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STUDY

How a Rural College Works to Prevent 'Brain Drain'

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PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL DAKOTA FOR EASTERN OREGON U.

Grace Donovan, executive director of the REV Center, is shown leading a panel at the Northern Blues Restoration Project's 2024 annual conference at Eastern Oregon U. Over 100 regional representatives convened to explore expanding the natural-resources work force.

Fifteen years ago, when Grace Donovan was growing up in eastern Oregon, she couldn't imagine staying in her rural region after high school. It wasn't that she didn't care about the area — or appreciate all it had to offer. Her hometown of Enterprise, with a population of 2,124 people, takes pride in its “[old-fashioned charm](#),” surrounded by grassy meadows, pine forests, and views of the Wallowa Mountains. Yet the academic and professional opportunities she wanted seemed to be elsewhere. “I didn't see a future for myself, despite really loving the natural beauty,” she says.

Donovan moved across the country to attend Middlebury College, in Vermont, graduating with a degree in political science in 2014. She then spent nearly a decade far away from her home state — working in education and economic development in the Dominican Republic, Chile, and Detroit. If she ever thought about moving back to Oregon, she envisioned herself in a place like Portland — as one of the many modern young professionals drawn to big cities.

Then Donovan heard about an organization that [began in 2020](#) as a partnership between the Enterprise-based nonprofit [Wallowa Resources](#), which focuses on sustaining rural economies, and Eastern Oregon University, a public four-year institution in the small city of La Grande — about an hour’s drive from Enterprise — with a student body of 2,853. Their joint venture created a new nonprofit known as the Rural Engagement & Vitality Center, or “REV Center.” The center is housed at the university but works on [community and economic-development projects](#) throughout eastern Oregon — as well as southeastern Washington and western Idaho — with the help of university interns. One of its stated goals is helping to create “opportunities for the next generation of rural leaders to envision lives for themselves in the region.”

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Inspired by this mission, Donovan moved to La Grande last year to become the center’s executive director. She’s happy to be home and proud to be working to improve her region as well as communicating what’s already positive about it, including job opportunities students and graduates may not be aware of. “I see so many more possibilities here than I did when I was young,” Donovan says, “and I’m very excited to share that with other people.”

The REV Center is just one example of how EOU is developing partnerships to prevent further “brain drain” in its rural region — working to attract more students to the university, giving them a greater connection to the region while they’re students, and increasing the incentive for them to consider staying local after graduation.

“When you talk to county commissioners, educators, and people running businesses in the area, one of their key issues is how to retain people to keep from losing students who grew up in these small communities,” says Tim Seydel, who graduated from EOU in 1989 and now serves as its vice president for university advancement.

The university isn’t new to thinking about the issue, but it’s making new efforts after being officially designated “Oregon’s Rural University” by the state government



PHOTO COURTESY OF TALIA FILIPEK

Grace Donovan is executive director of the Rural Engagement & Vitality Center at Eastern Oregon U.

in 2018. (That designation was aimed at helping EOU direct federal funding to underserved rural populations, but it also recognized the university's unique role in the state's educational ecosystem: It's the only comprehensive postsecondary institution in eastern Oregon, serving an area that's sparsely populated but massive in geographic size — about as big as the state of Pennsylvania.)

The REV Center, whose work began in earnest when Donovan arrived last April, is part of the [Educational Partnerships for Innovation in Communities Network](#), a global group of over 60 colleges working to help their students improve the communities in which they operate.

Donovan says the center's budget this year is about \$470,000, largely supported by funding from the university and philanthropy, and it offers part-time paid internships to students who work on projects in the region.

The center's early projects have [included](#) working with the Blues Intergovernmental Council, which serves the Blue Mountains region, on a regional socioeconomic analysis of changes to forest management, and supporting state-funded community engagement aimed at improving transportation in rural areas. The value of these projects to their communities is obvious, but the center is also focused on its interns benefiting personally and professionally.

"Everything we do incorporates student internships," Donovan says, which provide exposure to job opportunities available in rural places. EOU is working to connect students to job pathways in its part of the



PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL DAKOTA FOR EASTERN OREGON U.

Shaun Cain (right), a professor of biology at Eastern Oregon U., helps students at La Grande High School during a Summer Institute and Early College Initiative course last summer. Students who take the course are eligible to earn college credit.

state, too, including through the center's [Rural Planning Program](#), inspired by conversations with Oregon's Department of Land Conservation and Development, which is offering assistance to local cities that don't have professional planning staff.

"Students are going to be working closely with city officials and understanding the inner workings of local government," Donovan says. "There's a severe shortage of city-management professionals in eastern Oregon. If you're looking at a major in politics, policy, or public administration, there are a lot of opportunities locally. We're giving students a close-up view of how city government works to see where they could possibly fit in." (The city of Joseph, Ore., became the inaugural participant in this program in late 2023.)

EOU is also working to attract more high-school students from 65 districts in the region by talking about the university and offering dual-enrollment coursework through their Early College Initiatives, which saves students money and gets them more quickly on the path to graduation and jobs.

“We want to help students at an earlier age and guide them toward what they’re looking for when they graduate,” says Kathleen Brown, associate director of Early College Initiatives. Even for students who ultimately have no interest in the university, Brown says, her message is, “I want you to be able to shut the door on me, not have me shut the door on you.”

Brown’s team, which includes specialists funded by a rural economic-development grant from the U.S. Department of Education, visits high schools and brings faculty members to speak to students, knowing that many rural families lack the transportation to visit colleges. They emphasize EOU’s small class sizes and tight-knit feel, arguing that it’s not a jarring transition for a rural student to study there. Brown also says she often talks to students about how attending EOU can help them to not leave behind the communities where they grew up but return to those places able to make a more valuable contribution: “It’s OK for you to get a degree and then go back to the farm, because that’s going to enhance the farm.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL DAKOTA FOR EASTERN OREGON U.

Kathleen Brown is associate director of Early College Initiatives at Eastern Oregon U.

Aviendha (Avie) Durrant, a senior at La Grande High School who plans to attend EOU in the fall, visited the [EOU HUB](#) at her high school — a room where students can work on their college applications, fill out paperwork for financial aid and scholarships, and ask questions. She also took dual-enrollment courses in Spanish and computer science, and spent a week living on EOU’s campus for the university’s MedQuest [camp](#) for students interested in the medical field. Durrant found the connections helpful and comforting, she says. “It makes me feel more confident in going from high school to college, which is a big step.”

Founded as a teacher’s college in 1929, EOU has an education-related partnership that can connect students with professional opportunities in the region. The [Oregon Rural Teacher Corps](#) partnership with the national [Rural Schools Collaborative](#) gives funding and other support to master’s students in teaching who teach in underserved Oregon communities.

The university also convenes job fairs and special forums that connect students to employment opportunities in the region. In early April of this year, the university held its third annual [Eastern Oregon Career Expo](#), a collaboration with the nonprofit [Eastern Oregon Workforce Board](#) and [WorkSource Oregon](#), a partnership between the Oregon Employment Department and state, local, and nonprofit agencies. Shawna Elsberry, the university’s

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director of career services, reports that 86 employers signed up to take part, and she believes many students who grew up in eastern Oregon simply may not know about opportunities that exist there.

“They may not have looked at employment in their own community until they’ve decided they need a little experience on their resume — or a little pocket change,” she says. “When they get involved with employers, they’ll find out there are marketing jobs, sales jobs, and accounting jobs, even in La Grande, with a population around 13,000.”

Corrian Kellogg, an EOU junior majoring in computer science and minoring in political science, is hoping to find work in the area that combines his technology skills and passion for public service — and he’s already seeing value in two of the university’s partnerships. Kellogg attended this year’s Career Expo to get a better sense of local employers, and he met with Donovan at the event. He’d already interned for the REV Center last year, working remotely on data analysis, and he’s hoping to do another internship there soon.

Kellogg’s family moved to La Grande when he was in high school. It was a huge adjustment for him, and he didn’t have warm feelings toward his new home. Then he took an inspiring class with Daniel Paul Costie, an assistant professor of public administration, who invited Kellogg to work with him as an intern on a REV Center project about transportation in Morrow County. Now Kellogg is thinking he’d like to stay in the region, be close to his family, and possibly work in government, nonprofits, or community organizations. “A few years ago, I thought I hated this place and wanted to get out as soon as I could,” Kellogg says. “Now I’m seeing how much good is done even in a place this small, and I’m getting more involved in the community.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF SHAWNA ELSBERRY

Shawna Elsberry is director of career services at Eastern Oregon U.

Seydel, the vice president for university advancement, says the university’s partnerships also shape its academic coursework, in an effort to ensure that graduates have the skills they’d need for work — including in area industries. He gave the example of the university’s new [agriculture entrepreneurship program](#), which focuses on experiential learning in the agricultural and natural-resource sectors. “We developed the program with an advisory

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PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL DAKOTA FOR EASTERN OREGON U.

Student interns gain valuable career development in natural resources through a collaborative project on Oregon's Bull Run Creek, spearheaded by the REV Center.

The university is motivated by the knowledge that local employers value having employees who are from their region — the kind of workers who are accustomed to rural life and don't have to adjust to it.

board of people from around the region who are involved in these industries,” he says, “and we’ve received funding from businesses to help get it off the ground.” Seydel says that this kind of partnership — one that brings in funding — can be vital to small rural colleges, which often lack financial resources.

Moving forward, Eastern Oregon University hopes to continue to develop its various partnerships, creating even greater synergy between its different efforts to encourage graduates to build careers in rural communities. Donovan says that the REV Center hopes to further integrate its work into its rural-related academic programs in the future. The university is motivated by the knowledge that local employers value having employees who are from their region — the kind of workers who are accustomed to rural life and don't have to adjust to it. “The message we’re trying to combat is that there aren’t any opportunities,” Donovan says. “It’s all about seeing possibilities and changing narratives.”

Questions or comments about this report? Email us at ci@chronicle.com.

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