

DEGREE

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The college heard from several major agricultural employers in the region, including Beef Northwest and the J.R. Simplot Co., that expressed a need for workers who can help identify problems and come up with innovative, cost-effective solutions.

“Entrepreneurship refers to the ability to problem-solve to prosper, manage and organize a new or existing business to earn profits,” Henninger said. “Agricultural entrepreneurs bring unique insights and innovative thinking into growing a common vision for investment in their enterprise.”

For example, Mueller said agriculture continues to search for models to become more sustainable. At the same time, they must make financial sense for farms and companies to thrive in a competitive marketplace.

“The reality is that in agriculture, you need to have both the business know-how and fundamental science background,” Mueller said.

That is what the agriculture entrepreneurship program seeks to balance. Mueller said the college is also reaching out to companies where students could be placed in internships, providing a real-world setting to put these principles into practice.

“We want them to anticipate change,” Mueller said. “We want them to be able to look forward, and have those uncomfortable conversations about where agriculture is going and help plan those things out.”

Agriculture, food and fiber accounts for 9.1% of Oregon’s overall economy and 371,300 total jobs, according to a recent study by OSU. The state has added more than 2,000 new farms in recent years, and the value of products now exceeds \$42 billion.

Henninger said he anticipates roughly 20 students in the first cohort of agriculture entrepreneurship majors.

As the program grows, he and other university leaders envision it will draw more attention to EOU, and attract students that might otherwise not consider attending college.

“We have all the confidence that this will become a signature program at EOU,” Henninger said.

HOTEL

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“It could go either way. It could be kind of a cold museum or it could be a place where people come and laugh and play the piano and have an incredible time,” Morden said. “It’s just a very unique place.”

Morden takes the reins

Morden, a well-traveled businessman, took over the Union Hotel without a very clear picture of what would come of his time managing the old building. He quickly grew a love for hosting the variety of guests who pass through the hotel.

“My favorite story is that I overslept and was late to the witness protection relocation program and Union, Oregon, was all that was left. I tell that to most people who ask me why I bought the hotel,” Morden said. “It turned out that the hotel business is the most fascinating thing in the world.”

Morden, a man whose wit is as quick as his sports car, previously operated the Riverside Inn on the McKenzie River prior to his days in Union. A business partner with family in Union alerted him of the building’s foreclosure, prompting Morden to make the purchase.

Coming from five generations of only children, Morden has created a space that is a cross between a hotel and an antique shop. From buffalo heads to vintage pianos and a plethora of paintings, the accumulated belongings of Morden’s ancestors live on in the hotel. Japanese art and culture is prevalent throughout the hotel parlor, which honors Morden’s mother. A translator during World War II, she lived in Japan for years and grew fond of the culture.

Similar to the decor, Morden and Meredith take a more unprecedented route when hosting and entertaining their guests.

“I don’t think I would have been happy with a Best Western or something, because they’re so impersonal,” Morden said. “Here, you really have an opportunity to talk to people and you realize quickly that this is the



The Union Hotel celebrates its 100th anniversary this year, marking a century as a centerpiece in the city’s downtown area. At top, the Huffman Suite is one of 15 themed rooms at the Union Hotel. Guests passing through are encouraged to write about their travels in journals that are placed in each room. Above, the parlor includes a pool table and gathering space for visiting guests.

Photos by Alex Wittwer/The Observer

entertainment business. What a gorgeous stage this is to entertain on.”

The Union Hotel brings in many unique travelers, some of whom are seeking out vintage hotels. Other guests such as visiting professors at Eastern Oregon University or construction workers on a local job are treated with the same welcoming atmosphere.

“Sometimes they start out tired or not in the best mood and we’re able to lift them, which makes it very enjoyable,” Meredith said.

A welcoming atmosphere, 100 years strong

Things can get busy at the Union Hotel for Morden and Meredith, which is why the duo recently added a new member to the staff. Rosie III, a sheepdog puppy, enthusiastically greets guests at the front door. She is the next generation gatekeeper, following Rosie II who lived at the hotel for years.

The happy, gentle dog is just one of the many aspects of the hotel that

are aimed at making guests feel at home in the historic building.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not ignored the Union Hotel, which has undergone several changes in the last couple years. The once flourishing restaurant, which used to hold gatherings, is no longer operational. Even so, the hotel’s flow of visitors stays steady throughout the year as visitors stay long-term in the winter and tourists flock to the hotel in the spring and summer.

Morden aims to finish

renovations on the third floor, which will be opened up for 10 to 12 apartments that he hopes will create more housing opportunities in Union County.

Whether guests stay long-term or for one night, Morden and Meredith always find joy in the visitors having a good time.

“It really is an incredibly fun, fascinating business,” Morden said. “They come from all over the world and they’re fascinated by it and it’s nice when we can just make them laugh at the very least.”

Meredith enjoys hearing the stories of traveling visitors so much that she placed journals in the hotel’s rooms. Passersby can leave their thanks to the hotel staff or tell stories of their travels.

“I really like that about this place, because they have the greatest experience here, which we get to share with them,” she said.

Even as Morden prepares to hand off the daily operations to Meredith in the coming years, the owner cherishes the opportunity to work in the hotel business. Hosting interesting guests in an ever-changing environment has motivated Morden to keep the Union Hotel thriving, 100 years after being built.

“It’s really an incredibly fun thing to do,” Morden said. “There’s a saying that if you love what you do, you never work a day in your life. Well, I think I’ve only worked about 15 days total then.”

WORKERS

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This desire, he said, is sometimes hidden deep in their hearts. When they finally talk to an employer about crane work, and they learn about the opportunities, they are excited. And when they get a job, often they do not want to leave it.

Being able to offer employees a challenging, fulfilling and enjoyable job, then, accounts for part of N.W. Crane’s employment success. This is not the end of the explanation, however.

A major reason Karlson has been able to foster loyalty is because he offers in-house certifications, which employees appreciate.

Certificates are important for crane operators. Many work sites, including ones owned by Amazon, allow only certified workers. And many employers, Karlson said, require employees to find and pay for their own certificates.

He said he suspects his employees appreciate their training, but also other perks. He offers insurance and vacations. Depending on their experience, a new driver can earn \$20 to \$22 per hour. His crane operators can earn \$23 to \$40 or more.

These are nonunion jobs, but Karlson said employees can benefit from not being union members. Union



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Ilyas Harral, of Pendleton, uses a rope to guide a crane segment into position Monday, Sept. 27, 2021, while working with Hermiston-based N.W. Crane Service Inc. at Kadlec Regional Medical Center in Richland, Washington.

employees, he said, might have to wait years before they can receive crane training. This is not the case for his workers — they can start training right away.

Turnover, then, is low, according to Karlson. His workers appreciate their jobs and the benefits of their labor, so they work well, but this is not all. They did not just start working hard when they joined his company; they started as good workers.

Karlson relies on pre-employment interviews to screen potential employees. Even if he has to do interviews by Zoom,

rather than in person, he likes to be able to look a potential employee in the eye. He said he tries to figure their abilities and their character. If he thinks an employee will be a good fit, he said, they usually are.

Karlson said his company is “in the best position we’ve ever been,” and this is during a pandemic when many other companies are struggling to retain or to find employees.

N.W. Crane has experience in worker relations, which Karlson attributed to its humble beginnings. The company grew as part of N.W. Metal Fabricators

Inc., a company owned by his father, Kerry Karlson. His father was doing well with metal fabricating, but he saw the need for cranes. When he started operating his own crane, more and more employers approached him for help. He added a second crane, which led to more.

By 2005, the crane side of the business was large enough to justify a separate business, and N.W. Crane Services was born. It began operating on its own property, separate from the fabrication company where it started.

A family operation that

ONLINE

See this story at lagrandeobserver.com to read a panel interview with three top state economists.

has developed since Ryan Karlson’s father first came to Hermiston with his family in 1986, the companies treat their workers like family, and that approach has “gone a long way” to inspiring employees to stay, he said.

Having experienced workers is vital, Karlson said, because their jobs are no small feat.

He has nine cranes. The smallest weighs 40 tons. The largest tops out at 550 tons. He recently had this biggest crane on site at Lamb Weston.

It took 15 semitrailers to move the crane and a 60-ton support crane to put it together. Taking it down, after the job, takes his staff 5-1/2 hours of coordinated, skilled and difficult work.

“They’re amazing,” Karlson said of his employees.

No clear solution to labor shortage

To say it’s been a tough year to be a business owner would be an understatement.

The rise and the fall of COVID-19 cases, risk levels that opened and closed businesses, new safety pro-

ocols and a severe labor shortage have forced many business owners to rethink and retool their operations. Some industries — such as health care and leisure and hospitality — have been hit hard by the pandemic and a lack of workers. Other industries haven’t felt a thing, economists say.

In response, small businesses have raised wages and bumped up benefits to draw works, which often requires raising prices to offset these new costs. A job that paid a minimum wage of \$9.25 an hour in 2016 now pays \$12.75 an hour, according to the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries. For the past five weeks, EO Media Group explored the effect of the labor shortage on businesses, industries and workers young and old.

The Oregon Employment Department reported that the state regained nearly two out of three jobs lost in spring 2020 when government mandates restricted or closed business operations. A record level of job openings were reported in April and June in Oregon and across the country. Businesses reported 98,000 job vacancies at any given time between April and June.

In addition, there were about 32,500 Oregonians between April and June who said they couldn’t work because of child care concerns or health concerns related to COVID-19.