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OCCA announces 2024-25 Howard Cherry Award honorees

SALEM, Ore. – The Oregon Community College Association (OCCA) is pleased to announce the winners of the annual Howard Cherry Awards, which celebrate the contributions that local advocates, administrators and board members have made to the benefit of community colleges in Oregon.

- **Community College Advocate:** *Senator Michael Dembrow (D-Portland)*
- **Community College Administrator:** *Dr. Lisa Skari (President, Mt. Hood Community College)*
- **Community College Board Member:** *Chris Brown (Blue Mountain Community College)*

The Howard Cherry Awards are named for the late Dr. Howard Cherry, a lifelong advocate for education and community involvement. Dr. Cherry was also a founding member of the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) and was a trustee of the American Association of Community & Junior Colleges.

"These remarkable individuals have shown extraordinary leadership and commitment to the mission of Oregon's community colleges," stated Abby Lee, Executive Director of OCCA. "Their passion, creativity, and advocacy have not only enhanced educational experiences but have also inspired many to engage in the vital work of creating brighter futures. We take great pride in honoring their contributions and eagerly anticipate the continued positive influence they will have on students and communities across the state."

These outstanding individuals will be honored during the Howard Cherry Awards Banquet at OCCA's Annual Conference November 7, 2024, in Gleneden Beach, Ore., at Salishan Coastal Lodge.

Community College Advocate:

Senator Michael Dembrow (D-Portland) – Since he was first elected to the Oregon House of Representative in 2009 and then the State Senate in 2013, Sen. Michael Dembrow has been the leading voice in the legislature for higher education, but particularly for community colleges and students. In Sen. Dembrow's 15-year legislative career he has served as chair of the House Higher Education committee, the Senate Education Committee and as a member of the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Education, which passes budgets for all levels of Oregon public education.

Throughout his leadership Sen. Dembrow had a profound and positive effect on community colleges and the students and communities they serve. In 2018, Sen. Dembrow led the charge to open Oregon's financial aid programs like the Oregon Opportunity Grant and the Oregon Promise to all students who attended and graduated from Oregon high schools regardless of their documentation status. In 2023, Sen. Dembrow introduced and passed SB 523 to empower community colleges to offer Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degrees, which opened the possibility of greater access to four-year nursing degrees across the state. In 2024, Sen. Dembrow passed legislation creating a workgroup to make recommendations on how to transition community colleges from traditional developmental education to evidence-based corequisite education, and

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legislation directing the Higher Education Coordinating Commission to calculate the cost of offering applied baccalaureate programs at community colleges and then recommend potential funding for these programs.

These are just a few examples of the legacy that Sen. Dembrow will leave when he retires at the end of 2024. In his legislative career he has been a strident and consistent champion for students and community colleges on so many issues that have made a positive impact on the lives of Oregon community colleges and the students we serve.

Community College Administrator:

Dr. Lisa Skari (President, Mt. Hood Community College) – Dr. Lisa Skari has been the President of Mt. Hood Community College (MHCC) in Gresham since 2018. Her contributions have not only shaped the landscape of MHCC but have had a lasting impact on the broader community surrounding the college, and through her work at Oregon President’s Council she has elevated the impact and standing of Oregon’s community colleges. She is a leader who stands out for her unique and humble approach, one that harnesses her extensive skills to bring people together to create positive change. Her leadership style is rooted in a student-centered philosophy, with equity being the cornerstone of all her initiatives.

One of Dr. Skari’s most notable achievements has been her unwavering commitment to advancing the college’s equity work. Through her vision and leadership, MHCC has embarked on a comprehensive journey to become a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive institution. This work has permeated all levels of the college, engaging faculty, staff, and students alike.

In addition, Dr. Skari played a crucial role in the HECC funding formula task force, where her insights and advocacy were instrumental in shaping funding decisions that support all Oregon community colleges, including the smaller and rural institutions. Dr. Skari’s commitment to student-centered leadership, equity, and community engagement sets a high standard for all in the field of higher education.

Community College Board Member:

Chris Brown (Blue Mountain Community College) – Chris Brown, a retired Colonel in the U.S. Army, has served on the Board of Directors for Blue Mountain Community College in eastern Oregon since 2015. Chris, who lives with his wife Kathy on their ranch in Heppner, has long been a proponent of the college and its students. Prior to joining the BMCC Board, Chris was an integral volunteer for the BMCC capital construction bond campaign in May 2015, serving as a campaign lead in Morrow County and helping secure \$23 million in funds. His proximity to the college and its students during this campaign created an even stronger passion for BMCC’s mission. He won a write-in campaign to fill a vacant seat on the Board of Directors in 2015 just months after the bond’s approval by voters. Chris was then selected to chair the Bond Oversight Committee to oversee the use of the funds for the capital construction projects at three locations in two counties. Chris brought a strong commitment to fiscal integrity and transparency to the bond oversight work, garnering community praise for his leadership.

As a member of the BMCC Board, Chris twice served as Chair, as well as Budget Committee and Audit Committee chair for the past four years. He also served as the OCCA representative for BMCC from 2015-2023, and led the BMCC Presidential Search Committee in 2021. Chris is known for being extremely thoughtful and inclusive as a leader, and he consistently reaches out to other partners to gain perspective, clarify issues, generate possible solutions, and advocate on behalf of the college. Chris recognizes that BMCC’s 18,000 square mile service area means that the college serves a vast group of students, community members, and partners, and their needs are not always the same. He advocates effectively with all college partners to work together to better serve the community. Chris does his homework, asks the hard questions, and is willing to see issues through multiple

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perspectives. He is an outstanding ambassador of BMCC, and is supportive of making sure BMCC remains relevant, reliable, and accessible to the communities it serves.

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The Oregon Community College Association (OCCA) represents the 17 publicly chartered community colleges and their locally elected board members in Oregon. Founded in 1962, OCCA's purpose is to support the colleges before policy-makers and partners whose actions affect the well-being of community colleges across the state.