

# CAMPUS

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testing clinics every Tuesday and Thursday throughout the month of January. In the case of a positive result, after an interval of time the individual is tested again to be extra cautious — two consecutive positives are still tallied on the school's COVID-19 dashboard, contributing to a test positivity rate of 11.2% through Sunday, Feb. 6.

Prior to the pandemic, Eastern and most higher learning institutions were already offering the option of online learning. When students or faculty members test positive for the coronavirus or are experiencing symptoms, the ability to shift to online education allows the learning process to go uninterrupted — both online and on the classroom. "If there's a positive in a class, our focus has been to continue having the in-person class," Seydel said. "Our push has been to ensure that students have

the opportunity to attend in-person classes." Both Seydel and Karpilo noted that by this point in the pandemic, students and staff are generally being extra cautious when it comes to COVID-19. The university's health center has seen many students come in and check for COVID-19, even if they just have a common cold. "Students are a lot more aware of the spread of illness, so they're being very smart about it," Seydel said. "The awareness among students is neat to see."

**Vaccine mandate**  
When Eastern Oregon University announced its vaccine mandate on June 3, 2021, the decision was met with opposing views. Seydel noted that the initial reaction by many was the misconception that unvaccinated individuals could not go to school or work at Eastern. He explained that the mandate was a precaution toward the goal of maintaining a safe environment for everyone, regardless of vaccination status. "We've always held up that we need to create a safe

and healthy environment for everybody who interacts with EOU — students, faculty and staff," he said. "Whatever we need to do to ensure our students can achieve academic success, we have focused on." As of the university's latest vaccination status report, on Oct. 30, the in-person vaccination rate among Eastern Oregon University students was 75.7%. The in-person exemption rate was 24.2%. For employees, 80.1% were reported as vaccinated and 17.7% received an

exemption. As COVID-19 case numbers in the omicron spike begin to plateau, Eastern is aiming to continue its protocols to ensure the campus is a safe learning environment. "This has really been a group effort at EOU. All faculty, staff and students, it really has been a group effort," Karpilo said. "Everyone on this campus has had to step up to get us through this. I think it's just a testament to the dedication of our faculty and staff, as well as who our students are."

# FIRE

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gotten out were sitting in a vehicle less than 50 feet from the home. Fearing for their safety, he urged them to get out and move farther away, which they did. Not long after they left the vehicle a power line fell down near it, causing a cascade of sparks, Bell said. Elgin Rural Fire Department Capt. Doug Durfee said the possibility of the fire spreading was a concern, so firefighters sprayed water on some of the nearby structures soon after arriving.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Elgin Rural Fire Department Capt. Doug Durfee battles a late-morning house fire in Elgin on Friday, Feb. 4, 2022. The family of four were able to get out of the home without injury.

"It was one of the first things we did," he said. Those who were worried about the fire spreading included Regena Warren, whose house is just east of the home the fire struck. She feared the flames would spread to her house because of a number of dead and old trees between the two structures. She was outside watching intensely Friday morning and said she was ready to take action if necessary if her house was threatened.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

La Grande Rural Fire Chief Craig Kretschmer douses the smoking remains of a house on Fifth Street in Elgin on Friday, Feb. 4, 2022.

She said that had the fire begun to move toward her home it would have been hard for her to subdue because her water hose was frozen. Warren said though that she was ready to start tossing buckets of water on it if necessary.

Warren said that she was unaware of the fire until a friend, Janet Flippo, came by to see if she was OK. Warren said the fire had been burning about half an hour at that point. She suspected that something was wrong though because her dog was barking and seemed anxious. "He was freaking out," said Brayson Devin, Warren's stepson. No wind was blowing during the blaze, which was reported at about 10 a.m. "That helped a ton. Wind is the worst thing



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Homeowner Skyler Payne hangs a replica of an American flag over a soot-covered swingset outside his home at 25 N. Fifth St., Elgin, on Saturday, Feb. 5, 2022, as he searches through the damage to find any salvageable items. The home was destroyed in a fire Feb. 4.

you can have during a fire," Durfee said. "It causes sparks to leapfrog." The Imbler and La Grande rural fire departments, the La Grande Fire Department and the Union County Sheriff's Office also

responded to the blaze. The fire burned into the roof over the garage and home's living room. Firefighters fought this portion of the blaze by spraying water on it from below. Durfee said it would have been too risky to go on the top of the roof because of the possibility of it falling through. He pointed out during the fire there were indications that portions of the roof were weakening. The family of four

living in the home were assisted by local American Red Cross volunteers Heather Stanhope and Pat McDonald. The American Red Cross is able to provide comfort kits, which include hygiene items, fleece blankets, toys for children and cash assistance, Stanhope said. The Red Cross can also help connect victims with social services.

Firefighters were able to rescue a number of family keepsakes from portions of the home, including framed photos. However, many of the photos and keepsakes kept in the living room were lost in the blaze. "There are a lot of memories in there," Payne said. The cause of the fire remains under investigation.

# MASKS

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daily, filling Oregon hospitals. Oregon health officials say the average number of new COVID-19 cases has dropped about 40% over the last week.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

Carla Sorweide, owner of Hought's 24 Flavors, serves burgers to a couple on Thursday, July 1, 2021, in La Grande. The Oregon Health Authority has announced an end to indoor mask requirements in public places "no later than March 31." The end of the mask mandate indoors also will apply to schools, according to the OHA.

"By the end of next month, we'll be in a place where disease rates should be much lower, hospital capacity much less strained, and we can move to a more individual and community-based approach to masking requirements and mask use," Sidelinger said. Although state models show hospitalizations peaking at 1,169 before declining, Sidelinger said Oregon is "past its peak." The latest numbers from OHA show hospitalizations

at 1,092. There have been 6,181 Oregonians who have died. OHA officials say the indoor mask mandate could lift sooner if hospitalizations decline at a faster rate than expected. Officials also recommend high-risk individuals continue wearing

masks indoors, including people who haven't been vaccinated and those with compromised immunities.

OHA's announcement will soon put masking rules back into the hands of businesses or employers.

More than 100 people testified during a recent public hearing on the indoor mask rule, with several folks asking the state to drop the indoor mask requirement immediately.

A hearing on the mask requirement in schools last month yielded a similar response, but the Oregon Health Authority made its school mask requirement permanent as the temporary rule expired.

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