

# The Impact of Education in the Siuslaw Region

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SIUSLAW  
VISION  
Putting People at the Center

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## Executive Summary

Siuslaw Vision convened a team of community members in the spring of 2018 to evaluate the Vision's impact on education in the Siuslaw Region. Working with consultants from Dialogues in Action, the volunteer group learned evaluation techniques and designed and implemented an evaluation of the Educated People element of the Siuslaw Vision. The purpose was to identify gaps in education offerings and reveal themes, opportunities, and needs.

For the qualitative evaluation, an in-depth interview protocol was designed to compile data about the structural changes resulting from the Vision's program. A stratified sampling technique was implemented to select a representative sample and 37 interviews were completed; data was analyzed inductively using a modified version of thematic analysis. The most significant themes were brought forward as findings in this report. For the quantitative evaluation, a survey was designed and distributed to collect data. The survey was completed by 116 respondents.

Report findings: 1. Education is the Key!, 2. Choose Your Own Learning Adventure, 3. RSVP to Learn!, 4. Everybody Needs a Learning Buddy, 5. The Early Bird Gets the Learn, 6. It's Not Just the Money, 7. We're All in This Together, 8. You, As a Teacher!, 9. You Don't Know What You Don't Know, 10. The Awareness-Engagement Feedback Loop, 11. Connecting the Dots.

The Vision's intended impacts were learning desire, learning ability, learning connectivity, and community capacity to support learning. The interview and survey

questions were designed to elicit responses to evaluate whether and to what extent those impacts occurred. The findings naturally grouped into three general categories: personal interest, motivation, and welcome; obstacles to engaging in learning opportunities; and, engagement now and into the future.

Data indicated Siuslaw Residents derived joy and personal satisfaction from learning. Education was seen as a way to achieve goals and enrich the community. For many Residents, lack of time, family obligations, lack of reliable transportation, lack of internet access, and cost, were barriers to education. Data also pointed to a perceived community split between working-age and retired people, and between long-time Residents and newer transplants. Lack of a community center was identified as an impediment to learning; many in the Region envisioned a community center model as a hub for learning, teaching, and sharing information. Data showed that increased awareness leads to higher participation; personal invitations pay off and can even overcome perceived learning barriers.

Findings revealed the Vision could maximize education participation by supporting events that minimize barriers; there was a distinct need for child/family-friendly events, and for learning among peer groups. By making an effort to be inclusive, groups would help bridge community divides. Bringing people together in shared experience could improve understanding and acceptance through recognition of shared interests, values, and aspirations while learning in peer groups can facilitate entrance to education for the less engaged. Communication about upcoming events was not yet effective. Organizers should use multiple avenues to reach the broadest possible audience.

The evaluation identified a strong belief in the Siuslaw Region that learning together could bring the community together. Once people took part in learning events and began to feel they were a part of the community they were more likely to seek out and participate in future learning opportunities.

## Introduction

### About Siuslaw Vision – Putting People at the Center

The Siuslaw Vision is the result of a two-year community visioning process that included more than 1,200 Residents from all of the Siuslaw Region communities from Dunes City to Deadwood. From survey results and community conversations, the Vision identified six elements to focus on:

- Working people (jobs/economy),
- Happy people (health and human services),
- Educated people (lifelong learning),
- Connected people (infrastructure/public services),
- Creative people (arts and culture), and
- Active people (recreation/environment).

The Vision Keepers steering committee and contractors work to support projects that are important to the people in our community and to connect people with each other and with resources to help them accomplish their goals. For more information about Siuslaw Vision or to get involved, *contact [siuslawvision@gmail.com](mailto:siuslawvision@gmail.com)*.

### Project Impact Education Evaluation

Working with Portland consultants from Dialogues in Action, Siuslaw Vision brought together a team of community members in the spring of 2018 to evaluate the impact the Vision has had on education in the Siuslaw Region during the past few years. The volunteer group participated in a series of monthly workshops to learn evaluation techniques, and then applied them to design and implement an evaluation focused on the Educated People element of the Siuslaw Vision. Through this work our hope was to see where there were



gaps in education offerings and to identify common themes, opportunities, and needs. Although focused on education, this project served as a hands-on learning experience that can be replicated in other areas of our community.

## Methods

### Evaluation Methodology

The aim of our evaluation was to see what kind and quality of impact the education program has had so far in the Siuslaw Region. To understand this, we explored two broad research questions:

- What kind and quality of impact are we having on the people of the Siuslaw Region?
- What aspects of our program are causing this impact?

Over the course of the project, we (a) developed and refined our ideas of intended impact and indicators of this impact, (b) designed and implemented a mixed methods outcome evaluation using both qualitative and quantitative means to collect and analyze data, (c) identified findings, and (d) considered the implications of those findings for program improvement and innovation.

This project began with a focus on the work of identifying and clarifying the intended impact of education in the Siuslaw Region. Once the ideas of impact had been developed, we used the Heart Triangle™ model (Patty, 2013) to identify qualitative and quantitative indicators of impact focused on the mental, behavioral, and emotional changes in people of the Siuslaw Region that indicate we are achieving our impact. We then used these indicators to design a qualitative interview protocol and a quantitative questionnaire to measure our progress toward achieving our intended impact.

### Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

For the qualitative portion of the evaluation, we designed an in-depth interview protocol to compile data about the structural, qualitative changes resulting from our program. We used a purposeful stratified sampling technique to select a representative sample from the population we serve. We drew our sample from the following strata of our population:

- Working adults
- Non-working adults
- Retired adults
- Those who are users and non-users of education in the community
- Those living throughout the Siuslaw Region

Our interview team consisted of 11 community members from all geographic areas of the Siuslaw Region, and included the co-chairs of the Siuslaw Vision Keepers (steering committee) and the Vision coordinator.

We then convened 37 one-on-one interviews lasting between 45 minutes and one hour in length with a sample from the identified strata of the population. Interviewers gathered the data by capturing the conversation through written notes during the interviews and filled in the notes immediately after the interview to obtain a substantive rendering of the interview. Of those interviewed, 62% were 55 and younger and 38% 56 and older; 59% were female. Our sample included representatives from four of the six geographic areas within the Region. Florence, Mapleton, and Deadwood were overrepresented in the data compared to the population of the Region, while Unincorporated areas were underrepresented, and Swisshome and Dunes City were not sampled at all (Figure 1). The geographic breakdown of survey responses generally mirrors the population breakdown of the region although survey responses seem to have over represented Dunes City and Deadwood and underrepresented Unincorporated areas. However, some respondents may have self identified as living in one of the listed communities when, in fact, they reside in an unincorporated area.

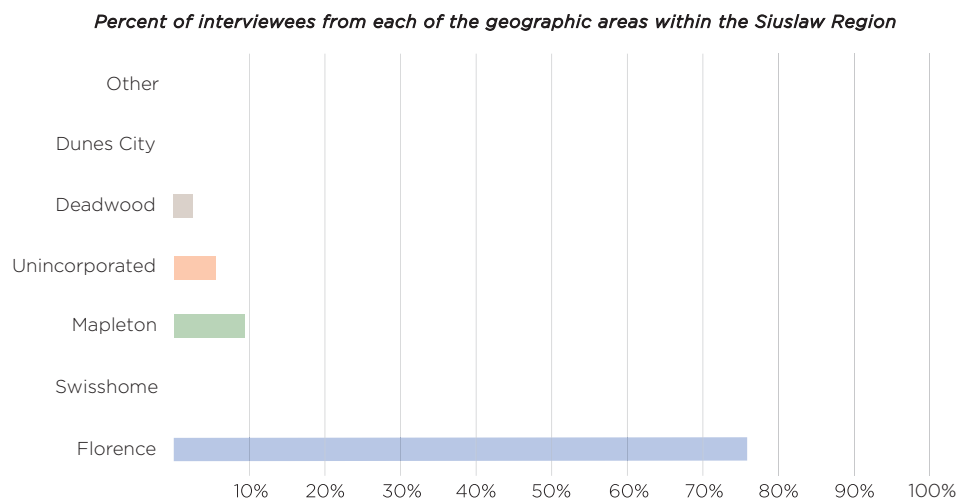
We analyzed the data inductively using a modified version of thematic analysis. Interviewers implemented the first three phases of thematic analysis (becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, and identifying themes) for each interview. The interviewers analyzed the raw data by reviewing each interview four times through each of four lenses, using each to illuminate a different aspect of what the data reveal about the research question. The data were then gathered into four categories to serve as an initial set of codes. Then, intra-interview themes were generated based on the pervasive insights from the data. This process allowed us to interpret the meaning and significance of the data from each interview.

Next, we brought all of the data analyses and initial themes together and implemented the next two phases of thematic analysis (reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes). We reviewed the initial themes as a team to identify the overarching and inter-interview themes that emerged from the full scope of our data analysis to illuminate the collective insights and discoveries. We mapped these themes visually and examined them in various ways to gain greater definition of the features of the themes, causes and catalysts of the themes, new or surprising insights related to the themes, and relationships between the themes that were revealed in the data. We then determined the most significant and meaningful discoveries and brought them forward as findings to be described in the final phase of thematic analysis: this report.

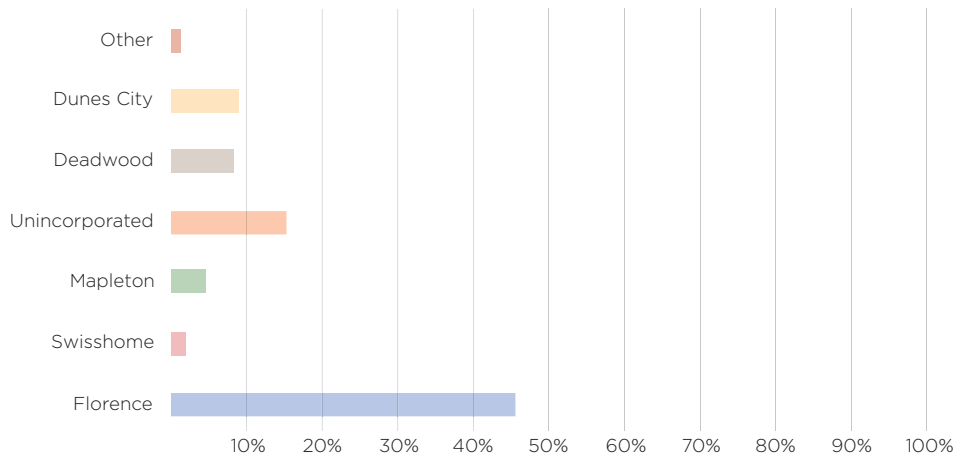


## Quantitative Data and Analysis

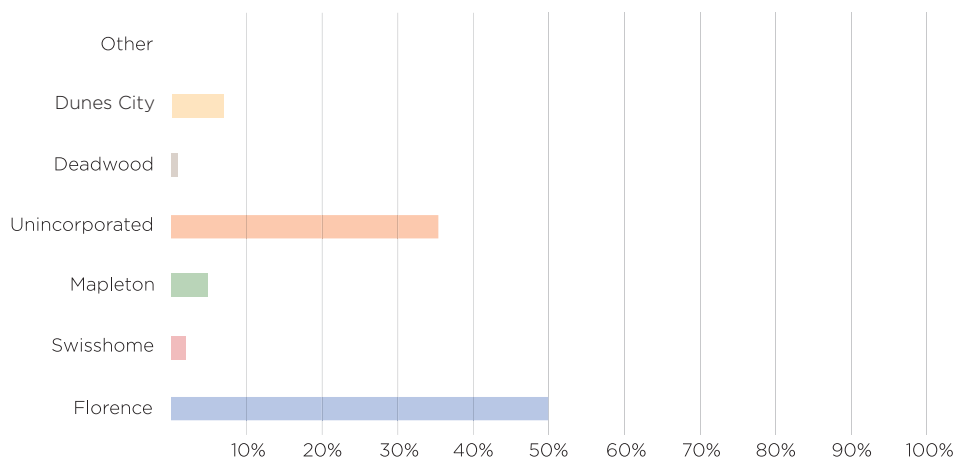
For the quantitative portion of the evaluation, we designed a questionnaire survey to collect data on our quantitative indicators of impact. The survey was disseminated in print and online forms through Siuslaw Vision’s RiverCal.org website and was available at community locations such as post offices and libraries. The link was shared via Siuslaw Vision’s Facebook page and email list, through personal emails from Project team members, at a community nonprofit workshop, through an article in *The Siuslaw News* and as a public service announcement on KXCR radio. Community partners also shared the link in their circles and the Florence Area Chamber of Commerce distributed it to members in the Chamber Blast email. The questionnaire survey was viewed by 297 and was completed by 116, a 39% response rate. Nearly one-third of the responses were collected at the nonprofit workshop. Eleven percent of respondents have lived in the Siuslaw Region for 2 or fewer years, 30% for 3 to 10 years, and 59% for 11 or more years. The data were analyzed primarily using measures of central tendency. We identified key insights, patterns, and gaps within the data and incorporated these discoveries into the related findings, making special note of where the quantitative data corroborated or contradicted the qualitative findings. To further inspect the data for subtleties within the results we reanalyzed the data by age category and again by area of residence. We found that 38% of the respondents were 55 and younger, while the remaining 62% were 56 and older. The geographic breakdown of survey responses generally mirrors the population breakdown of the Region (Figure 1). However, survey responses seem to have overrepresented Dunes City and Deadwood, and underrepresented Unincorporated areas. Additionally, two survey respondents lived outside of the Siuslaw Region but considered themselves highly connected.



**Percent of survey respondents from each of the geographic areas within the Siuslaw Region**



**Percent of the Siuslaw Region population residing in each of the Region's geographic areas.**



The most significant findings from this evaluation are described in the following report narrative. We begin with a list of the findings and follow with a detailed description and the significance of each on the subsequent pages. We end by summarizing the results and offering conclusions. We highlight encouraging points and note areas where additional work is needed.



## Findings

### **1. Education is the Key!**

Siuslaw Residents love and value learning and what it can provide for them; education is the key to whatever they want.

### **2. Choose Your Own Learning Adventure**

The focus of learning is on what is currently interesting or useful to the learner.

### **3. RSVP to Learn!**

Reaching out to our neighbors and inviting them to learn is a shared responsibility that helps bring the community together.

### **4. Everybody Needs a Learning Buddy**

Receiving invitations from and learning within a group of peers is motivating and welcoming to learners.

### **5. The Early Bird Gets the Learn**

More child friendly and welcoming spaces, and events and opportunities for children, teens, and young adults will result in future engagement.

### **6. It's Not Just the Money**

Financial and lifestyle barriers present an obstacle to education in the Region.

### **7. We're All in This Together**

A community split between people with different backgrounds affects people's perception of learning opportunities.

### **8. You, As a Teacher!**

The Siuslaw Region is rich with expertise that often goes untapped due to a lack of recognition of the value of a person's knowledge and skills and the lack of a clear path for how that knowledge can be shared.

### **9. You Don't Know What You Don't Know**

Education opportunities are only as good as our communication about them.

### **10. The Awareness-Engagement Feedback Loop**

The more awareness of and engagement in learning opportunities you have, the more likely you are to continue to engage in and have hope for the future expansion of these opportunities in the community.

### **11. Connecting the Dots**

Community connections can build continuous positive relationships.

## 1. Education is the Key!

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Siuslaw Residents love and value learning and what it can provide for them; education is the key to whatever they want.

The interview data reveal that Siuslaw Residents love learning and take joy in learning. Many prefer hands-on learning: face-to-face and peer-to-peer learning. They feel they learn more from other people, one on one, than from books or formal teaching. Survey data support this and indicate that the efforts of the Siuslaw Vision are having a positive impact, with 68% of respondents saying that learning opportunities were more valuable in the past year than before.

Siuslaw Residents like education that is practical and useful for them. Learning is personal. They like education that reflects current interests. In fact, 91% of the survey respondents had recently incorporated something they learned into their lives. Local Residents believe education is worthy. They value education because they want to stretch themselves and grow. “Every single moment is a new opportunity to develop the brain. I want a healthy brain,” said one interviewee. Residents like learning situations that have positive energy, even if they are uncomfortable. One interview subject expressed a need for “willingness to learn or to grow ... wanting to put yourself out there ... feeling vulnerable is important for open discussion.” They place a high value on both learning, and those who continue to learn. They believe that learning is healthy for people, it gets people out and involved in the community; the social aspects of learning are beneficial. One Resident’s comments summed up the sentiments we heard throughout our interviews, “If you don’t learn something new every day, you’re wasting your time.”

In our interviews we heard that Siuslaw Residents want to learn new things and they want to share that knowledge with others, especially with youth. As one Resident expressed, “It’s such a joy being around kids and learning.” Another Resident said, “It would be nice to implement some inclusive environments for young adults, [such as art, spoken word, music, or sharing ideas].”

Our community views education as a way to help others. Residents see both learning and teaching as worthy. They believe learning is important because things change. They like learning because they want to do better at their jobs or to become a repository of knowledge for their colleagues. One interviewee stated “I like learning new things to help do a better job taking care of people.” Some Residents are willing to share their knowledge and teach others, though many undervalue their ability to teach. The data also show that Residents like to learn from people who are not like them—people of different ages and

backgrounds. However, some Residents indicate ageism is a concern in the Siuslaw Region, e.g. older people are unwilling to be taught by someone younger than they are. In contrast, some younger Residents enjoy learning from older Residents.

Interview data indicate local Residents view education as the key: The key to whatever the person wants, the key to future options. Residents believe education and degrees lead to better jobs, promotions, stability, security, and financial benefits, like being able to buy a house and being able to help others—in a word, freedom. Education = Confidence. “I love just finding out new information, linking it to things I already know, the whole process,” said one woman we talked to about the value of education. “I really like the aftermath of learning—I’m not as easy to fool anymore.”

Residents especially desire CTE (Career Technical Education) learning. Residents who are parents of young children want their kids to be able to learn what they need to have the job that they want. They want enough education available to allow high school students to graduate and find a job here that will allow them to be able to afford to stay in the Region and live here.

## Significance

One of the main goals of the Vision is that Residents be lifelong learners. The value of that to local Residents is to enable them to learn what they need and want to learn, at a time and place that works for them. That could mean professional development to get a better job, algebra for college placement, or cooking skills to improve their health. The finding that Residents love and enjoy learning is a positive indicator that the Vision’s efforts are on the right track. Insight gained into specific preferences in learning, e.g. face to face, can help guide future efforts and ensure that learning opportunities best serve Residents’ needs and desires. The finding that Residents value both learning and sharing what they know with others is significant because the Vision can work to empower and support Residents to teach each other. It also is a way for local people to connect with each other, increasing enjoyment and quality of life for all. Ageism will likely be both a challenge and a benefit in this effort; multigenerational learning and teaching is identified in the Vision. It is also encouraging that Residents value education, as that is an additional goal of the Vision. The recognition that learning leads to confidence is significant. Having confidence in themselves leads to success for Siuslaw Residents, in whatever arena they choose. The finding that local Residents view education as the key to whatever they want is also encouraging. With that belief framework, it will hopefully be easier to get Residents to support needed learning opportunities and facilities.



## 2. Choose Your Own Learning Adventure

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The focus of learning is on what is currently interesting or useful to the learner.

In our interviews we heard that people seek out opportunities to learn about subjects that are interesting to them and to gain knowledge that will be useful at this point in their lives. This was true for people of all educational levels, backgrounds, and age categories. One interviewee said “I love to learn about new things but if they are not interesting or relevant, I don’t remember as much.” Another interviewee stated that he wanted to “continue to learn small amounts in his spare time, utilizing things I can learn independently.” Specific areas of interest mentioned were physical therapy, home maintenance and improvement projects, healthy cooking, the surrounding natural world, and career technical or trades. “I want to learn practical things that can help me live better, like cooking healthy on a budget, how to can, and history and regional things to help teach us what makes the Region special, like Native American culture, salmon fishing, crabbing and clamming,” said one interviewee. However, the data show that at times the need or desire to gain skills required by a job will act as an external motivator to seek out formal educational opportunities.

Survey data support the idea that learning focus will vary depending on interests. The survey asked people to identify the one thing they would most like to learn in the future. Responses fell into six main categories: Job Training/Computer Skills, Personal Enrichment, Health and Wellness, Financial, Life Skills, and Nonprofit/Community Building/Social Justice. The largest number of responses fell into the Nonprofit/Community Building/Social Justice category, 27% overall (30% of those 55 and younger and 24% of those 56 and older). Siuslaw Residents across all ages are interested in building community and increasing nonprofit capacity, with a smaller but noticeable focus on fostering opportunity for children and youth. This particular focus might have been highlighted in the data because a large number of survey respondents completed the questionnaire at a nonprofit training workshop. The next two most popular categories were Personal Enrichment and Life Skills, each with 19% of the total responses. However, for Personal Enrichment, music and art were mainly mentioned by those in the older group and languages and outdoor recreation by those in the younger group. Additionally, responses within Life Skills mainly focused around retirement for the older group.

The emphasis placed on opportunities for technical and trades education was the most thoroughly explored in the interview data. When examined more closely, the focus on career technical education and the trades was two-pronged. There was a focus on the

availability of training for workers and a separate focus on broadening the perception of students. The data show that the emphasis on career technical education and learning opportunities in the trades for workers was an outgrowth of people wanting training available for the jobs that are prevalent in our Region. The second focus of the emphasis was on high school-based learning opportunities in the trades. One person said there are “few electives at the high school; we need more classes like automotive [and more trades].” This was partially driven by the hope that exposing young people to a wider variety of possible careers during secondary education would ease the transition from high school to the next phase of life. The idea was that a greater awareness of non-academic options would decrease the amount of time it took for young adults to identify and begin an educational program or apprenticeship that fit their goals. Those students who do not wish to obtain a two- or four-year degree, or who desire to work in the trades may benefit from the opportunity to explore the possibilities as part of their secondary education rather than trying to gain employment or internships to test the waters, so to speak, after graduation.

While there was a general awareness of the local community college, participants were often not familiar with the course offerings. Some interviewees were unsure about what was available, while others assumed that courses they felt were important were offered, and yet others were disappointed with the available courses. As one person said “I was hoping there were opportunities to understand personal finances better.” Despite the confusions and criticisms interviewees brought forth, the overarching message was of hope and perseverance. “I’m committed to learning for myself,” said a recent retiree. “I’m very motivated to continue learning for my own personal development.”

### Significance

The desire of people to learn things that are interesting to them now, especially the things they deem personally useful or utilitarian in their lives, presents a bit of a conundrum for proponents of community-based learning. Information on some topics, such as healthful cooking or the surrounding natural world, may be more easily obtained in a community-learning setting. The areas of interest are broad enough to attract a group of interested learners, as well as knowledge-sharers. These areas are commonly viewed as interesting and accessible. Information on other topics may be more difficult to obtain through community-based learning. For example, a deeper understanding of required physical therapy or the detailed procedure to complete a project to maintain or improve a home or vehicle may only be interesting or useful to a small number of individuals at any given time. Additionally, the details pertinent to each person would almost certainly be different. A person who simply wants to complete a project or training regimen may choose to rely

on books or online instructional materials instead of searching out a person-to-person learning opportunity. One reason is the relative ease of finding the resources. Finding an expert on the topic who is available to instruct may be much more difficult than simply finding the same information in an online search or the library stacks. While it is likely that individuals in your community possess the knowledge you are seeking, discovering and connecting with such an individual may pose such an obstacle that people opt for the easier but less connected route. “I find myself definitely committed to learning in my own way, through things like podcasts and reading,” said one interviewee.

We have been thinking a lot about learning in informal settings such as community-based learning and learning among individuals, but the focus in the data on career technical education and in the trades often cannot be obtained in this informal manner. If a person is going to successfully leverage the learning into a career opportunity, a certificate or license will often be required to demonstrate mastery of the subject matter. The disconnect between our focus on community-led learning and more formal education may be a product of the perception of definitions. It is possible that although we attempted to describe our broad definition of learning, the interviewees may have based their answers substantially on their perception of learning, which is likely more restricted to formal educational opportunities. However, the focus on career technical and trades education may reflect a desire for the availability of training and education that matches the jobs and careers that currently exist in our Region. Whether or not it is true, there is a perceived shortfall in our community in this area.

A large portion of our population is retired from their first career and many moved here because of the welcoming community and beautiful surroundings. This can lead to a perception of Florence being a retirement community. The emphasis on youth and career training in the data pushes back against this popular perception. Working-age people live here for a lot of reasons, but no matter the reason for moving or staying here, all want to earn a living wage to support their families. They want high-quality employment opportunities and they want the educational opportunities to qualify for those jobs. The present focus on career technical and trades learning is likely a reflection of the current job market.

### 3. RSVP to Learn!

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Reaching out to our neighbors and inviting them to learn is a shared responsibility that helps bring the community together.

A neighborhood, community, or region that learns together creates a healthy, tolerant, and diverse population that values differences and change. Throughout our interviews, we heard that Residents believe education can bring the community together and that it's the community's collective responsibility to create educational opportunities where that can happen. While Residents have a variety of ideas of what that responsibility entails, they conveyed that the community is responsible for helping people feel welcome in educational settings. "Florence is a good place to find a support structure," said one interviewee. Another Resident said "I want to give back more. I want people to feel like they matter and aren't alone." Other ideas heard in our interviews included that a responsible community provides youth educational opportunities outside of school, and a community that values learning is attractive to quality educators—the feedstock of a learning community.

In our interviews, Residents expressed that there is value when people see commonality of caring and feel unity of community. Data revealed that as community connections and relationships increased, so did the likelihood of prioritizing time in their week to participate in learning and taking responsibility for their own learning. Where there is initiative there is hope: Hope for an evolving community song, a place with rhythm where new ideas are added and old ones are resurrected and remolded, creating a new song of shared experience. Residents shared that educational opportunities provide the venue for this shared experience, both formally and informally. As one Resident said, "Getting people out and active in the community, now they have something they can focus on."

Others shared that people are more likely to engage in learning when invited to by someone they know, because, especially for younger Residents, it helps answer the question for them, "what am I going to get out of it?" Additionally, an invitation can dispel the 'outsider' feeling of trying to break into groups that "feel tight-knit and hard to penetrate" as one interviewee stated. Our survey data support this desire to feel included and welcomed. Six survey respondents said they did not participate in learning opportunities out of fear and another three felt like outsiders because they did not know others with similar interests. If we extrapolate this to the entire Siuslaw Region, at least 4% of the population self-selects out of learning opportunities because they feel they will not fit in or are reticent to try.

Some interviewees felt that if people are encouraged during their upbringing to engage in exploration of thought and experience, they will be more likely to value lifelong

learning. One person said it the opposite way: “people who’ve not had a lot of education tend not to seek out as many opportunities for enrichment.” This may already be occurring in the Siuslaw Region. Survey data show that Siuslaw Residents felt that they were actively encouraging others to participate in learning opportunities, and to a lesser extent, being encouraged by others to participate themselves. The responses were even more positive for the past year than for years before that.

Residents also saw a responsibility for each and every community member as a teacher and a learner. Neighbors that share their different cultural experiences create a stock rich with common marrow. Overall, the message heard from interviewees was that we are responsible not only to ourselves but to our community to participate in lifelong learning, either as the student or the teacher, or both. One interviewee said the whole community misses out when people were “failing to build community because they don’t share [their knowledge] because they don’t feel secure.”

### Significance

The Siuslaw Region is a melting pot of experience across the social and demographic spectrum—blue collar, white collar, no collar. This can create a challenge to unify and assemble around a cause or identity. Communities with a common identity based on shared experience are magnets for like-minded value rich in change, tolerance, growth, and comradery. “When a group of people are learning together, they are able to reach out better,” said one interviewee. Where you can bring people together in shared responsibility, strength in many aspects of community are created. Siuslaw Vision has to ask—can you use responsibility to invite educational participants as a catalyst for community unity and vision? Where does evolution fit in or stop?

It is significant that Siuslaw Residents feel they are already doing a pretty good job of encouraging others to participate in learning events and opportunities. This is something that the Vision can encourage and build upon. However, it is likely that people are mainly focused on their own peer groups when encouraging participation. The Vision should also be a catalyst for people sharing their encouragement with wider segments of the population by finding ways to reach outside of their own peer groups to foster love of learning and community engagement.

## 4. Everybody Needs a Learning Buddy

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Receiving invitations from and learning within a group of peers is motivating and welcoming to learners.

Our interview data revealed that particularly for Siuslaw Region learners under the age of 35, there is trepidation around how welcome they are in learning situations. We heard that these younger learners are unsure if they would find a place in the room, particularly if many of the existing learners are of an age that is different from the prospective learner. One woman in her early twenties described her perception of welcome at events of mixed ages by saying, “I am not sure they want me there. A lot of the older people don’t seem to want us (younger learners) there.” This obstacle demonstrated a way that younger and older learners in the Siuslaw Region view their learning opportunities quite differently. Interviews with seniors suggested that they felt more confident of their welcome in diverse learning situations. One interviewee said she would like more opportunities to learn among peers of her own age and suggested that those providing education opportunities need to “be welcoming and [to] separate demographics [age] sometimes.”

Invitations to learn by a peer seemed a successful way to overcome the worry that a new or less experienced learner might feel in an unfamiliar environment. One learner newly out of high school described being invited by another student to a leadership program and how completely it changed her comfort with educational programs. Another interviewee said, “it would be great to have a relay system in a community to get groups to go to things together.” A young woman who did not have much experience in learning environments explained that the last time she participated in an event it was because she received a call from her friend asking her to go. She described having a great time and “wanting to do a lot more things like that.” An invitation from a friend can encourage a less confident learner to engage in an educational event or class.

Young learners also described a desire for more learning opportunities specifically designed for teens and young adults. One interviewee expressed frustration by the “perception that young adults are less engaged in learning opportunities [which is] likely because of a lack of learning opportunities that appeal to them.” This idea was also shared by an older learner who stated that, “classes and other events are all designed for retired people.” Other young learners agreed, with one saying, “everything happens in the day. I would like something I could do or the teens could do other than just hanging out.” A need for expanded learning seemed clear across the interviews of Siuslaw Residents.



## Significance

One of the goals of the Siuslaw Vision has been creating opportunities for people of different ages to learn together. While that certainly remains an important goal, this finding speaks to the importance of providing more opportunities for young people to learn with their peers. Especially for less confident learners, this finding suggests the need to promote learning events that feel welcoming because they are specifically designed for people within a similar age group. When someone hears from a friend that they are welcome at this kind of learning event or place it can have an impact on how confident they will feel when engaging in future learning and potentially change a less confident learner into a more eager one.

## 5. The Early Bird Gets the Learn

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More child-friendly and welcoming spaces, and events and opportunities for children, teens, and young adults will result in future engagement.

Our data revealed that families with children and young adults face obstacles in becoming involved in learning opportunities within the Siuslaw Region. A busy working mother with school age children asked “Is it going to be worth my time (away from my family after a long work day)?” She went on to explain that she enjoys events with others from her peer group and involving her family and children increases the likelihood of her involvement. In the survey data, 4% of respondents listed family and child obligations as among their biggest barriers to participating in learning opportunities. Together this information demonstrates the need for dependent care and/or a way to involve children in the learning opportunity. An example of such a program is the Siuslaw Vision’s outdoor education program. One single mother said “the Vision Quest programs have let me share knowledge of the outdoors that I don’t have with my daughter. I really appreciated being able to pass that on to her.”

Going out to places in the community can provide learning opportunities and the chance to meet others in the community, as one high school student shared. Through a volunteer experience she participated in through school she met other volunteers and learners in the community. The project was implemented by older adults that welcomed student involvement on a particular aspect. This experience and the example set by those older adults provided a positive learning experience, increased the likelihood of her future involvement in learning opportunities, and, thereby, laid the foundation for her to become a lifelong learner. Having programs where adults can mentor kids is also important. “Caring adults can reach kids,” said a retiree who volunteers in the high school. “It’s important for young people to have an ally out there.”

Young adults—high school age through their twenties—need events and opportunities to help them engage in learning in the community. A high school student stated in an interview that small towns do not provide a lot of opportunities for young adults. She explained that inclusive environments, like a community center, that provided learning opportunities for art, music, poetry (spoken word) and a place to share ideas among those her own age is needed. This same student mentioned her hope for the community: “My hope is that the Siuslaw schools and the community become more open-minded, where people are not afraid to share their opinions and where young people have as much opportunity to share their voices as older people.” She stated that she liked, “having a voice

and anything to do with bettering myself/gaining experiences.” This young adult also noted that the influences of great leaders, photographers, singers, etc., motivated her to follow in their footsteps.

Siuslaw Residents would like to have a place to hold learning events and otherwise interact within and across peer groups. Nearly 6% of survey respondents regarded the lack of a community center as a significant barrier to participating in learning opportunities. Additionally, an interviewee agreed that “we need a better center for kids, like the YMCA.” Community members are not waiting around, however, they have ideas for the present as well; the same interviewee suggested using existing community activities to engage more of our youth. “We have to find fun opportunities and make the effort to teach kids at every chance, like when we had the block party [in Old Town]. We could have had booths and activities there for teaching kids.” Yet another interviewee echoed this sentiment saying “there needs to be more opportunity for kids of any age.”

### Significance

It is important for our community to consider the needs of parents and families and to take away barriers that may discourage their involvement. Providing child care at an event (so children are at least nearby and witness parents learning) or actually involving the children in the learning opportunity encourages parental involvement. This also provides an important example for young children, the example of others actively learning and engaging in their community. As these children grow into young adulthood (high school and just beyond) it is important that they have chances to have their voices heard, have a place to congregate, and access to activities they enjoy. Additionally, witnessing other adults learning encourages them and gives hope. We know people learn by example and engagement. Thus, the example of other active learners, whether our parents or others in the community, encourages us to seek out learning opportunities.

## 6. It's Not Just the Money

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Financial and lifestyle barriers present an obstacle to education in the Region.

In our interviews, we heard that many Residents are in survival mode, living from paycheck to paycheck without the means to invest in classes. However, money was not the only consideration. Family obligations, personal insecurities, and other barriers also play a key role in hindering participation in educational opportunities.

One Resident we interviewed said Florence had few activities and educational opportunities geared toward lower-income families compared to Coos Bay, where she moved from. In her experience people of lesser means feel like they don't fit into a group whose problems seem trivial compared to their own struggles to provide for the basic needs of their families. Another interviewee noted that she sees many people, who normally don't participate, attend events that offer food at low cost or free because they can feed their families one meal. A third Resident said "If food is offered, I'm more likely to attend because that's a meal I don't have to provide." Another Resident said "It's not just about the money, and yet it is; activities seem to be geared around people with money who don't have to worry about taking time off from work." Business owners often cannot attend educational opportunities that happen during business hours because they would have to pay for someone to cover or they'd have to close their business and lose sales.

We heard from Residents that adequate access to internet and computers also plays a role. Many in our community have limited access to the internet due to finances. They rely on their phones because they don't have internet at home and have limited data plans so they have to use their phones wisely. Many do use the library computers. One interviewee reported hoping for wider availability of broadband so people can do more online learning.

Transportation is an issue as well—especially for children who want to participate in sports or other activities that require regular transportation. One Resident said she struggles to get her child to her events due to an unreliable car. She must ask for rides from fellow participants and is embarrassed to have to do so. Another interviewee expressed a similar concern, saying "I have to find a way to get there because I don't always have reliable transportation." Additionally, child care or parental care can be an obstacle. If an adult caregiver wants to participate, they either need to find substitute caregivers or bring along their family members. This can add substantially to the cost of participating.

One interviewee said she thinks people in our community don't participate in learning opportunities because of fear. "They don't know what to expect. People don't want to

be uncomfortable, or they are scared it may change their view on something they were taught and believed their whole life.” Several others we talked to also mentioned their own insecurities as reasons they may not take advantage of existing learning opportunities. “Prejudice, bias and fear, plus busy schedules, keep people from participating,” stated an interviewee. “I have a learning disability, so it takes me longer to learn things,” another interviewee said. “[I get frustrated by] not having the answers, feeling unqualified; [I have] inadequacies and insecurities.”

For those in the most vulnerable financial states, we have under-acknowledged the emotional and physical impact of food and housing insecurities. Survival is the main concern for lower-income families in our Region. Making their dollars stretch to the next paycheck is the top priority and to participate in anything extra may literally mean changing what is eaten that month. This applies to unemployed, underemployed, struggling new business owners, and seniors. Additionally, even when people have the time, money, and transportation to attend a learning opportunity they may be too mentally or emotionally drained to attend because their life situation takes up so much of their energy. “I want to participate, but often find out too late about events,” said one interviewee. “It takes planning for time off, transportation, family care (parents and kids), depending on the activity. And it takes money. It always comes back to money.”

The survey data support and expand our interview data on barriers. As with the interview data, the barriers listed in the surveys fell into several broad categories. While all of the barriers brought forth in our interview data were mirrored in the survey data, the survey data indicated that there are additional factors to consider. The two most commonly listed barriers in the survey data: lack of time, and timing or scheduling incompatibility, were not highlighted by the interviewees. Taking a closer look at the responses, we found that none of the barrier categories were mentioned by Residents from only one area. Likewise, similar proportions of respondents in the two age categories listed fear, lack of common interests, cost, time available, and lack of locations or facilities as among their top three barriers. However, there were also notable differences between the groups. Respondents in the younger group mentioned barriers related to life stage and circumstances, scheduling or timing, lack of opportunity, and communication or publicity at higher rates than those in the older group. In contrast, larger proportions of older respondents listed access and transportation, and lack of interest or desire as barriers. Interestingly, all respondents who said they experienced no barriers and who listed barriers not fitting into one of the categories were in the older age group.

## Significance

Financial barriers impact our Residents who could potentially benefit the most and who have a high desire to continue their personal education and promote the education of their children. It does so by limiting how they learn about opportunities (they often rely on word of mouth), how they get to the events (carpool, bus, walk, use unreliable transportation), and their ability to pay for the activities (activity cost, additional family care expenses). However, other barriers remain significant obstacles as well. If we are to truly include our community, we must take the impact of financial insecurity and other lifestyle barriers into account when creating learning opportunities.



## 7. We're All in This Together

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A community split between people with different backgrounds affects people's perception of learning opportunities.

People of the Siuslaw Region are diverse, like many other communities, and the Region is divided in a variety of ways. We learned through our interviews that some community members struggle with the differences they find in the community. Our interviews revealed that community members feel divisions of socioeconomic status, gender, area of residence, length of residency in the Region, and language. People with different backgrounds “experience the world with different views, perceptions, and biases. They see life differently,” one interviewee mentioned.

Our data show two main community splits. One is between working-class and retired folks while the other is between long-time locals and newer Residents. The two are inextricably intertwined because many of the Region's retirees moved here from other regions. However, the division with retirees has its own causes. Many events and learning opportunities are planned by retired people because they have time and energy available. Because of this, learning opportunities tend to be focused on subjects that are of interest to the older generations. Additionally, many events occur during the day. This timing is convenient for people who are retired, but not for people who work during the day.

Several people mentioned that there was a general insider and outsider feeling in the Siuslaw Region. Some commented that there is a rift between people who have lived in the area for many generations and those who have not. One local who was born and raised in the Siuslaw community said, “I think the community has pioneers [locals], snow birds, and newcomers.” Our conversations with diverse people found that many struggle with their own split between wanting more learning opportunities for themselves and their families, and also not wanting too much growth because they fear it would change the town they love and feel comfortable in. Several long-time locals commented that they don't like those who have moved to the Region more recently and sometimes wish they were not here. They see newer Residents as the reason for the increased prices of housing, the competition for local jobs, and as trying to impose their own ideas. For example, one interviewee said “I've been doing this for 20 years and you can't tell me what to do,” while indicating that he hadn't been part of community learning opportunities.

Newer Residents feel this resistance from long-time locals. One woman who came to Florence for a fresh start said she hasn't found it easy to get involved in groups, including learning opportunities. “I'm working my way into the community,” she said. “It's a difficult town

to start over again in.” Perhaps because of this difficulty even newer Residents can be less than welcoming to brand new people. One interviewee found this at the local gym, saying that “the gym yoga and group classes feel tight-knit and hard to penetrate.” Those who have moved to the area recently sometimes have a hard time feeling like they fit in and don’t always feel welcome to participate in group learning activities. “Cliques prevent me from jumping in and taking part in learning opportunities,” said one Resident. “A welcoming atmosphere is very important.” Our survey data, however, provide a positive counterpoint to this dilemma. Siuslaw Residents report feeling more comfortable participating in new learning opportunities and feeling more welcome at new learning opportunities. While a higher proportion of the older group felt this way, the numbers for the younger group were encouraging, especially because a larger proportion of the younger group reported feeling very much more welcome at events.

Another main division is geographic, between the people who live in Florence and those who live in upriver communities. This division is not as well represented in our data, partially because of the difficulty in reaching Residents in the upriver communities to include them in our interviews. However, as noted in the Introduction, our survey data cover all geographic areas in proportions similar to those in the Siuslaw Region population. Among geographic areas, 38-50% of Residents felt quite a bit or very much more comfortable participating in new learning opportunities in the past year. Likewise, 22-67% of Residents felt quite a bit or very much more welcome when attending new learning opportunities. When we also include those who felt somewhat more comfortable or welcomed, the proportions were greater than 68% in all communities except Swisshome, which remained at 50%. However, it should be noted that the Swisshome data is from just two survey respondents. Perhaps the geographic splits are the effects of distance and not significant differences among people living in the different areas.

### Significance

While everyone may have a different opinion, it is important that all locals bring their experiences and knowledge together to make the Siuslaw Region a better place for all. The splits in the community, both real and perceived, indicate that those involved in community building have work to do to help bring people together. “I hope that this Region recognizes the things we have in common and finds ways to rise above what makes us different,” said one newcomer who has been struggling to find her place in the Region. The survey data adds a significant layer because it demonstrates that positive change is occurring. There is work still to be done but efforts by the Siuslaw Vision are creating space for people to come together and providing impetus for local individuals and organizations to be more outward looking and inclusive in their own events and programs.

## 8. You, As a Teacher!

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The Siuslaw Region is rich with expertise that often goes untapped due to a lack of recognition of the value of a person's knowledge and skills, and the lack of a clear path for how that knowledge can be shared.

As Residents of the Siuslaw Region, we know there is a wealth of knowledge and skills available in our area and, as one interviewee stated, "there are a lot of people in this town who have a lot of skill sets that would benefit others." Whether it be long-time Residents with a deep knowledge of the Region, artisans or tradesmen with a love of their craft, or retirees with professional experience, the information available in this Region is vast and diverse. However, in our interviews we heard that individuals who have expertise may not be aware that their expertise can be shared with other people, or the Region as a whole. Data showed that without a suggestion or an invitation to share, these local experts may not believe that their knowledge is of value. And Residents who could greatly benefit from the knowledge and skills might not know that local expertise is available.

Our data revealed that there are a number of barriers to sharing individual knowledge. Finding an available and satisfactory venue to share information, skills and expertise may be challenging. Not understanding what community members need and want and not having the confidence to teach may also pose a challenge. Knowing that one's experience is being sought out and valued may help the person who is sharing feel more confident and willing to share. Some interviewees noted they especially like to learn from retirees. One person we talked to mentioned that several of her community college instructors were retired and had previous careers, which made their teaching unique. Another Resident stated "I would love to find a center here, like the Senior Center, that offered free space for classes and a system for offering classes and for sharing what you can teach and see if people want to learn; sometimes we don't know we have valuable information to share." Survey data do not show any trend in this area; responses are spread relatively evenly across the categories with slightly more respondents feeling somewhat more welcome to offer learning opportunities than the number at either the positive or negative extreme. This was true across geographic areas and for those 56 and older. However, the responses for those 55 and younger indicated they feel more welcome to offer their knowledge and skills for others.

In our interviews we heard of a variety of learning interests for which many Residents in the Region have tremendous expertise. Native American culture is a rich and valuable part of our Region's history and could have more of a presence in available learnings.

“There used to be a lot more opportunities to learn about the Native American culture here,” one Resident said. “It doesn’t even seem like it’s talked about now.” Data revealed that consciousness and awareness of Native culture could be more accessible if the right venues were located. Our geographic and natural surroundings are varied and provide abundant opportunity for exploration and enjoyment. Interview results suggest that when considering venues for experiencing and sharing information about natural resources, sensitivity for the “care of” and preservation of these resources is important.

### Significance

The large reservoir of untapped knowledge available in the Siuslaw Region is an asset for the Vision in achieving the goal of lifelong learning for Residents. Having an available cadre of local experts is a significant resource for the community. Also, Residents benefit from sharing their knowledge and expertise, just as they benefit from learning from others. The giving and receiving of knowledge helps create bonds within the community and promotes connections between people who may have thought they had little in common. One woman we talked to related an experience of a positive interaction she had after working in the Aspire program at Siuslaw High School. “A young man I worked with walked up to me in town,” she said. “He smiled and opened up to me as if I were an important person in his life. I can tell I’m making a difference.”

The combination of interview data demonstrating barriers to sharing knowledge and survey data showing no movement toward a more open atmosphere for such action shows that the Vision has a lot to do in this area. People who have been able to share with or gain knowledge from other Siuslaw Region community members are energized by the experience, which shows a desire for more such opportunities. How do we find a path forward to help Siuslaw Residents fulfill this desire for and with one another?

## 9. You Don't Know What You Don't Know

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Education opportunities are only as good as our communication about them.

We discovered that nearly all of those we talked to, despite differences in ages and backgrounds, are interested in education and learning. We also have many opportunities and resources for learning available in the Siuslaw Region. However, there seems to be a bit of a disconnect between the desire for learning and those who take advantage of it because people don't always realize what is available in the Region. This emphasizes that effective communication is essential. As one interviewee said, "there needs to be a way to reach out to people better, a smarter way to get people's attention."

This theme was repeated in several interview conversations and to some degree in the survey data. People don't know how to find out about all the education opportunities and they don't know how much the Siuslaw Region offers. One interviewee stated that "there is a difficulty of being aware of opportunities." Another community member said "It would be nice if there was one place to go where everything was listed that I can see from my phone, as I don't always have access to a computer. But there also needs to be something in the paper." Among survey respondents, 4% listed communication about and awareness of events as one of their top three barriers to participating. In contrast, 58% stated that they were some or quite a bit more aware of learning opportunities in the past year. This held across geographical areas and age categories although it should be noted that the response was slightly more positive among those over 55.

Perceptions about education vary. Our data suggest that community members don't understand the breadth of offerings that Lane Community College Florence Center and the Siuslaw Public Library offer, even though they are aware that there are opportunities. Another insight from our evaluation is that people want learning that is practical and personal. Even if there's not a formal program in a topic of interest, it's important that they are aware of the avenues they have in the community to learn what is important to them.

Reaching people as directly and personally as possible helps with dissemination of information. Those we talked to expressed willingness to share information and be a resource for others, so it's important to get information about opportunities to community leaders so they can share it with their networks. One Resident in her 30s said "I want to become a resource for others by being active myself and knowing what and where things are happening and letting other people know." She also expressed surprise that people her age aren't more active in learning opportunities. Another interviewee suggested that

groups should “find where people are already at. Engage them in a space they’re already comfortable in.”

Since people in the Siuslaw Region receive their information from different sources, it is essential to use multiple avenues of communication. Often people learn about opportunities from other people they encounter. Not everyone reads *The Siuslaw News* or uses Facebook. Several people mentioned not feeling welcome at some meetings and events. Communication via personal invitations, Facebook events sent to specific people, and inclusive wording in written communications could help ensure that people feel they are welcome to learn. Another interviewee said “Bang the drum, have the events, keep it at the forefront of the community.”

### Significance

Our interviews revealed that we not only need to communicate about opportunities for learning in the Siuslaw Region, we also need to let people know what resources are available to help them overcome their barriers to learning. For example, we can help people access education by informing them of resources such as financial aid and other funding options, places with computer and internet access, sources of child care, and services for those with learning disabilities or language barriers. Based on the survey data, there is progress being made on the communications front. People are reporting higher awareness of events and other learning opportunities. The Vision can work to support current efforts and support groups looking to expand their reach.

It’s important to let people know about the opportunities available for learning, but it’s also important to let our experts know about opportunities for teaching. Several of those we talked to expressed interest in sharing their knowledge with others in the community but aren’t sure how to do so.

## 10. The Awareness-Engagement Feedback Loop

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The more awareness of and engagement in learning opportunities you have, the more likely you are to continue to engage in and have hope for the future expansion of these opportunities in the community.

We heard in our interviews that the connections to learning opportunities appear to be driven first by awareness, and second by engagement. As individuals discover and take part in opportunities, they become engaged and continue to look for new opportunities for learning. The more awareness individuals have, the more likely they are to engage. The more they engage, the more likely they are to seek out new opportunities.

Interviewees shared that the earlier they find these opportunities, the more likely they are to engage, which results in a change in priorities to seek out more learning. Likewise, survey respondents reported feeling more open to learning opportunities in the past year. Survey data also indicated that these learning opportunities have become more valuable to Siuslaw Residents. These responses show the growth of engagement, connection, and community through learning. In contrast, there appears to be a lag in empowerment to educate. Fewer survey respondents across all geographic areas and age groups felt empowered to educate themselves or others. Although fewer people feel comfortable teaching, when Siuslaw Residents are aware of learning opportunities they actively take steps to engage and participate.

Awareness of opportunities, regardless of whether or not she could avail herself of them, led one Resident to remark, “It doesn’t just happen. It has to be nurtured.” Another interviewee suggested that widening the age-level and background of participants encouraged an “ecosystem” of learning opportunities in the community. “You can’t be afraid of stuff,” another Resident stated, referring to approaching new learning opportunities. “The more you see and hear of things being offered in the community, the more excitement you feel yourself because you see it as something you or your friends are doing.” Despite this, people must sometimes decide on engagement behavior using a cost-benefit analysis. While one interviewee was “energized” by new opportunities, she weighs some classes, especially those aimed at professional or vocational training, by the probable financial outcome asking “Is this going to break the bank?”

Different age groups reported different learning experiences and learning styles, with special importance on “peer” learning reported by younger groups. Our interviews revealed that being invited by a peer is a predictor of involvement, especially in younger people. Older Residents reported feeling more welcome in new learning situations. Participation as



a volunteer in an organization in the Region is a large predictor of involvement in community learning, tending to favor older citizens whose leisure activities are often volunteer-driven. Across all age groups, being personally greeted at learning events was important.

As volunteer connections to organizations grow, the likelihood of further connections to learning opportunities tends to grow. With this comes responsibility to take action to increase involvement in those opportunities by allocating time and resources to new ventures. The more people discover about their region, the more likely they are to seek to learn more. “The museum, the visitor center, when you see these things, you feel more part of town,” said one retiree.

While the level of actual participation in learning opportunities varied by age, occupation, and economic status, observations voiced by those interviewed seemed to consistently maintain that lifelong learning opportunities are critical to building community. “What keeps people from learning is sometimes just fear of being accepted,” a retiree noted. “We have to make this place what we want it to be,” said a full-time employed professional. “I hope the community can learn from each other,” said another respondent. A working mother said “barriers can be removed to make opportunities accessible to those with young children.”

### Significance

Consistently reported was hope for the future. Open-mindedness and the ability to accept new cultural experiences, including but not limited to food, were elements of the desire to find learning opportunities. “I’d really like to know how to live sustainably,” said one participant. Family influences play a role in promoting a desire for lifelong learning. Notably absent was the opinion that community learning on a greater scale was either impossible, impractical, or unaffordable. In most cases respondents voiced optimism that achieving both awareness and participation was within the grasp of the Siuslaw regional community.



## 11. Connecting the Dots

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Community connections can build continuous positive relationships.

As positive community connections and relationships increase in one's life, so does the likelihood of prioritizing time for those activities, building self-esteem, taking on more education, and having hope for the future of the Siuslaw Region.

In our interviews we heard that as one becomes involved in a meaningful community activity, she or he is highly likely to make significant person-to-person connections. These connections then often grow into an ensemble of supportive relationships and positive feedback. This means that if you have a positive experience in a community engagement of interest to you, even with limited involvement, you will likely make new friendships or renew old ones. Interviewees shared that person-to-person contact is an encouragement to engage again in an activity or one that is similar. One interviewee said she is usually anxious about attending a new activity, but as she has become more involved in community education opportunities, she feels better about attending. "I see a lot of the same people that do things and they become familiar. I sit by them."

Community learning opportunities can also act as social mixers. Whether drawn in by the enjoyment of the activity itself or the personal contact that they made with other people, interviewees left these activities with a positive outlook. "Social events change communities," said one interviewee. "People are engaged and don't die early." One Resident stated that people also create such opportunities to gather and learn. "Social media is disconnecting—people feel alone. I decided to start a mom's group." Another said "I love the social aspect of learning. I think it's positive." The survey data also show that learning activities support social connections. Over the past year, learning activities have increased social connections at least a little bit for 86% of survey respondents. This pattern holds true across geographic areas and age groups. Although there is variation among communities, for the Siuslaw Region as a whole, 46% of respondents reported their social connections were increased quite a bit or very much through participation in learning opportunities.

People are looking to be connected and to build community. As one interviewee said: "We need more opportunities to connect with each other while learning something fun to help us grow together. Then we can feel like we are part of the community." In the past year Siuslaw Residents engaged in community learning opportunities as much or more than in years past. People were also finding and building connections at these events. Survey data show that 79% of respondents across the Siuslaw Region met new people through learning

opportunities in the past year. Additionally, an average of 71% of the new acquaintances were in a different age group than the respondent. Learning opportunities increase social connections within and among age groups, building robust community links.

### Significance

Increased social connectivity and positive outlook, whether due to feeling involved, feeling motivated, or indeed feeling a part of the community, will enrich one's self esteem and continue the spiral of positive motivation. They will have someone coming back again and again, taking an active part in the future, and looking to a greater extent at the future of the community as a whole. If someone finds a possibility of further involvement, through enhanced education or through other engagement, they are more likely to take a chance. Also, the positive encouragement of a group as well as the accomplishments of the group are very often strong motivators. This can be an avenue through which the Vision can put forth an effort to sustain and grow toward achieving purposeful goals.



## Summary and Conclusions

The impacts that Siuslaw Vision is hoping to achieve through its focus on educated people are learning desire, learning ability, learning connectivity, and community capacity to support learning. The interview and survey questions were designed to elicit responses from the public that would allow us to evaluate whether and to what extent those impacts are occurring. Our findings naturally grouped into three general categories. The first grouping revolved around personal interest, motivation, and welcome. The second grouping delved into the obstacles to engaging in learning opportunities. The final grouping focused on engagement now and into the future.

Group 1 Findings (1, 2, 3, 4) are focused on the interests and motivation of individuals, as well as how welcome people feel to participate. Our data indicate that Siuslaw Residents derive joy and personal satisfaction from learning; there is a deep love of learning within our Region. Motivation often stems from needing information that can be incorporated into people's lives right away. While some people prefer to use references to find information on their own, there is a widespread desire for person-to-person learning and for sharing knowledge inclusively.

Peer learning is especially desired by younger learners who may not feel welcome in a room full of retirees or older adults. Encouragingly, the data demonstrate a desire within the community to create or nurture opportunities for the youth of the Region. They are seen as a vital, yet hard-to-reach population. It is recognized that invitations matter; people are encouraging others to participate in learning events. Being invited can make people feel

like they are not alone and they are welcomed. It builds instant community with a learning buddy. Shared experience builds community and learning opportunities provide avenues for shared experience. A community and its members hold a responsibility to engage and to invite others to do so as well.

Specific areas of interest for future learning from the survey data covered a broad range and varied among individuals within and between age groups. Interestingly, though, most people were interested in subjects related to nonprofit capacity and community building, personal enrichment, and life skills. The emphasis on nonprofits and community is perhaps a reflection of the large number of volunteer organizations in the Region and the fact that approximately one-third of the survey responses were gathered at a training for members of nonprofit boards. Within the interview data there was an additional emphasis on career technical education and training for trades.

Siuslaw Residents love learning and have broadly diverse interests. People want to learn from others in both age-inclusive and peer groups. Residents of the Siuslaw community want to support learning opportunities for others, with a special emphasis on youth and young adults. Learning and education are seen as a way to achieve personal goals and enrich the community fabric.

Group 2 Findings (5, 6, 7, 8) detail the obstacles and barriers that Siuslaw Residents must overcome in order to participate in learning opportunities or otherwise engage in their community. For many Residents, family obligations, such as child and parental care, must be weighed against participation. Other barriers include lack of reliable transportation, and lack of internet access. Attending learning events is difficult if one does not have a way to travel to and from or cannot find out information or register because of lack of internet access. The cost of attending an event was also a major barrier. Even if events are free, money may be required to overcome some of the other barriers. For example, a fill-in care provider or transportation fare may be needed.

Finances and life situation can be big obstacles to overcome, but the biggest barriers to participation in learning events were lack of time and incompatible scheduling. Lack of free time and scheduling difficulties were the two most listed barriers by survey respondents. Interview data also highlighted these issues. Some people felt they had to choose between spending time with family and attending events. Others said that many events were scheduled during working hours, precluding their participation. Scheduling difficulties and timing of events points to another barrier: the perception of a community split. The two main splits mentioned were between working-age and retired people, and between long-time Residents and newer transplants.

Many Residents view the lack of a community center as an impediment to participation. There is a strong desire for a space for learning as well as for teaching and sharing knowledge. People view a community center as a space to attend classes. They envision a system where any local person could sign up to teach a class or share knowledge informally. A community center could also be a central location to disseminate information about upcoming learning opportunities and events.

Group 3 Findings (9, 10, 11) explore the importance of communication, delve into the idea that higher awareness leads to higher participation, and describe how learning events are creating community connections. Our data indicate that communication is essential, but difficult. We found that direct, personal outreach is most effective in making people feel truly invited. However, to have the broadest reach, groups must use multiple avenues of communication. This is important for those planning learning events because they likely want to reach past their membership or regular mailing list to reach as many people as possible. Additionally, individuals expressed frustration with not knowing where to find information. How do you learn about something you don't know exists?

More broadly disseminated and inclusive invitations can have a large payoff for organizers of learning events. Higher awareness makes people more likely to try something and the engagement then leads them to seek out more opportunities to be involved. People find connection through learning events and become part of the community building process. Personal greetings at events help people feel welcomed, included, and important. Personal connections, even acquaintances, increase people's sense of inclusion and belonging. Learning opportunities provide space for these connections.

Learning events often provide the catalyst for involvement by creating a space for people to come together for a shared purpose without the stress of expectation that some associate with volunteer opportunities. Our data indicate that when people overcome barriers to participation they are rewarded with a larger social network and increased community connection. People not only feel more connected, engaged, and welcome at future learning events, they feel a deeper connection to fellow Siuslaw Residents. This is the very essence of community building: changing the perception of an area being just a place to it also being a collection of interconnected people with shared experience and responsibility.

As a final conclusion we highlight the encouraging points in the data and the areas in which the data indicate that work is needed.

## Encouraging points

People report a deep love of learning. Learning is valued. Siuslaw Residents desire and seek out learning opportunities and people want to gain and share knowledge. The focus of learning is on things that are inherently interesting or practical to the individual learner. This is important because people are more likely to seek out information that they need than to seek information for things they want to learn ‘someday’. There is inherent motivation to follow through on their desire.

There is a strong belief in the Siuslaw Region that learning together can bring the community together. Engagement increases person-to-person connections and these connections, in turn, increase engagement. Once people take part in learning events and begin to feel they are part of a community they are more likely to seek out and participate in future learning opportunities. Invitations can be incredibly important to begin this process in a positive way. It is notable also that people feel they can individually make a difference for themselves and their community through the process of gaining and sharing knowledge. Again and again we heard that people wanted to nurture and create opportunities for teens and young adults. They were seen as a vital component of the community that we are continually building.

## Work needed

Siuslaw Vision and community organizations can mindfully work to maximize participation by planning events that minimize barriers. The obstacles that we identified were not surprising, but the extent to which they limited engagement in learning events was unexpected. There is a distinct need for child- and family-friendly events. By making an effort to be inclusive, groups and organizations will also be helping to bridge the splits in the community. Bringing people together in shared experience can start the process toward greater understanding and acceptance through recognition of shared interests, values, or aspirations.

The desire for a community center runs deep throughout the Region. Residents want a place to gather and a space to share knowledge, both formally and informally. It is currently difficult for people with knowledge to share to find a space to organize such an event. Many in the Region envision a Community Center model as a community hub for learning, teaching, and spreading information. People also hope that such a space would make it easier to ‘access’ and capitalize on the vast and diverse expertise in the Region.

Communication about upcoming events and opportunities still needs work. People reported not finding out about events until it was too late to attend or not knowing how to find out about things. A centralized way of disseminating and finding information would

be helpful. At the same time we heard that people prefer to get notifications and invitations in person and that not everyone utilizes the same platforms to get information. Anyone organizing an event or reaching out for community members should use multiple avenues of communication to reach the broadest possible audience. There is disagreement in the data about how to approach this issue, but it is clear that more work is needed in this area.

A red rounded square graphic with the word "Citations" centered inside in white text.

## Citations

Patty, Steve. 2013. *Getting to What Matters: How to design and develop evaluation*. Portland: Dialogues In Action LLC.