Southern Oregon University

The origins of Southern Oregon University, situated on a leafy hillside overlooking Ashland, go back to 1869 when a group of local citizens, calling themselves the Rogue River Valley Educational Society, met to plan an academy or college. Although they found some funding, acquired a site, and began construction that year, the money proved to be insufficient to complete the planned building. In 1872, under the leadership of the Reverand Joseph Skidmore, the building was completed, and the Ashland Academy opened in November. Because of its continuing rocky finances, the Methodist Episcopal Church took over the academy in 1878.

In 1882, a year after the academy granted its first three diplomas, the Oregon legislature authorized the creation of state normal schools in Ashland and Monmouth to train future teachers and prepare students to enter university. Ashland Academy became Ashland College and Normal School, but state funding did not come with the school's new status. Over the next several years, the school was operated and owned by, at different times, the Methodist Episcopal Church, as well as various individuals and groups, including a private association of Ashland citizens. The state officially took over the school in 1899 when the legislature approved funding for it, acquired the property, and established a state board of regents to oversee it. The school continued to struggle financially, however, even as it improved course offerings. By 1903, the college was the state's largest normal school, with 270 students.

When the legislature failed to fund the state's normal schools in 1909 and the Board of Regents decided to close Ashland College, local citizens donated enough money so that the students could finish out the school year. They then began a campaign to establish the Southern Oregon State Normal School (SONS). After fifteen years of lobbying, placing initiatives on state ballots, and speaking about the need for teacher training in the southern part of the state, the legislature reauthorized a normal school in Ashland and provided funds to construct a new building on a site donated by the town.

SONS had 22 faculty and 273 students when it reopened in the fall of 1926. Since then, it has become a comprehensive regional university with an undergraduate liberal arts program with thirty-four majors and a number of graduate programs. The school has had five name changes, the most recent in 1997, when it became Southern Oregon University (SOU). In the fall of 2008, SOU had 198 faculty members and 5,092 students.

One of the university's most notable accomplishments was the launching of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) by Angus Bowmer, an English professor who staged the first performance during Ashland's Fourth of July celebration in 1935. SOU has maintained a relationship with the festival ever since; guest artists and lecturers from OSF are part of the school's theatre classes and productions, and students serve as interns. With the Institute of Renaissance Studies, founded by Margery Bailey in the 1950s, and the Center for Shakespeare Studies, founded in 1986, the university has nurtured a holistic approach to studying Shakespeare's writings and the Elizabethan period through performance, teaching, and scholarship. The Margery Bailey Renaissance Collection of over 7,000 volumes in the Lenn and Dixie Hannon Library is a major support to the Shakespeare Studies curriculum.

SOU also boasts Lawson Inada, an emeritus professor of writing, who was Oregon Poet Laureate in 2006-2010. In 2008, Michael Geisen, a School of Education graduate, was named National Teacher of the Year.

The Rogue Community College-Southern Oregon University Higher Education Center (RCC/SOU HEC) opened September 2008 in downtown Medford. The center was designed to serve the residents of Jackson County and to help students move seamlessly from a community college environment to SOU. In 2008, the Environmental Protection Agency listed SOU on its "Top 20 List of Green Colleges and Universities."

Written by Teresa Montgomery

Further Reading:

Kreisman, Arthur. *Remembering: A History of Southern Oregon University*. Eugene, Ore.: University of Oregon Press, 2002.

O'Harra, Marjorie. *Ashland: The First 130 Years.* Rev. ed. Ashland, Ore.: Northwest Passages, 1986.

Southern Oregon University. http://sou.edu.

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