

Thoughts on the Governor's Higher Education Taskforce's Mission

For Consideration of the Communication and Execution Committee

Situational Context

- Seven years ago, Idaho's State Board of Education (SBE) set the 60% goal for the state. This goal represents a sizeable gap from where the state stands today at 41%. In the last 7 years, very little measurable progress has been made towards achieving that goal. It is clear we face **two** problems when we address achieving the 60% goal. First, there are large gaps that must be crossed to get to 60%, and secondly, there has been a lack of progress toward the 60% goal in seven years of our efforts.
- The Governor is seeking an answer to these issues, and ultimately seeks to create a strategic plan that would serve as a guide for the state to address this challenge. To that end and as an initial step, he has assembled a taskforce to study, build consensus, and make recommendations.

Hypothesis

1. **This is a "systems" problem.** Tackling the 60% goal and addressing the lack of progress thus far, are clearly not component issues or an isolated challenge. Both problems, are clearly "systems" issues. By that I mean the challenges underlying the problems are:
 - a) **Pervasive** across all higher education (across Idaho and the nation), and not isolated to a specific institution(s) or individual.
 - b) **Complex and multifactorial**, meaning the problem is not addressed with an easy, simple, or mono-dimensional perspective.
 - c) **Interconnected and interdependent** across all components/institutions, meaning how the all the existing components connect and interact are core to how the whole system behaves. Significant progress toward goal attainment is extremely unlikely to be achieved by simply "bolting on" new programs or adding funding onto the existing system while leaving the existing system otherwise untouched.
2. **The current "system" is not broken.** There is a saying amongst those who deal with complex systems, *"if the current system is not producing the outcomes you want, don't think of it as if the system is broken, instead it is likely perfectly designed to produce the outcomes you are currently getting"*. The clarity within that statement manifests itself in several ways:
 - a) First, it is erroneous, unfair, and misdirected to seek to place blame on people or sub-components within the system, as they are likely just doing what the current system asks and incents from them.
 - b) Second, the outcomes and behaviors of the system will not be adequately addressed by complaining or pointing out issues, nor by bolting on new things and leaving the existing system intact. Incrementalism will be an ineffective strategy for change.
 - c) Lastly, the key to materially changing the outcomes of the current system, lies in redesigning the system, in large part, or in its entirety. That means things likely redesigning

structure, roles, incentives, and how the system is governed. Parts of the existing system that already serve the goal should be retained, and parts should be replaced.

3. **Change management is critical to the solution.** It is also key to understand that redesigning the system is only the first step, and the heavy lift lies in the required change management work. Internalizing this dynamic is critical, as is deeply understanding the ramifications. For example:
 - a) Change management taxes and places demands on the leadership and communication elements of the system in much different ways than the job of shepherding a status quo, linear-extension phase of a system. The skill set and mind set of those in charge must be different. These changes must be dealt with and need to precede all other change efforts.
 - b) Research tells us that bigger, more abrupt change actually yields more effective results than using smaller, more continuous steps. Two problems often defeat change efforts using the later approach. First, people often deal with small change by assessing it as no big deal, and end up ignoring the change directives, and quickly resuming status quo behaviors that are comfortable. Their lack of change influences others to do the same. Second, people often burn out suffering change fatigue, as small continuous steps require a long period of change in order complete the transformation. Bigger efforts are more effective in getting people's attention and force them to deal with the barrier, both real and perceived. And introducing a sharp period of change and discomfort, followed by adaptation into a new normal, is a healthier effort.
 - c) Large scale change requires far more emphasis on communication, tactical inclusion, emotional support, and stronger emphasis on the "why" behind the change. These efforts are often minimalist or completely ignored in small, ordinary changes, that can be achieved with more of a short directive method. Additionally, things like reassignment for people without skills to handle the new role, and an intolerance for those refusing the change must be anticipated, prepared for and be part of the plan.

4. The **SBE is part of the system**, in fact the most critical part, **and it too must be redesigned** in the vision of its new role. All structures, policies, practices, customs, surface and underlying assumptions need to be examined and assessed for fit in the new system. And if necessary, must be redesigned. This can lead to small changes, such as frequency of meeting and agenda structure of the SBE, up to and perhaps including large changes that require constitutional changes to implement. This effort needs to be done wisely, as to not get into a mode changing things for the sake of change, nor failing to address fundamental misalignments that will doom efforts.

It is worth restating; this effort must be approached with a mindset that the existing SBE and people are not broken. That is unfair and flat wrong! Instead they are perfectly in alignment with the current system. It will be natural and expected that those in the SBE institution will likely begin this work with the emotional response that they are under attack. We need to be understanding to those feelings, but also respectfully persist through them, if we are to achieve our goal.

5. In summary, the Communication and Execution Committee of the taskforce's initial discussions have entirely focused on communications as the key challenge and entirety of the end recommendations. While an understandable starting point, we must progress to the view that

communication is critical, but is only a subset of what we need to deal with in our recommendations to the Governor.