

Remembering Former Dean Tom O'Brien

February 26, 2026

Thomas O'Brien, who served as dean of the Isenberg School of Management for nineteen years before his retirement in 2006, passed away in February.

As dean, O'Brien was a builder, mentor, and friend. He cultivated the landmark \$6 million gift from Eugene M. Isenberg '50, '00H that named the school, built the 45,000-square-foot Harold Alford Management Center, and launched what has become one of the country's leading Online MBA programs. He folded the Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management and the McCormack Department of Sport Management into the business school and established Isenberg's first endowed faculty positions. His fundraising and vision built the foundation that enabled the school to become the institution it is today.

While those achievements stand as the physical markers of his tenure, the people he guided and supported will be his lasting legacy.

"Tom was not only a visionary leader, but also a mentor, colleague, and friend to many in the Isenberg family," said **Anne Massey**, Isenberg's current dean and the Thomas O'Brien endowed chair. "His leadership, kindness, and unwavering commitment to Isenberg over many years of service have left a lasting mark. It has been my honor to serve as the Thomas O'Brien endowed chair, created in recognition of Tom and his enduring impact."

In an article published in the school's newsletter in 2006, before he left his position as dean, O'Brien described the challenges and pleasures of the job, including managing the revenue and leading the teams. "What I hadn't counted on was losing my heart here," he said. "Especially to the students, alumni, and many of the faculty."

He added, "During my years as dean, whenever I got fr



Menu s knew how to renew myself—I spent quality time

In the later years of his career and well into retirement, O'Brien became a familiar and beloved presence in downtown Amherst. His daily five-mile walking loop (in his leather coat and cowboy hat) was a ritual that seemed to mirror his steadiness. With his loyal Labrador Dean at his side, he moved through campus and town with a quiet constancy that made him part of the landscape. His passing leaves a space that cannot be filled, but his footsteps—literal and otherwise—remain deeply imprinted on the community he helped shape.

To support his legacy, the family invites donations to the [Dean Tom O'Brien Scholarship Endowment](#). Read the obituary [here](#).

Isenberg Faculty and Friends on Dean Tom O'Brien

Hossein Kazemi, Director of the CISDM and Michael and Cheryl Philipp Endowed Professor of Finance

"One of Tom's defining qualities as dean was his willingness to trust faculty and give them the freedom to pursue new, unconventional ideas. When Tom Schneeweis proposed establishing the Center for International Securities and Derivatives Markets (CISDM), he offered his full support while allowing the center to evolve organically, encouraging experimentation to find the right model. He also supported bringing leading scholars and practitioners from around the world to share their expertise, even at a time when compensating outside speakers through a research center was uncommon and sometimes discouraged. His openness to innovation created an environment where new ideas could flourish and helped position the center as a globally respected institution.

"Tom was equally committed to building lasting institutional resources. When an asset management firm expressed its willingness to donate a highly valuable, proprietary database, but only if recognized at its full market price, Tom could see the transformative potential of the gift. He personally traveled with us to New York to meet the firm's founder and worked hard to ensure that the university understood the importance of the opportunity. Through his persistence and advocacy, the gift was ultimately realized and properly recognized. His leadership not only secured an extraordinary resource but also demonstrated his deep belief in investing in the intellectual infrastructure that would benefit faculty, students, and the broader academic community for years to come."

George Milne, Edward D. Shirley '78 Endowed Professor of Marketing

"Tom was a very personable, kind man who effectively led the School of Management to becoming the Isenberg School of Management. I appreciate that Tom, as part of his leadership style, made time to have one-on-one conversations with faculty. He also could lighten the mood with a smile and good story or anecdote."

Anna Nagurney, Eugene M. Isenberg Chair in Integrative Studies; PhD Coordinator in Management Science; Director, Virtual Center for Supernetworks

"Tom O'Brien left an incredible legacy on faculty, staff, students, and alumni. He was brilliant at bringing people together and in supporting them. He always had a kind word, a story to share (often very funny), and cared about us in terms of both our professional and personal growth. I will never forget how, when the UMass Board of Trustees approved my appointment as the John F. Smith Memorial Professor in 1998, Tom O'Brien had the most beautiful blue vase of flowers with stargazer lilies delivered to my home, along with a big bag of chocolate chip cookies for my young daughter. And, the year before, after I returned from Stockholm, Sweden, where I had held a visiting professorship at the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH), when Gene and Ronnie Isenberg were visiting, he made a point of having me meet them and even share photos of experiences in Sweden. Tom always showed up to important events and celebrated milestones with us. He came to my Distinguished Faculty Lecture in 2000 and the dinner afterwards. Tom was extraordinary at making and sustaining friendships. He listened to people and he cared. He made everyone feel special when he chatted with us.

"Tom valued having speakers come to Isenberg and it was such a pleasure to hear from many luminaries and also alums, such as Jack Smith Jr., who had endowed the chaired professorship in honor of his Father. Tom was very supportive of the Virtual Center for Supernetworks that I founded in 2001 and we enjoyed when Jack Smith Jr. came to visit the Supernetworks Lab. I remember how Tom and I jointly hosted Daron Acemoglu of MIT in 2008, with assistance also from the UMass Amherst INFORMS Student Chapter. Acemoglu, subsequently, received the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences.

"In gratitude, as a token of appreciation, I nominated Tom O'Brien for the Distinguished Alumni Award, which he received at the Massachusetts State House in Boston in April 2007. [Menu](#) experiences, photos, memories, and the wide and deep impact of our legendary former Dean Tom O'Brien...

Robert Nakosteen, Professor Emeritus in Operations and Information Management

"Tom hated meetings, and he wasn't very good at running them. His philosophy about meetings is summarized in his pithy phrase: 'Not all meetings are bad. Some get canceled!'"

Dennis Hanno, former Isenberg Associate Dean; President Emeritus, Wheaton College; Faculty, Gabelli School of Business at Fordham University

"I first met Tom O'Brien as a PhD student in the Isenberg School soon after he became Dean and I'd say we hit it off immediately because we shared a passion for the power of education and for the power of UMass. A few years after finishing my PhD, Tom was the driving force in bringing me back to UMass as a faculty member, which was quite literally the best thing that ever happened to me. It was amazing to work so closely with someone who was a true mentor for me, and working together we also became friends and forged a lifelong bond that lasted right up until his passing. He was that kind of a person and friend - always authentically interested in others and willing to do whatever was needed to help someone.

"Tom literally created the Isenberg School (it was SOM before him) and his impact on the place and on the lives of thousands of students is the stuff of legends. Under his leadership, the Isenberg School grew enormously in size and stature. There was no challenge he avoided: Merge Sport Management and Hospitality and Tourism Management into the business school? Done! Build one of the leading online MBA programs before online was a thing? Done! Update and add to the building at a time when such dreams seemed impossible? Done! And there are so many, many more examples of what his leadership made possible.

"Most importantly, Tom was one of the most compassionate, genuine and authentic people I have ever met. When I joined the Isenberg School, my children were toddlers and to this day they still feel attached to him as much as I do. It's because he always took the time to talk with them and showed interest in everything they were doing. He was never too busy for anyone and he had so much to share with others.

"Tom truly shaped me and, more importantly, he shaped the Isenberg School and UMass in ways that continue to shape so many others. I'll miss him immensely, but I know his legacy will live on."

Nelson Lacey, Professor Emeritus of Finance

"Tom became dean at a tipping point in the life of the business school. This is exemplified by comparing the size and financial health of the school from the 10 years prior to the 10 years after his tenure at Isenberg. Without large budgets, Tom laid a foundation of raising revenues as it became clear that this was to be a matter of survival at UMass going forward. Both Mark and Anne took these initial efforts and (to their credit) ran with it.

"Another aspect of Tom's leadership is that he allowed room for faculty and staff when it came to making decisions and setting agendas. This came from the fact that he was not an academic and arrived without any campus experience. Although his learning curve was steep, he did learn how to better argue for and secure resources.

"I would summarize his time as dean as a success and believe that most would agree. I say most because he made some tough calls and because unanimous views in academia are pretty much an impossibility.

"Tom's heart was big and it showed. I believe he approached each day with the hope of making Isenberg a better place."

Marc Weinberger, Professor Emeritus of Marketing

"I served on Tom's administrative committee for most of his tenure as dean. During that time, he set the foundation for a transformation from a financially strapped backwater program to a school with a widely recognized and envied name, and a preferred destination for students. It was Tom who brought key alums back to the school with support that culminated in the Isenberg family gifts in the late 1990s. By establishing a fundraising arm where there had been none, and appointing and empowering key program leaders like Dennis Hanno and Eric Berkowitz, Tom made the school a magnet for students on and off campus, and online. For Tom, it was always about the students, and with that mantra, he set the stage for the branding and current success of the Isenberg School of Management."

Bonnie Zima-Dowd, former Development Director

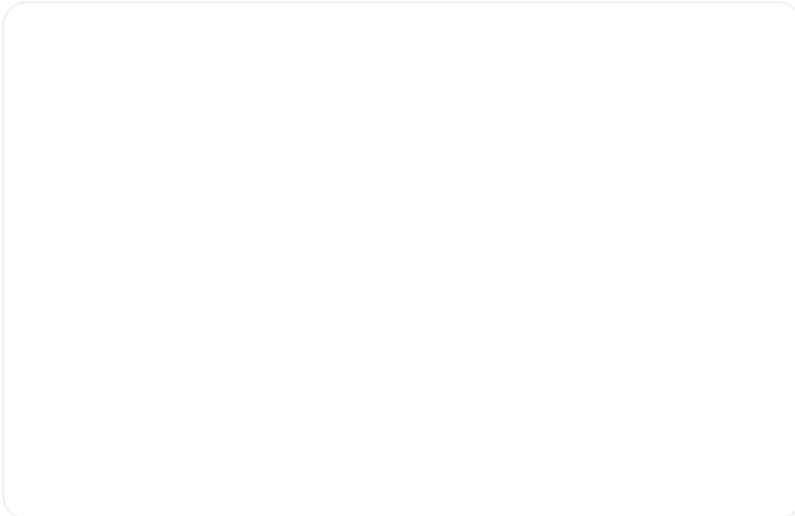
Menu

“Tom was a friend, mentor, teacher, and servant leader, and as dean of Isenberg he loved what he did. Although Whitmore and campus politics sometimes got in the way, Tom fought back because he always, always put people first and he wanted the very best for his students, his staff, his faculty, and his alumni. Even when he was fundraising, the donor always came before an ask of any kind. This was a radical change for the development professionals on campus at the time—but it worked! Tom also believed in hiring great people and letting them do their job.

“He gave the school more than its first addition and a name. He loved the school with all his heart and mind; not everyone can do that. Isenberg was blessed to have Tom O'Brien as dean for 20+ years.”

Faculty News

[More Faculty News](#) →



Isenberg Welcomes New Faculty

The Isenberg School of Management welcomed 11 new faculty members for...

[Read More](#)

Isenberg Faculty Rank Among World's Top 2% Most-Cited Scientists

Isenberg School of Management faculty are again among the most prestigious...

[Read More](#)



2025 Faculty Research Report

[Read More](#)

Info For...



Quick Links



Menu

Isenberg School of Management