

# Outgoing EOU president looks back

### Tom Insko reflects on 7-year tenure with university

By SHANNON GOLDEN  
The Observer

LA GRANDE — As his tenure comes to an end as the 12th president of Eastern Oregon University, the reality has started to sink in for Tom Insko. “I love this university,” he said. “I love our students and I already know I’ll love our future students.”

Insko was appointed in 2015 after more than 20 years as an executive at Boise Cascade. The EOU graduate and lifelong La Grande resident brought his business experience, passion for rural Oregon communities and desire to expand opportunities through education to his role as president.



Insko

Insko announced on Aug. 1 that he was leaving his post and has been named president and chief executive officer at Collins, a wood products company based in Wilsonville.

“I fully expected to retire from Eastern,” he said. “But things happen in life and the set of circumstances came together that this opportunity presented itself to me, and it’s unique and it’s the right thing for me and my family.”

Under Insko’s leadership, EOU increased student access to higher education and protected affordability by keeping tuition flat during the pandemic in 2021-22. EOU has had some of the smallest increases in costs of all public universities in Oregon during his tenure while increasing its diversity and growing student retention rates.

Now, the university’s board prepares to launch its search for a new president — to have one in place by at least July 1, 2023. Insko said he is excited to see what talented individuals the position attracts, and hopes whoever takes his place will maintain the progress he and university leaders set in motion.

“We are seeing national interest in how this institution is embracing and serving students, that all of us are challenged to serve,” he said. “They’re seeing action and results from this little institution in Eastern Oregon, and I just see that momentum continuing.”

### Unconventional expertise

When Insko stepped into his role at Eastern seven years ago, the state was threatening its shutdown. Several years of falling enrollment rates had prompted frequent budget cuts and staff eliminations — Eastern was spending more money than it was taking in.



Former Eastern Oregon University President Tom Insko high-fives a student in this undated photo.

Insko, with bachelor’s degrees in mathematics and business economics and a master’s in business administration, may have seemed an unlikely choice for higher academic leadership. But his expertise fit the bill.

“There’s a national trend now among university presidents hiring to look for somebody with good business skills,” board chair and interim co-president Richard Chaves noted. “If you think about the responsibilities of a president, a lot of them are right along those lines.”

University board members noted in 2015 that Insko’s experience working with the state Legislature, building teams and relationships and strong understanding of finance and budgeting were important factors in their decision to hire him.

Insko worked for Boise Cascade for 20 years, in positions ranging from administrative analyst to plant manager, production manager, senior financing manager, region manager and area manager.

He also served as a governor-appointed member of the Business Oregon Commission and the Northeast Oregon Regional Solutions Committee. He serves on the Western Resources Legal Center board of directors and is past president of the EOU Foundation. And between 2012 and 2018, he served on the Oregon State Board of Forestry. Insko cited this policy work as an asset.

“All those experiences contributed to my development as a leader to be able to come into EOU and face a very challenging industry and a dynamic organization,” he said.

Since the start of Insko’s tenure, the university has expanded its academic programs, reorganized its academic colleges and added two new deans. Insko also helped secure funding for the new fieldhouse, the addition of men’s and women’s wrestling, lacrosse and baseball programs, and renovations and upgrades to buildings

across campus.

Insko noted that it is his expertise in areas outside of academia that have increased financial stability and helped EOU’s faculty and staff establish stronger programs.

“I think it was probably one of the best decisions that EOU has made in presidential selection for many years,” Chaves said.

### A well-established leadership team

Insko’s first day on the job coincided with the first meeting of the university’s new governing board. Throughout his seven years as president, Insko emphasized that he and the board worked to establish goals and systems that could be pursued even in the case of a leadership change.

Vice President for University Advancement Tim Seydel said that having a strong leadership team will make a difference when it comes to facing the transition from Insko to a new president.

“I think that the real key component here and the big difference will be that we have this local governing board,” he said.

In 2017, the board of trustees approved the strategic plan for Eastern — one geared toward maintaining the momentum Insko and university leadership established.

“We all know that a lot of times great strategic plans get written and then they get dusty up on the shelf,” Chaves noted. “President Insko and the board have done a lot of things to help ensure that that’s not the case with this plan.”

The framework, named The Ascent 2029, highlights six goals to be achieved by the university’s centennial year: boost student success, improve academic quality, increase the university’s impact, foster a thriving university culture, cultivate partnerships and establish financial sustainability.

“I was a student here. I’ve bene-

fited from the culture that we have as a university,” Insko said. “For me, it’s very personal in wanting to provide that experience for every student that comes to Eastern.”

### Focus on student belonging and diversity

Insko’s push to better serve the Eastern Oregon community highlights another facet of Eastern’s identity that needs to be addressed — diversity, equity and inclusion.

“We recognized that we were not serving the growing race and ethnic diversity that we have in our region,” Insko asserted.

Together with the board and university faculty, Insko worked to develop outreach programs to recruit a more diverse student population and developed support systems for low-income, first-generation and minority students.

“All these underserved populations have challenges that systems within academia have kind of locked them out of,” Insko said.

This June, the EOU Board of Trustees authorized Insko to enter into a contract with educational consulting firm EAB Global, Inc., geared toward closing equity gaps within regional cohorts of two- and four-year colleges and universities by 2030.

As part of this “Moon Shot for Equity” initiative, the university will receive research, technology and advisory services around change management and equity training. It must also agree to implement research-based best practices for removing systemic barriers to success.

### Rural roots

Insko also emphasized that one of his top priorities during his time at EOU was fostering the university’s rural identity and building connections with the rural communities it serves.

In March 2018, Gov. Kate Brown signed House Bill 4153,

designating Eastern Oregon as Oregon’s Rural University. The bill touted the university’s rural outreach, distance education and online programs and broad-reaching community engagement efforts. At the time of the bill’s signing, EOU served the highest percentage of students eligible to receive the federal Pell Grant in Oregon.

“That really put the flag in the ground in the state, that EOU has a unique and distinct mission,” he said of the legislative recognition.

Raised in northern Union County, the Elgin High School graduate has a long-standing passion for rural communities. Throughout his time as EOU president, Insko worked to highlight the university’s roots and establish connections with the region’s geographically dispersed communities.

“I’m thankful that the faculty, staff and everyone really embraced that and have developed programs and systems that exemplify being a university focused on serving Eastern Oregon first,” he said.

The Rural Engagement and Vitality Center is one such program that arose during Insko’s tenure. Formed through a partnership between Wallowa Resources and EOU, the center provides resources and internship opportunities for students, connects faculty with regional partners and responds to regional challenges such as workforce housing.

“We don’t want Eastern Oregon University to continue to be the best-kept secret,” he said.

### Moving forward

As the search begins for his replacement, Insko wrapped up his time at Eastern just as new students and returning students returned to La Grande for fall classes. Insko said that although he is stepping out of the presidential role, he has no plans to disengage with the university or its constituents.

He emphasized that the push to better serve rural, Eastern Oregon students and become an engaged regional partner was a team effort.

“I’m thankful that the team here, the faculty, staff, everyone really embraced that,” he said.

But he’s not concerned about his personal legacy at Eastern — he simply hopes the university will maintain the momentum it developed over the last seven years.

“Whether I’m ever attached to that or not, frankly, I don’t care,” he said. “It’s really about this institution and who it serves and its important role in this community and this region.”

# New tool developed in Corvallis traces stolen trees

By GARY A. WARNER  
Oregon Capital Bureau

CORVALLIS — Illegal logging steals up to \$1 billion per year for the timber industry — but investigators have a new tool developed in Corvallis to increase the chances of convictions, the U.S. Forest Service reported this week.

Unless caught during the felling of trees, criminals frequently are not prosecuted or, if tried, they’re acquitted. Federal prosecutors have difficulty proving “beyond a reasonable doubt” that a log at a lumberyard was part of an illegal harvest.

But a new system developed by researchers Rich Cronn and Laura Hauck at the U.S. Forest Service’s Pacific Northwest Research Station in Corvallis increases chances of proving a connection.

Using DNA taken from a fallen tree, the researchers developed protocols to evaluate wood products that have met the test of being admissible as evidence in court.

The U.S. Department of Justice used the system to convict an illegal harvester of bigleaf maple trees in the Olympic National Forest in Washington state.

The researchers are honing the system by working with law enforcement, “citizen scientists” who look for possible cases and nongovernmental organizations involved in protecting forestlands.

Together, they started building genomics databases for the species most frequently targeted by timber thieves.

Like humans, tree DNA passes traits on to the next generation of trees. Trees can be part of the original nat-

**MORE INFORMATION**  
Science Findings is a publication of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Forest Service. Find Pacific Northwest articles at [www.fs.usda.gov/pnw](http://www.fs.usda.gov/pnw).

ural landscape, or planted from areas nearby to far away. Lumber has increasingly used “farmed” trees planted for the specific purpose of being harvested after a set number of

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