Lee named a Bellwether Award finalist

Weekend College Recognized

Lee College received notification in late December that it was one of ten national finalists selected for the prestigious Bellwether Award on the merit of its Weekend College program. The Bellwether Awards are conferred by The Bellwether College Consortium housed within The University of Florida's College of Education.

The Bellwether Awards are given annually to community colleges that have implemented innovatively outstanding programs with demonstrated success. Winners were announced at the end of January 2018. While Lee College was not among the winners this year it was, nonetheless a significant achievement to have been named a finalist as it was also the college's first time to participate in the competition.

The Bellwether Awards identify and promote effective post-secondary programs for replication at higher education institutions across the nation and consequently positions colleges to pursue various funding opportunities. The consortium also provides a platform for its members to collaborate on potential joint ventures while having access to educational thought leaders.

"This is the first time Lee College has been recognized for this prestigious, national distinction," says Lee College President, Dr. Dennis Brown. "It's especially fitting given the significance of the college's Weekend College and its impact on the futures of our students. This program is literally changing lives by providing access to education in a format that speaks to real-life scenarios. People have families – they have to go to work. The Weekend College format at Lee College makes it possible. It truly is transformative for our students. I couldn't be more proud of everyone involved in the Weekend College — especially our students."

Lee College's Weekend College is targeted to adult learners and working students. Funded through a $2.7 million First in the World Grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the Weekend College gives students the opportunity to earn associate degrees in less than 2 years by attending classes only on Friday evenings and Saturdays. Five majors are currently offered: Transfer in Allied Health, General Studies – Social Science Concentration, Business Administration and Management, Industrial Welding Technology and Computer and Network Maintenance Technology. The Weekend College recently graduated its first class in May of this year less than 24 months of the program's first start. Lee is the only community college district in Texas — and one of only four community colleges in the entire country — selected to receive First in the World grant funds.

Of the first cohort of students to enroll in the Weekend College in Fall 2015, fully 70 percent completed their associate degree programs in less than 24 months – significantly more than the state average of 12 percent that measures out to three years. Much of that success is attributed to the program's unique design, which keeps the same groups of students together from enrollment to graduation or transfer; offers courses at multiple campus locations, with many delivered in a hybrid format that blends online and classroom instruction; provides block scheduling that enables students to know exactly which courses to take and when they will be held; and ensures Weekend College courses are never dropped or filled to capacity. Students also work with a

completion coach who helps them apply and enroll, secure financial aid and conquer any challenges that arise during the program or after graduation.

Speaking to the success of the program, Dr. Veronique Tran, Vice President of Instruction for Lee College says, “The power of the relationships being built between the students, staff and faculty cannot be understated. Those connections are powerful. It’s certainly one of the primary reasons we are seeing so many students stay in the program and graduate.” Tran goes on to echo Brown’s comment regarding the way the Weekend College is structured. “By developing a program built to suit the needs of working families, we empower those students. All the commitment in the world falls by the wayside if the schedule doesn’t work for the student. But when we are able to meet people where they are and making access possible, they flourish. Lee College’s Weekend College is proof of that.”

College representatives will be traveling to Florida in January to attend The Bellwether Finalist Awards presentation. The awards ceremony is part of a national policy summit sponsored jointly by the National Council for State Directors of Community Colleges and the Institute of Higher Education (IHE) at the University of Florida. The summit provides an interactive forum for higher education leaders on the topics of recruiting, retention, and success of adult learners and latest trends in adult learner policies and programs on a national, state, and institutional level.