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## **Higher Education in Idaho; Investing in Our Future**

By Debbie Critchfield, President, Idaho State Board of Education

The Idaho State Board of Education and the presidents of Idaho's four-year institutions announced this week that there will be no increase in tuition in 2020. Last spring, I wrote in an opinion piece that tuition increases need to occur less often and pledged that the Board and the presidents would work together to contain tuition costs and keep college affordable. This announcement makes good on that pledge.

As a Board, our number one priority is holding down tuition costs while still providing quality education and support students need to stay on campus and graduate. I would like to take this opportunity to discuss with you what that looks like on campus and how higher education finances have changed over the years.

### **Tuition vs. State Funding**

It is a fact that Idaho students and their families are picking up much more of the cost to operate our institutions. Forty years ago, state funding covered 88 percent and tuition revenue paid seven percent of that cost. Today, the numbers are nearly even. State funding covers 51 percent of costs and tuition revenue pays 47 percent. While state general fund support has declined over the years, tuition increases have

made up the difference. In 1980, state appropriations for higher education was almost 17 percent of the state budget. Today, it is less than eight percent and spending on higher education is a smaller part of the state budget than it used to be.

### **State Funding Pre-recession vs. Post-recession**

State higher education funding is down six percent, when adjusted for inflation, compared to where it was at the beginning of the last recession in 2008. Since 2012, while funding has increased an inflationary adjusted 28 percent, higher education is supported less by state dollars than it was a decade ago. We are grateful for the state's continued investment, but when we have discussions about funding for higher education in Idaho, we must start with the fact that funding has not yet recovered to pre-recession levels. The effects of the last recession on higher education are no different than they were on public K-12 education. However, while restoration of operational funding has been underway for K-12, the same is not true for higher education.

### **Meeting Student Needs and Technology Requirements**

There are 4,750 people working at Idaho's four, 4-year institutions. Just over 19 percent of those employees (602 in the Managerial/Professional/ Classified category and 290 faculty) have been hired since 2005. Simply put, there are more technology-related needs and student support services that must be met compared to 15 years ago.

A university cannot operate today without technology experts working to keep student data, class schedules, grade transcripts, financial aid data, online course materials and IT infrastructure running and secure from hackers. Computer technicians, information technology specialists, cyber-security and online programmers are critical for our campuses to function and to maintain databases and online programming operations that did not even exist a decade ago. These functions are new requirements of the modern age of higher education and relevant to the needs of our citizens and our state's growing high tech economy and workforce.

Many employees are working in student support services, which includes proactive academic advisors (monitoring student progress to graduation and intervening to provide assistance if grades begin to slip or goals change), crisis counselors and mental health service providers. These services support student success, and students and their families increasingly expect and demand them. Student retention rates vary, but are a concern on all of our campuses. We are actively working to address this.

### **Higher Education Priorities Moving Forward**

As Board members, we know that cost is the number one barrier to continuing education pathways. Our new presidents are all very capable administrators who understand the landscape and issues surrounding higher education in Idaho. We have been working with them since last spring to prioritize programs, evaluate, restructure, and streamline operations and cut costs, culminating in this week's announcement to forgo a tuition increase next year.

The Board and the presidents are eager to partner with policy makers to find long-term solutions to keep higher education affordable for students, while shoring up finances and creating efficiencies to keep our institutions sound. This conversation can't be just about lowering or freezing tuition. It must include creative strategies for a sustainable funding model that moves students and Idaho forward. Higher education in Idaho is key to continuing prosperity in our state. Our public colleges and universities generate over \$3.3 billion annually in gross state product, drive research and economic development, train the current and next generation of Idaho workers, and deliver education that changes people's lives for the better.

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