

# Snowboarding 101

## Experiential Education at SnoPlanks Academy

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**THIS PAST WINTER**, SnoPlanks co-founder James Nicol pulled an NBD.

It's probably not what you expect—instead of closing shop or selling his 10-year-old Bend, OR-based snowboard brand, he donated it to Oregon State University-Cascades.

There was no one major reason for SnoPlanks's change of direction, Nicol explains: "You see two paths diverging, and it's either you need to fully go all in and scale or go another direction."

Nicol was just ready for a change.

It so happens that SnoPlanks' small but mighty manufacturing shop is located right in the ever-expanding backyard of OSU-Cascades, which is also conveniently located right on the road to Mt. Bachelor.

Nicol and SnoPlanks cofounder Ryan Holmes had been speakers in OSU Business Instructor Todd Laurence's business classes over the years, so Nicol reached out with a proposal to donate the company or, in his words, "continue growing within the folds of this amazing university."

They made a not-so-straightforward deal, which involved structuring a business donation, a far cry from previous monetary donations to the college. Despite the complexities, the cool news is that now there's a precedent for these kinds of donations, which alone has implications for future brands looking to become involved in experiential education.

This winter will mark the first year OSU-Cascades students bring SnoPlanks to market as a business from the ground up right from their campus. This past spring, a mere four months into the transfer, the college hosted a panel discussion featuring the SnoPlanks founders, Laurence, and the new student leadership, offering a look behind the scenes.

Operating a student-run business is indeed a bold undertaking. The company is staffed by six paid students from departments across the university, including SnoPlanks' new President, Caitlin Colgin; Ryan Henkel, the COO and head of finance; Jacob Smith, the head of supply chain and operations, who comes from an engineering curriculum; Tristan Brown, the chief product officer, who is an outdoor product major studying innovation and entrepreneurship; and finally a chief marketing officer and a

James Nicol schooling students on the art of snowboard production.  
Photo: Todd Laurence



head of sales and customer success, all managing fellow students to get the business' engine revving and get product out the door and in your hands.

Nicol voices an awesome outcome of this donation: "Students get to be a part of building a business while they're in school for four years doing marketing, design, sales—all these different facets of the business. And by the time they get out of school and graduate, they're well equipped to go to work for any outdoor brand."

Herein is also one of the biggest challenges—every year, a new group of novice students comes in while the most experienced graduate. Everyone acknowledges this is an issue, but Laurence says his biggest focus is on creating a knowledge bank so that the information can be passed on from the graduating class to the freshman.

SnoPlanks snowboards will be available for winter '24-'25, but they won't be pressed in Bend. SnoPlanks Academy is outsourcing manufacturing overseas with a fairly small product run. The shop will still be used for one-off builds and product testing. Like absolutely everything, that may change in the future—there's a lot yet to be figured out. But for now, it's an experiential education experiment that's literally putting a small slice of snowboarding in the hands of the youth. ▲