you would like to know. Thank you for all you have done for me and the other P-tech students.”

“The Process Technology program prepares students for jobs in high-paying industries.”

“Opportunity is Missed by Most People Because it is Dressed in Overalls and Looks Like Work.”

Thomas Edison
As Shakespeare would say, “What’s past is prologue.” The Lake Charles campus is rich in aviation history. What started out as Lake Charles Army Airfield in World War II where A-6, A-20, and B-26 crews trained evolved into Chennault Air Force Base where B-29s and B-47s supported the Strategic Air Command mission.

It is the perfect setting for students interested in aviation maintenance technology. All they have to do is look beyond the hangar doors of their classroom to see the job possibilities at Northrop Grumman and AAR, or across town at ERA Helicopters, the longest serving helicopter transport operator in the industry. What makes the SOWELA program unique, said Troy Fontenot, Aviation Maintenance Technology Instructor and Program Coordinator, “is our vintage aircraft, helicopters, and aircraft and equipment for training students in more modern systems. The instructor team is highly experienced in both fixed wing and rotor-wing aircraft. That diversity offers students the opportunity to pursue careers in aviation maintenance ranging from major repair facilities of large aircraft and general aviation maintenance, to offshore or medical helicopter transportation.”

“I started working for ERA Helicopters in 2010,” said Troy Arceneaux, a current student in the program. “I wanted to stay with the company, so it made sense for me to go to school for my A&P license.”

Like many students, Trey wanted to complete his education without quitting his job. “I signed up for the aviation program at SOWELA and now I’m reaching the end of my schooling for the Associate’s Degree in Applied Science for Aviation Maintenance. After I get my A&P license, I hope to work as a field mechanic and work my way up to the top. Who knows? After a few months of hands-on experience, I might go overseas for a couple years. The opportunities are amazing in the aviation field, and I’m going to take advantage of every minute.”

Ensuring that Louisiana Remains the Land of Great Cuisine

The Culinary Arts program is growing to meet the hospitality needs of the region with an accredited program and students with a passion for their work. One of the side benefits of being at SOWELA is the opportunity to enjoy a multi-course meal weekly that is prepared and served by our culinary arts students.

Since Chef Jerry Sonnie’s arrival as Program Director, the Culinary Arts program has gained a reputation for excellence and quality and is fully accredited through the American Culinary Federation Education Foundation Accrediting Commission. “This accreditation,” says Dr. Neil Aspinwall, Chancellor, “validates the quality of instruction in the program.”

The culinary program teaches aspiring chefs the basic types of cooking and the culinary skills they will need to enter the hospitality industry. Two of the program’s star pupils include a duo of military veterans, Lance Isom and Vince Smith. They epitomize what the program is all about and the promise it holds for students serious about entering the hospitality field. “We both did over 20 years in the Army,” Mr. Isom said. “When I retired from the military, I was Sergeant First Class (E7). Growing up in a large family, we didn’t have the luxury of going to fast food restaurants. My mother cooked food that stretched to feed a household of eight. Since my great and blessed friend Vincent was also talking about culinary school after separating from the Army, and with a little coaxing from our wives, we decided that SOWELA offered the best opportunities. We hope to open a restaurant when we graduate from SOWELA, serve the great people around Fort Polk, and inspire our own kids to strive, achieve, and believe that you can do anything you set your heart and mind to with the help of the Lord.”

While the history of flight all around us, SOWELA’s aviation maintenance technology program is beginning to soar.
Providing students the information they need to be greater than they imagined possible.

“You don’t realize how much you help these students along their career path,” said Robbie Johnson, an Instrumentation Technology instructor, “until they come back and tell you they got a job with PPG, or Dow Chemical, or somewhere, and they say how much they appreciate all the things we showed them.”

The Instrumentation Technology program is one of the most popular programs on campus, with 300-400 students enrolled each year. Students receiving their associate’s degree, an AAS in Instrumentation Technology, are able to pursue jobs as instrumentation technicians and instrumentation and electrical technicians who learned to teach and convey the knowledge we learned. We try to bring as many realistic experiences as we can based on what we’ve seen, what we know, and what our industry contacts tell us.

“We are interested in our students learning what they’ll need to know when they get their degree,” Johnson said. “We keep them informed about jobs opportunities. There are about a dozen websites I check daily to help students find jobs, and there are a lot of jobs out there.”

Many of the program’s success stems from the experiences instructors bring to the curriculum. “We aren’t tying measuring and control devices help keep facilities running. Much of the program’s success stems from the experiences instructors bring to the curriculum. “We aren’t tying the things we showed them.”

“SOWELA gave me real world training and the instructors had years of experience,” Gunn Misell. “We try to give students a pretty good understanding of the type of equipment they’ll be exposed to or working on equipment they’ll see in the plants. SOWELA is close to home. I heard they had a good welding school and I want to get a good welding job around here or in an offshore environment,” said Industrial Electrician Program Coordinator, Robert LeBoeuf. “We concentrate more on the maintenance end, as our students will be trouble shooting and fixing problems as they occur to keep production up and running.”

Many of the students in the Industrial Electrician program are also taking courses in the Instrumentation program as both programs are highly valued in the industry. General Apprenticeship – Plumbing Construction The plumbing construction program provides specialized skilled-trades courses that equip students with the skills necessary, based on industry standards, to become plumbing journeymen.

As business and industry expands in the Southwest Louisiana region, the job opportunities are there for students interested in automotive, welding, industrial electrician, and plumbing apprenticeship jobs.
As the Business of Doing Business Grows, SOWELA’s Office-Related Programs Open Doors of Opportunity.

“Our four curriculums are general and applicable to any business,” said Debbie Lejeune, Department Chair for Business and Information Technology. “Students with their Associate Degrees are prepared to support business leadership for any kind of business that deals with the public.”

Accounting: The Associate Degree in Accounting Technology provides the practical skills in the accounting cycle from analyzing and recording transactions to adjusting and closing entries in preparing financial statements. Linda Fontenot, a 2003 graduate with two Associate degrees, one in Accounting and one in Office Systems, started as a receptionist and quickly moved to the accounting department. “In June 2014,” said Ms. Fontenot, “I will celebrate my 10-year anniversary at the Stine Company’s corporate office in the accounting department. “In preparing our students,” says Instructor Darrell Buck, “we help them build their portfolios and network them with industry professionals.”

Drafting and Design Technology: “In our Drafting and Design Technology program,” said Program Instructor Aaron Goodman, “we teach students to build industrial drawings and teach them communication and critical thinking skills in classes as varied as history, biology, and algebra. Our goal is helping students develop a strong work ethic, adaptability, and problem solving skills so they can function well at any job.

Networking Specialist: The Networking Specialist Associate Degree provides the expertise to set up computers and servers, maintain the hardware infrastructure, and run the computer systems. Alumnus Josh Young said, “SOWELA met all the criteria I was looking for: practical instruction, hands-on learning opportunities, a track record of training students in the field, and the ability to finish the program in two years. The training I received helped me in preparation for a career in the IT field, as I am now a Network Analyst.”

General Studies: The Gen Ed department provides a solid foundation for students planning to transfer to universities as well as students seeking technical diplomas and associate degrees. We train them in four basic disciplines: pipe design, structural, civil, and mechanical. We pinpoint our training so they can find work in Southwest Louisiana, but what they learn can be applied worldwide.”

Criminal Justice: “The Associate Degree in criminal justice is a two year program ideal for those wanting to enter law enforcement or needing a two-year degree to meet promotion qualifications,” said Dr. Lisa Quibodeaux, Program Director.
As SOWELA begins its 76th year, it is moving forward with a master plan to revitalize the campus. The Phillips 66 Process Technology building and the Arts and Humanities building were recently completed, and the Nursing and Allied Health building will be completed later this year. By 2017, a brand new campus in Jennings will be added and two new buildings will be constructed at the Lake Charles campus along with improvements including a campus gateway and a streetscape that will create a modern campus identity. At long last, the campus infrastructure will reflect the image of what we are—a first-class comprehensive technical community college.

SOWELA Transforms into a College of First Choice.

“Learners First... No Excuses

“At SOWELA, there is a crystal clear understanding that students are our only reason for being. College leadership has developed a sense of urgency about being prepared to provide outstanding service to the next student that walks on the campus for the first time. The core of this outstanding service to our students is the offering of relevant programs that prepare students for further study and for high skill, high demand, and high wage employment. Students at SOWELA find faculty and staff that care deeply about their success and go above and beyond to meet their needs.” Dr. Rick Bateman, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs.

Students First... No Excuses

Frank Russell

“I was working as a laborer for Turner Industries, and I kept getting laid off, getting laid off, and getting laid off. I wanted to have a steady job, but instead the people at the plant here I could go about being an operator. They said the only way you can do it is to go to SOWELA and get a two-year degree. So, I said, that’s what I’m going to do. As soon as I got laid off from the next turnaround, I enrolled at SOWELA. I graduated this semester and have an internship with AXIALL Corporation. Since I’ve been here, I became student body president, and I’ve had a fantastic time.”

Kayla McCloney

“I came to SOWELA for their accounting program. I hope to go on to a four-year school and get my bachelor’s and become a CPA and work for an accounting firm.”

Granville Handy

“I heard that SOWELA is an awesome school. They have great programs. I chose SOWELA because I wanted to pursue the Process Technology program. As soon as I get my degree, I hope to find a good job at one of the refineries or plants they’re building around here.”
"I have worked in two-year and transfer colleges, four-year colleges, and research universities. All these presented me with the knowledge of deciphering the difference between our SOWELA students and those others, and why I chose to come to SOWELA – To help 'mold' people into whatever they want to be and thereby give them the opportunity to become globally competitive and contributing citizens.

In observing SOWELA’s success, I have now come to attribute the unprecedented progress to one thing – people (students, faculty, staff, alumni, employers, and patrons). However, in reviewing students’ expectations, one of the general themes that emerges is the students’ love of SOWELA and their confidence that the College will deliver, through her faculty and staff, on the promise of an excellent open door institution.”

Dr. Fitzpatrick U. Anyanwu, Executive Director of Planning & Analysis for Strategic Effectiveness and Chief Planning, Research and Effectiveness Officer of the College.

"The success of our students – past, present, and future, is our number one priority! Supporting them in achieving their educational and career goals is central to our mission.”

Jeanine Newman, Vice Chancellor of Finance

"I’m a welder at SOWELA. I chose this major so I can better my skills and be a hundred percent in my field. When I graduate, I want to work in the plants or work offshore.”

Chet Calloway

"I felt like the community college would be more personal than a big university. When I graduate, I want to go on to a university and further my studies.”

Chance DeVille

"I actually tried going to a big college, and the classes were very large. They didn’t have that personal connection with the students like SOWELA. With the smaller class size, I have gotten to know other students and my instructors. It’s just a wonderful learning environment. I have gotten to know other students and my instructors. It’s just a wonderful learning environment. I want a job in my field... that’s what everyone wants. That’s what I’m really hoping for.”

Natalie Hart

"I chose SOWELA because I knew I could get a quality education and a degree in less than two years. My career choice is media, and I hope to start in the media field when I graduate.”

Bryan Reddin

"I am a STEPS student. I chose to come to SOWELA and attend here for my college courses just to get a head start in college. The College offered me a wonderful opportunity and I took advantage of it.”

Vivian Reyes

"I chose SOWELA because I knew I could get a quality education and a degree in less than two years. My career choice is media, and I hope to start in the media field when I graduate.”

Matalia Anderson

"SOWELA is in a good location, has great students, and great teachers, and it’s a school you can graduate from, walk out, and get a job.”

Jennie Deshatrel
SOWELA Technical Community College opened the doors to its beautiful new Library and Learning Resource Center in June 2013. The 8,685 square-foot area includes offices and public space with computer workstations and study areas. The facility includes four group study rooms, a photocopy center, and a separate instructional computer lab.

Mrs. Mary Frances Sherwood and her staff provide a professional atmosphere and personal service so that students can access the 88 computers, books, eBooks, journals, and a multitude of electronic resources. Online resources are available 24/7 for students, which are particularly vital to SOWELA’s distance learners.

“This library is a haven for students; it is a beautiful and productive place,” said student Phyllis Minter. “I love to go there between classes just to relax.”

“Historically, the library has been the backbone of a college,” said Dr. Charles Nwankwo, Chief Information Resources and Technologies Officer. “It is the main place on a college campus where students, faculty, and the community meet to study, compose, discuss, and socialize. It is with this view in mind that SOWELA, as a comprehensive community college, has created a library space befitting of its current teaching/learning mission. This physical space will continue to bridge the digital or information divide for students and serve as a repository of learning and knowledge on campus.”

Student Michael Walker echoes Dr. Nwankwo’s sentiments. “The new library was very beneficial for me during my first semester,” he said. “It provided a nice open place to study by myself, or with others, and the library staff was very helpful. It is my sanctuary when I’m on campus.”
Outstanding Faculty Make SOWELA a Special Place

The faculty is an integral part of the community college mission. It is the faculty who, in the end, carries out the goal of democratizing higher education while maintaining the level of rigor and quality of work that has made post-secondary education in the United States the best in the world. The community college professoriate is determined to make a difference in their patients’ lives.

Al Caesar – Workforce Development Training Coordinator

“Here at SOWELA, students are getting a good education. I personally know almost every student here and they are all truly amazing people who put a great deal of time into educating their students. Of the faculty members I know at SOWELA, I love best the approach to teaching in their job that makes me up, takes my knowledge to others, to give them a chance at a better life.”

Henry Duplantis – Instructor of Industrial Instrumentation

“SOWELA has grown and is continuing to grow at a rapid pace. The physical appearance has vastly improved. It is not only new buildings, but also new programs (HVAC), new accreditations (SACS), new partnerships (with schools), and a great commitment within the College to a great number of new services to help a student to be successful. It is interesting to and meeting the needs of the community at every level. It is truly becoming a community college.”

Dotty McCormick – Instructor of English

“SOWELA is special because... Everyone is looking forward to going to SOWELA. One reason I love it is the diverse and interesting students I get to teach. I’ve taught students of Vietnamese, Iraq, and Afghanistan; single parents; grandparents raising their grandchildren; recent high school graduates; and non-traditional students who are getting a great education. I enjoy working with other faculty and staff. It is like a family here.”

Leslie Ferreguy – Instructor of Practical Nursing

“SOWELA is that important episode of one’s life that springboards them into their career. As an instructor of Graphic Art, I have the unique perspective of also being a graduate of the College. SOWELA prepared me for the workforce and helped me network with professionals. The concept of giving students real-world skills and a quality education at SOWELA is so important.”

Thomas Richard – Instructor of Automotive Technology

“I enjoy teaching, so coming to work is a joy. There are good folks who support me and motivate me to do my best. This enables me to do my best for the students. A good day at work is when a student tells me of an accomplishment of theirs because of what I’ve taught at school. I enjoy working with other faculty and staff. It is like a family here, we support each other. There is so much satisfaction in passing on my knowledge to others, to give them a chance at a better life.”

Todd Carrere – Instructor of Mathematics

“Here at SOWELA, students are all respected by their peers and appreciated by their students. The faculty is an integral part of the community college mission. It is the faculty who, in the end, carries out the goal of democratizing higher education while maintaining the level of rigor and quality of work that has made post-secondary education in the United States the best in the world.”

Lame Nevils – Instructor of History

“Spring 2014 was the beginning of a successful career as an instructor. Since 1938, SOWELA has been an integral part of Southwest Louisiana and has had faculty and staff dedicated to the educational and workforce needs of our people. As a professor at SOWELA, I can very proudly be a small part of that tradition and know firsthand how dedicated the faculty and staff are in providing excellent instruction to our students. It is rewarding to work for a college that embodies the values of Southwest Louisiana: hard work, resiliency, and a strong sense of community.”

Erik Jessen – Instructor of Graphic Art

“SOWELA is that important episode of one’s life that springboards them into their career. As an instructor of Graphic Art, I have the unique perspective of also being a graduate of the College. SOWELA prepared me for the workforce and helped me network with professionals. The concept of giving students real-world skills and a quality education at SOWELA is so important.”

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Act Now

“The Student Union will give students a safe and secure place to meet between classes.” Nataleigh

“The new Student Union building will be a great place for students to unwind after a test and provide a place to study, as well as a safe haven to be able to relax or exercise.” Jacob

“All of SOWELA’s students would benefit from a Student Union building. The fact that it would offer free Wi-Fi in a comfortable environment with food service options nearby would make it easier for students to study and tutor other students.” Mitchell

“Having a place that has everything including a food center, tutoring, study halls, and a hang out spot would be great. Instead of walking across campus, it would be nice to have a one-stop shop for all of my needs as a veterans.” Lance

“Today’s students are different. They are intensely focused and many already have full-time jobs. They know the prerequisite for a good paying job is an education, and as a result, most have fewer hours for downtime. SOWELA’s new Student Union building will provide a much-needed hub for student activities and success-related services such as a fully equipped cafeteria, aerobics and recreation areas, places to study, and room to hold events that encourage a sense of community. The $8 million Student Union building will be built as the result of Senate Bill 204, now known as ACT 360. It will be one of 29 new facilities constructed throughout the state as part of a commitment by the Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS) to help create a stronger workforce for Louisiana. A brand new campus in Jennings also is a part of this new legislation. In order to access the $18 million from the state, SOWELA, with the help of friends like you, must contribute 12 percent of the total cost – $960,000 for the Student Union building and $1.2 million for the Jennings site. This represents an approximate 8-to-1 match; for every dollar given to the ACT 360 effort, the state will match with eight dollars. In the words of SOWELA student Sonni Hearon, “the new Student Union building will have an enormously positive influence on SOWELA’s student body. It will provide a place for students with different majors to get to know one another, share their experiences, and help build a more family-oriented student community.”

In the words of SOWELA student Sonni Hearon, “the new Student Union building will bring us together as a campus. It will provide space for students to relax and study. There are so few places to eat near campus, so having a full-service cafeteria means we won’t have to leave campus.” Amanda

“Having a place that has everything including a food center, tutoring, study halls, and a hang out spot would be great. Instead of walking across campus, it would be nice to have a one-stop shop for all of my needs as a veterans.” Lance

“In order to access the $18 million from the state, SOWELA, with the help of friends like you, must contribute 12 percent of the total cost – $960,000 for the Student Union building and $1.2 million for the Jennings site. This represents an approximate 8-to-1 match; for every dollar given to the ACT 360 effort, the state will match with eight dollars. In the words of SOWELA student Sonni Hearon, “the new Student Union building will have an enormously positive influence on SOWELA’s student body. It will provide a place for students with different majors to get to know one another, share their experiences, and help build a more family-oriented student community.”

Amanda
Facilities Planning And Management Is Transforming The Sowela Campus To Look Like What We Aspire To Be

When David Darbone arrived on campus in 2008 as Director of Facilities Planning & Management, the place was still a mess as a result of Hurricane Rita, and the College was conducting business from 40 trailers where students, faculty, and staff were crammed together like sardines.

One of the first things he did was to organize his team. He found that one knew how to do a little plumbing, another had some carpentry skills, and with his background in construction, they were able to do a little magic.

Today, instead of picking up the pieces, the facilities management team is helping build and maintain a first-rate college campus. The revitalized campus includes the Phillips 66 building, the Arts and Humanities building, and the new Nursing and Allied Health building scheduled to open soon.

A $20 million training facility and a new Student Union building on the Lake Charles campus and a completely new site in Jennings are on the immediate horizon.

“The Chancellor has a great vision for what SOWELA is and needs to be,” says Mr. Darbone. “As we define what the College is, the look and quality of the facilities impacts recruiting.”

The small facilities crew stays focused on doing a good job. “There’s intrinsic value in being proud of the work we perform,” says Darbone. “Sometimes the reward for our efforts comes when I overhear visitors or students saying how awesome the facilities are. Hearing comments like that means we’re part of the legacy of the new SOWELA and that my guys can look back on what they’ve done and be proud of what they did to help make this College great.”

A Brand New Campus for Jennings

SOWELA will expand its presence and programs in Jennings to benefit all of Jeff Davis Parish.

Through the vision and leadership of former State Senator Jerry Theunissen, assisted by the tireless efforts of civic leaders Greg Mercantel, Ronnie Petree, and Marion Fox, a brand new building and campus will be built in Jennings.

With the generous support of the Jeff Davis Parish School Board, Police Jury, and the City of Jennings, ten acres of land has been purchased adjacent to the Jennings High School to construct a $10 million teaching facility as part of SOWELA Technical Community College.

Quoted in the American Press, Mr. Marcantel stated, “This will be a tremendous addition to the education system of Jeff Davis Parish. We already have a SOWELA campus, but SOWELA has plans to greatly expand the programs and courses it offers. In the long run, it will have a tremendous impact on preparing our local youth for alternative career paths for the growth that is being projected for Southwest Louisiana.”

“The new campus will allow us to provide more options and relevant training,” said Kylie Schmaltz, Coordinator at the Morgan Smith Instructional Site. “Having a brand new campus will allow SOWELA to expand the programs offered and be a great reminder to the parents of junior high and high school students that SOWELA is the next, best step after high school.”

The new campus will also allow SOWELA to provide workforce training to the citizens of Jeff Davis Parish who want to take advantage of the job opportunities coming to the region.
Steve Stickell, Automotive Technology, 1969

I was working in K-mart in the automotive department when I started attending SOWELA and was in the automotive mechanic program when it was located over on Mill and Kirkman Streets. My instructors were very good and gave us a lot of hands on experience in addition to all the other required courses like math that we had to take. After SOWELA, I went to barber school and now work at A Barber Shop in Lake Charles.

Jake Philmon, Electronics Technology, 1972

I enrolled in SOWELA in 1970 for one year in Electronics Technology. At that time, the school was on Broad Street and the Technical classes were on Mill Street in Lake Charles. During my two years at SOWELA, I studied Electronics and some Aerospace Technology with Mr. House where I received an associate degree in electronics. Mr. John House, was very knowledgeable, and his previous industry experience created a learning atmosphere that encouraged many students to pursue an electronics career. After graduation, I married my high school sweetheart, and we had a young family with the arrival of my beautiful daughters, Kimberly and Pamela. I took a sales position with BFI in Bridge City and moved to Vidor, Texas. Years later I moved to Houston as a business partner and minority owner of Allwaste. Currently as District Sales Manager with Progressive Waste Solutions for Southeast Louisiana, our company is involved in the environmental waste collection and disposal industry. My wife Patricia and I live in Lake Charles, currently serve on the SOWELA Foundation Board, and attend Trinity Baptist Church. My hobbies include riding motorcycles, hunting, cooking, and spending time with family and close friends.

Mark Biagas, Electrical Apprentice Program, 1985

Mark Biagas is the Corporate Treasurer and Business Development Manager with Bay Electric Co., Inc., Newport News, Virginia. He attended SOWELA Technical Community College from 1981-1985 and graduated through the Electrical Apprentice school program and an Electrical Journeymen and Construction Quality Control Manager certified by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. As Business Development Manager, Mark is responsible for the development and implementation of business strategies. He also serves in the capacity of Senior Electrical Estimator. He has more than 28 years of experience in the electrical and general construction industry. Mark plays a pivotal role in identifying and prioritizing project opportunities and cultivating relationships to best position Bay Electric. As a Senior Electrical Estimator, he is responsible for electrical construction projects varying in size from $100,000 to $10 million and estimates jobs in collaboration with management to ensure timely and cost effective completion. Mark has been married for 34 years to Melinda (Honoré) Biagas, and has one daughter and three sons. Mark and Melinda reside in Yorktown, Virginia.

Michelle Brunner Parker, Commercial Art, 1998

Michelle began taking Commercial Art classes during her senior year at Barbe High School. She applied for a scholarship to complete the course and graduated with an Associate Degree in Commercial Art in 1998. It didn’t take her long to figure out what she wanted to be when she grew up. She caught the design bug immediately while taking her first tech-prep class in high school, which led her to pursue a degree in Graphic Communication at SOWELA Technical Community College in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Throughout her technical education, she interned at Louisiana Marketing & Design—at the time, the lake area’s premier advertising agency—where she developed a quiet eye for good design and a drive to master her creative skill-set. Michelle further honed her creative abilities in production and print design and later took the role as the lead designer for Whittlebee Advertising, where her command of excellence won many local and regional awards. She continued to be among the top tier of graphic communicators in Southwest Louisiana as the senior designer for Lake City Printing, creating graphic works that received gold and silver ADDY awards, as well as the much coveted Communicator Award—an award given to only the very best print advertising in the nation. Her design bug proved to be contagious and has lead to a creative partnership with her husband at Parker Brand Creative Services, a traditional & new media marketing group located in Sulphur, Louisiana. Now, the professional marriage has produced two beautiful daughters, and she has nurtured over a decade is during this to work for her clients.

Jennifer Lafleur, Accounting Technology, 2000

I came here as a senior in high school through the STEM program. My major was an associate in Accounting and I came here as a senior in 1998-1999. I graduated from here in February of 2000. In 2000, I furthered my education through the University of Phoenix online program with a Bachelor in Management with an emphasis on accounting. I started working here in January of 2013 as an Accountant, in coming on 13 years of experience in Accounting, and I have just recently been promoted to Director of Student and Restricted Accounts.

Hodge Brown, Process Technology, 2003

Growing up watching my dad work hard and struggle, the images of what we went through as a family are never far from my mind. I will always remember my first construction job. I was a helper for a construction company, and we were digging holes for a tank battery. Alone, with no equipment, I dug a 5-foot-old man—and I was 19. I just remember that I couldn't stop thinking to myself, “I don’t want to be the person who gets poked.” I spent seven more years moving from job to job. Then I decided to attend SOWELA Technical Community College where I was able to receive an affordable quality education. The technical training and skills I received from SOWELA made me as competitive as my colleagues, who often have degrees from major universities. I was one of the first students in the new Process Technology program at SOWELA. I realized I had a big decision to make; I have three kids at home that I need to provide for financially. I thought carefully about my future and decided not to forget my second semester. I did understand that taking care of my kids, working full-time, and going to school at the same time would be an impossible challenge. So I made plans to work and save up enough money so that I could later return to school on a full-time basis. Mark said, I furthered my education through the University of Phoenix online program with a Bachelor in Management with an emphasis on accounting. I started working here in January of 2013 as an Accountant, in coming on 13 years of experience in Accounting, and I have just recently been promoted to Director of Student and Restricted Accounts.
Budd Allemang, Aviation Maintenance Technology, 2008

Francis Gregory (Budd) Allemang, Jr. completed the Aviation Maintenance Technology program in February 2008. He is currently positioned as quality assurance lead inspector at Sikorsky/Global Helicopters in Coatesville, Pennsylvania. Budd was awarded for the FAA inspection authorization test provided by Bakers School of Aeronautics in 2011.

William Nathan Leelwell, Aviation Maintenance Technology, 2008

Nathan has worked as an aviation maintenance technician for three years and has become a senior helicopter flight instructor for Bristow Academy. Flying turbine aircraft and teaching military tactics and night vision goggle operations. He received a recognition award for contributions to his flight department and was appointed a check pilot for Bristow Academy.

Diane Fontenot, Accounting Technology, 2010

“QuickBooks introduced me to the potential capabilities of some software programs, which made learning Excel easy. This class soil enriched my vocabulary and enabled me to speak more coherently. All of the required courses are an everyday tool. English enriched my vocabulary and enabled me to speak more coherently. All of the required courses are an everyday tool.

Kayla Betromand, Practical Nursing (LPN), 2013

Kayla has been working as an LPN for about eight months. Remembering her time at SOWELA she said, “It’s a great school, loved the faculty, and classes were challenging. Obtaining my license was very rewarding.”

Bonnie Greene, Criminal Justice, 2011

Bonnie graduated from SOWELA in December 2011 while maintaining a 4.0 GPA. She is pursuing her Master’s Degree and is seeking to join the U.S. military as an officer. “SOWELA,” she writes, “is a wonderful college and offers many hands-on opportunities to pursue a higher education.”

Jonathan Trahan, Process Technology, 2011

After successfully completing the Process Technology Program in 2011, Jonathan was offered an internship with Chemiex. He was offered a full-time job later that year and is now a B level Operator.

José Chavez, Practical Nursing (LPN), 2013

José (right) is currently employed at a doctor’s office. One of her proud accomplishments is graduating from the nursing program with English as a second language.

Ronnie Peters, Friend of the College

I am Senior Vice President, Division, St. Martin Bank & Trust Company and Chairman of Jeff Davis Parish Economic Development Commission.

All types of education are important. Hopefully all of us continue to learn something new on a daily basis. Some of us like to learn from books and apply that knowledge accordingly and some of us like to learn using not only our minds but also our hands. SOWELA affords the people of this area and especially this parish an opportunity to do both. Having a new building in Jeff Davis Parish is certainly a plus, but more importantly, the enhanced curriculum through training courses now being offered by SOWELA will make the difference in our area as we look to prosper during this economic boom in Southwest Louisiana. Ask the major employers in Southwest Louisiana where some of their most dependable and capable workers come from, and they will tell you they are from Jeff Davis Parish. I often think about how many people I know who have worked for Leevac as class A welders, at the plants in Lake Charles in all types of capacities, the farms of the southwest, and the oilfields of this nation and the world. Our people in this region know how to work and prove it daily. I am also a proud supporter of SOWELA because for years my mother taught at SOWELA. It has been important to my family. I feel fortunate to have a quality institution led by quality administrators right here in the parish I love so much. The new SOWELA location soon to be a reality is proof of what people working together can do to improve our community. This new venture will help make us better not only today, but for the future and more importantly for our future generation.

From funding student scholarships and equipping classrooms with the latest technology to helping support the programs and campus expansion that helps prepare students for the jobs they’re seeking, your gifts have a direct impact on the daily lives of our students.

Your gifts are important and every gift matters. Please let us know of your interest in SOWELA and how you would like to support our efforts by calling Randy Jolly in the Advancement Office at 337-421-6903 or email: randy.jolly@sowela.edu.
Where Are You Now?

Southwest Louisiana Technical Community College (SOWELA) is changing and growing to be the comprehensive technical community college the region needs.
You are part of our heritage and what you’ve done after graduating or completing SOWELA gives encouragement and hope to our current students, faculty, and staff.
We want to know where you are, what you’re doing, and be able to keep in touch.
Please take a few minutes and send us an email or go on Facebook and let us know your name, what you’re doing and some accomplishment or recognition, where you’re employed, and the city and state you reside.
If you can send a high resolution photo (300 dpi) that would be great.
Email: alumni@sowela.edu. Or call 337-421-6903 or connect with us on Facebook at https://www.facebook.com/#!/mysowela
We hope to include your story in the next issue of the SOWELA Magazine.

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