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New York Times touts Ashland's 'HIDDEN GEM'

By ANITA BURKE

Mail Tribune

The New York Times has turned a spotlight on Southern Oregon University — especially its theater program — by placing it on a list of schools that offer quality undergraduate experiences despite being relatively unknown on the national stage.

An article in a special section on education published Sunday named 20 schools that might not attract the attention of prestige-hungry students with an eye for the Ivy League, but are worth a look.

In fact, these "stealth powerhouses" can offer an escape from the pressures of trying to get into a top-tier college as well as a more personalized education, the article reported. Also described as "hidden gems," these small campuses offer easy connections with professors and additional opportunities for students to get involved, it explained.

"This is exactly what we've been saying about ourselves," said Barbara Porter, associate vice president for marketing and public affairs. "It's what we hear from students. It's great that what we know is now widely known."

The article specifically touted SOU's strong ties with the Tony Award-winning Oregon Shakespeare Festival, which was founded by a professor from the school back in 1935. It also praised the university's strong English and liberal arts curriculum, its summer training program for theater teachers, and a Shakespeare studies minor that bridges academic study and performance.

"The experience students get is one of practical expertise as well as theory," said Chris Sackett, chairman of SOU's theater arts department.

Professionals from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival work with the school as guest artists and adjunct faculty, Sackett said. Students can gain hands-on experience at the festival.

The festival and the university also collaborate on Elderhostel programs, summer camps, including an intensive one for high school juniors happening on campus this week, and other events for school children, said Joan Langley, director of education at Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

Theater student Cody Roberts, originally from Royal City, Wash., a farming community in central Washington, came to the Ashland campus four and a half years ago on the advice of his brother, who recommended the theater program and the Oregon location.

"I've learned a lot about myself," said Roberts, who is now preparing his senior thesis show featuring SOU students and alumni. "This program is very competitive but really encourages you in your art.

"You work with your peers and whether you're interested in performance or technical, you will have an opportunity to learn in every area."

The chance for students to get involved and personalize their educational experience is available across campus, not just in the theater program, Porter said.

The Times' article, with its focus on undergraduate teaching and growing scholarship at the universities it described as "off the beaten path," should benefit the entire campus, she said.

"This is about fitting into a profile and helps all programs," Porter said.

"Being recognized in this way is a dream come true, based on our vision for SOU pursued tenaciously," SOU President Elisabeth Zinser said in a prepared statement. "It spotlights for prospective students and their parents the wisdom of considering SOU for a superb education."

Other schools noted in the list included Evergreen State and Whitman College in Washington; Pitzer College, Santa Clara University and Mills College in California; Colorado College in Colorado; the University of Oklahoma — Norman in Oklahoma; Macalester College and Carleton College in Minnesota; Grinnell College and Cornell College in Iowa, Kalamazoo College in Michigan; Earlham College, Miami University, Kenyon College and College of Wooster in Ohio; State University of New York — Geneseo and Union College in New York; and Wheaton College in Massachusetts.

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