



JULY



EOU board remains quiet on Online Program Management

By Alyssa Sutton
The Observer, July 13

Eastern Oregon University administration provided little public information regarding an upcoming decision that has the potential to drastically affect the future of the university and its students. Some members of the Board of Trustees, who will be making the final decision in November on whether to partner with an online program management company, would not offer a lot of information on what they know about the company or how they individually feel about bringing on an Online Program Management.

History

In August 2017, Eastern Oregon University requested proposals from online program management companies.

OPM's are third-party for-profit companies that assist universities in developing online curriculum and marketing strategies.

According to Eastern's executive director of regional outreach and innovation, David Vande Pol, who has previous experience working in online program management, the reason Eastern should partner with an OPM is simple: to increase enrollment.

He told the EOU Board of Trustees in April there has been a shift in demographics in higher education, with more and more students pursuing degrees online rather than on campus.

"Things are only going to

get more competitive in the online space, especially for small universities without brand recognition," Vande Pol said at the April meeting, explaining why he believes the university should partner with an OPM. EOU saw a 3 percent decline in enrollment last fall.

Three OPM companies submitted proposals to EOU within a few weeks of the request, and two were invited to campus in October 2017 — The Learning House and Pearson Online Learning Services. Vande Pol was the vice president of business development for the latter agency from 2013 to 2015.

In December 2017, EOU President Tom Insko and Vande Pol decided that EOU should explore a partnership with Pearson, and they presented the idea to the Board of Trustees in February 2018.

In February, Insko told the trustees he wanted to complete the evaluation process with Pearson by May 25 and provide a recommendation to the board at that time.

In the February meeting, the trustees had a few questions regarding Pearson — mostly about what the process would be once integration began — and why Insko had created such a short timeframe to determine if a partnership with Pearson would be beneficial for the university.

"I think we have a sense of urgency to address our enrollment issues," Insko told the trustees at the February meeting. "The longer we wait,

the more risk we (run)." However, Vice President for University Advancement Tim Seydel told The Observer in June that Insko's and Vande Pol's teams had decided to wait until the next school year — fall 2018 — to make any moves regarding the partnership, allowing for faculty and staff to be back on campus prior to any changes.

Lack of Information

In June, when The Observer sought the opinions of EOU faculty on partnering with an online management company, the majority of the 13 faculty members contacted said they were not comfortable discussing the issue on the record. The faculty who agreed to answer questions all stated that while Eastern needs help in marketing, they didn't believe an OPM was the best solution — and may even put the university, as a whole, at risk.

Shortly after the June story was published in The Observer, the president's office released a campus-wide email, obtained by The Observer, that said, "It is important to note that there were a number of unfortunate inaccuracies in the (Observer) piece as neither the President's Office nor University Advancement were contacted to provide clarification or context for some of the claims made (by faculty) in the article."

For clarification of the campus-wide email, The Observer reached out to

University Advancement to learn what was inaccurate in the article so corrections could be published.

Seydel responded in an email stating, "Any time confusing information is published or broadcast about EOU in today's interconnected world, we receive inquiries, questions, comments and concerns. While requesting corrections after the fact is possible, unfortunately the message is already published, and does not address the direct communication that needs to take place with a specific audience."

The editor of The Observer emailed once more for clarification on what was specifically inaccurate in the article but did not receive a reply.

Because the Board of Trustees made the final decision on whether to bring on an OPM in November — each with an individual vote — The Observer contacted each member of the board to see how he or she felt about the board's future decision.

Of the 15 members of the board, 13 refused to comment on the matter.

All board members referred The Observer to Seydel or Board Chair David Nelson.

Nicole Almanza, an EOU student whose term on the board ended this spring, committed to an interview to discuss the OPM. On the day of the interview, she canceled, stating, "I was contacted by the school and they asked me to refer you to Chair Nelson." She would not say who

contacted her.

Helen Moore said she was "not allowed to answer (questions about the OPM)," but later said she "wasn't comfortable answering at this point."

More than one board member said they were "not allowed to talk to the media."

The Observer left a message on Insko's private cellphone and later received a call from Seydel who said Insko was unavailable and the board would speak only as a unified voice.

"We follow (rules) that say trustees will speak as one voice," Nelson told The Observer. "We have disagreements in committees and meetings, but it's our policy not to air them out in the newspaper."

Nelson said the trustees give their individual opinions at the board meetings, but are not allowed to speak to the media outside of meetings individually.

He said Eastern at the time had not decided on partnering with Pearson and is still in the evaluation process — something that Insko was echoed in letters to faculty, that were published as part of a 60-page document online.

He said the goal of the board is to avoid passing on the cost of higher education to the students. Rather than increasing tuition, they must look for another way to produce revenue.

"Our two main sources of revenue come from students (paying tuition) and the state," said Richard Chaves,

who is on the Board of Trustees and also the chair of the Finance and Administration Committee said.

The concern for EOU, according to Nelson, is that in six years Eastern's reserve funds of \$8 million will be gone if they don't increase enrollment, since they will be using the reserves so as not to increase tuition for students.

Chavez disagreed with that.

"I'm sure there are scenarios where our reserves could be used up, but I wouldn't say that in six years our reserves would be gone if we don't increase enrollment," he said.

Marketing and online presence

Faculty agree with administration that EOU does need assistance in marketing the university.

Vande Pol told The Observer in February that Pearson would assist with marketing.

While the marketing may be beneficial, faculty have expressed concern about giving an OPM control over the college's online presence.

"My online students are my students," DeAnna Timmermann, assistant professor of psychology, told The Observer in May. "Under an OPM model — at least the model that has been shared with us — they won't be. I can see how administration is concerned about enrollment, but I would hate for (an OPM) to be the only avenue they explore."

Citizen-led initiative seeks recreational pot vote

By Cherise Kaechele
The Observer, July 2

A citizen-led initiative to let voters decide if recreational marijuana should be banned began circulating in July. The organizers of the initiative say it's not about being anti- or pro-marijuana. It's about giving the City of La Grande voters a right to decide for themselves.

The initiative's co-sponsors, Chris Jennings and David Moyal, had approximately two weeks to gather 1,200 signatures to get the initiative on the November ballot.

Recreational marijuana was made legal in Oregon in 2014, but the La Grande City Council took advantage of an option to opt out and banned recreational dispensaries within the city limits. Since then, due to the potential tax income and since the vote was nearly split down the middle, the council has revisited the issue. In April, the council voted 5-2 to take steps toward repealing the ban and let the residents decide, with Councilors Troy Pointer and Mary Ann Miesner voting against it. While some councilors said they are against legalizing the sale of marijuana in La Grande, they thought al-

lowing the voters a chance to decide is the best course of action.

In May, the council took its first formal steps toward this by holding the first reading of the measure, without much discussion from the council or the public. In June, when the second reading was held, more opponents to repealing the ban attended the meeting and spoke up against it.

Jennings said those opponents were "very vocal" with their opinions, which ultimately led the councilors to change their minds. Some councilors noted no one had personally spoken to them about supporting the repeal.

"The council got beaten over the head by those who were angry about the possibility (of legalizing marijuana) without thinking through the decision," Jennings told The Observer. "They backed away from their decision."

At the second reading, the council voted 6-1 to leave the ordinance as is, with councilor Nicole Howard being the single vote against.

According to Jennings, the fact the council stated multiple times democracy should decide on this issue, but then took away

that right from the voters "riled up a large amount of people."

He said the comments on The Observer's Facebook page and on other media outlets' posts show that many people in the community are not happy with the council's decision to continue the ban — and Jennings and Moyal decided to take action.

"We took it upon ourselves to figure out the system and what the (options to respond to this) are," Jennings said.

The option to pursue a citizen-led initiative was decided upon, but it requires a quick course of action.

He said the deadline to get the signatures was approximately mid-July.

"It is a quick-paced thing," he said.

Jennings and other initiative volunteers went to the La Grande Farmers Markets on Tuesdays and Saturdays to gather signatures.

Jennings said signing the petition is not an admission of being pro-marijuana.

"It's very much about expressing our right to vote," he said. "The organizational chart of the city is the community stands above the council."

Thomas steps in as new fire chief

By Cherise Kaechele
The Observer, July 6

New La Grande Fire Chief Les Thomas said his interest in pursuing a career helping others stemmed from tragedy.

Thomas, who is from Texas, said when he was 13 years old, he was at school playing outside when his friends pointed out there was a big fire in the area. That fire happened to be his childhood home.

"We lost everything," Thomas said. "There was absolutely nothing from that house that was salvageable."

Thomas said the outpouring from his community was heartwarming. People gave the family items to get started again.

A second tragedy pushed him toward his career in helping people even more. When Thomas was in high school, his girlfriend was killed in a car accident. She died because medical personnel was unable to extract her from the crushed car.

In response, the community gathered together and purchased a tool commonly referred to as the "jaws of life" for the fire department.

Experiencing compassion and generosity after these tragedies led Thomas to eventually pursue a job helping others.

"It pushed me forward," he said. "I went through fire school and was hired six weeks after graduating."

He worked in Texas fire departments since then. He served in his former department, in Webster, Texas, in Special Operations, Training and EMS. He also worked as a Rescue Training Instructor for Texas A&M University Engineering Extension Service where he traveled and trained many fire service and industrial organizations, according to a press release from the City of La Grande.

Thomas said goodbye to Texas in June and stepped into the role of La Grande fire chief, which had been vacant officially for about a year.

The fire department had an interim chief during that period of time, and now Thomas was excited to transition into his new role.

He said the group at the fire department has been welcoming and he wants to make sure the positive relationships the department has already estab-

lished with the community continue.

Thomas, who has extensive experience training personnel, said this job is all about education.

"From beginning to end, you have to educate yourself," he said.

He means to keep that up with his new staff, but also for himself.

Thomas has a bachelor's degree in fire administration and is currently seeking his master's degree in organizational leadership/fire rescue executive leadership. Because he wants to be in a leadership role, he said, he needs the education to allow that.

Long-term plans for the department likely include budgeting for additional staffing, which the department needs. The department's call volume has gone up exponentially, but its staff levels have remained the same, he said.

Short-term plans include getting to know the people who work for the fire department.

"There's a family atmosphere to this department," he said. "Everyone (the community included) has been really nice. I'm the kind of guy who is going to wave at people — even if I don't know you."





JOHN J. HOWARD
& Associates
REAL ESTATE

www.johnjhoward.com

La Grande Office
1207 Adams Ave.
541-663-9000

Baker City Office
2195 Main St.
541-523-7390

