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**ARTICLE: MAKING PROGRESS ON HIGHER ED TASK  
FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS**

By Dr. Linda Clark, President, Idaho State Board of Education

I had the honor last year of serving as co-chairman of Governor C.L. “Butch” Otter’s Higher Education Task Force, which developed many recommendations for improving our overall system, and sparked much discussion during the last legislative session.

Some of our recommendations did make headlines, while others generated less interest but have potential to improve public higher education in Idaho through an approach we call “systemness.” The term, first coined by the former Chancellor of the State University of New York, embodies the principle that when our colleges and universities operate as a system, they will be greater than the sum of their parts. Systemness started as a theme during our discussions but soon came to embody our work. The State Board adopted the recommendations and the systemness approach and our staff is working on implementation.

I want to provide a progress update in four areas:

**Improved Certificate and Degree Completion**

Many freshman and sophomore college students spend that first year or two figuring out what their major will be. We want to make it easier for them to explore different courses of study while staying on track to graduate on time.

One way we can do that both for dual credit high school students and college students is by developing what are called meta-majors – a collection of multiple disciplines in a similar field that share common milestone courses. Board staff is working with our state public institutions to identify milestone and elective courses in potential meta-major fields, which can help students make informed decisions about their field of study early in their academic career. “If a first year engineering student doesn’t master a milestone course like college algebra or calculus, it’s possible they could look at moving into another STEM meta-major discipline that may rely less on higher-level math, or perhaps consider a different field altogether,” State Board Chief Academic Officer Randall Brumfield said. “The earlier potential problems can be identified for students that may have issues with milestone course work, faculty and staff can work with them to ensure they are comfortable with the field they are exploring or the specific discipline they are pursuing. Either way, students can be advised on specific skill development strategies or consider other options for their studies in another area. These types of efforts can help students find coursework that engages their interest and ability while also helping prevent the loss of credit hours needed to complete a degree on time.”

### **Degree Audit System**

We have eight public colleges and universities in Idaho and a core tenet of the “systemness” approach is making sure they are all working together as a system for the best interests of students. A request for proposals is in the works to develop a statewide degree audit and student analytics system. This tool will help keep students on track to complete their studies on time, no matter where in Idaho they are attending a public institution now, and in the future. “It will allow dual credit and degree seeking students, as well as their parents, advisors and counselors to see how credits would transfer not only from one institution to another institution but how those credits will apply toward degree progress for specific programs,” Brumfield said. It will also enable the Board to assess progress toward degrees throughout the system, as opposed to relying primarily on measuring the total credit hours earned by students.

### **Credit for Experience-based Learning**

Hundreds of adult students are enrolling in academic and career technical programs at Idaho’s colleges and universities. Many have real-world experience outside the classroom that may be relevant to the degree or certificate they are pursuing and might even be worthy of college credit. “For instance, if we have a student enroll

after leaving the military, there should be a way to take what they have learned during their military service and apply it toward a technical certificate or academic degree,” Brumfield said. “This type of approach is one way we can engage and support adult learners without making them complete courses in which they may already be proficient.”

The goal is to develop a statewide approach enabling adult students to demonstrate proficiency through challenge exams, portfolios, or through documented work-based learning experiences. The system will be structured to have common delivery methods for assessing experienced-based learning and delivering a seamless approach to transfer credit across Idaho’s colleges and universities.

### **Online Text Books**

Costs are a major barrier for most who are interested in, or already going to college. Just last month, we as a Board reluctantly raised tuition and fees at our four-year institutions in order to keep up with operational costs. The purpose of the higher education task force was to improve our overall system and to keep college affordable. As we continue to grapple with tuition prices, there are ways to lower overall costs. One way is to offer online textbooks either at low cost or no cost, which the Board is committed to implementing. “Nationally, full-time students spend an average of \$1,200 per year on text books,” Brumfield said. “Board staff is working with the institutions to develop an inventory of online college course text books for use by high school dual credit students and college students.

The Board’s goal is to have the measures described here in place in time for the 2019 fall semester. We are working diligently and methodically to implement other Task Force recommendations and I will soon provide another progress report on those activities and initiatives. I believe these and other efforts will make our public higher education more efficient, accessible and affordable for all Idahoans, from high school graduates to adults interested in furthering their careers or starting new ones. The systemness principle is the key to making it happen.

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