Idaho State Board of Education

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Higher Education's Role in Idaho's Coronavirus Response

By Debbie Critchfield, President, Idaho State Board of Education

Idaho Governor Brad Little's Idaho Rebounds plan is a four-stage blueprint to bring Idaho back to a semblance of normalcy after a sudden and unprecedented shutdown of our state's economy.

The plan is driven by data and a mathematical model designed to help Governor Little's Coronavirus Working Group make good policy decisions to jump-start the economy in stages without sparking an upsurge in COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations and deaths in our state. The model was created right here in Idaho.

"Once again, our universities stepped up to respond to important research needs in our state," Governor Little said. "I appreciate our colleges and universities for helping my Coronavirus Working Group make data-driven policy decisions and identify effective mitigation strategies to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on Idahoans."

Recognizing in March that a federal data model was slow in coming, Idaho Department of Health and Welfare (DHW) Director Dave Jeppesen contacted the Idaho State Board of Education to enlist help from Idaho's public higher education institutions.

Faculty from the University of Idaho, Lewis-Clark State College, Boise State University, Idaho State University and a fifth institution, Washington State University, just over the state line, got to work.

Several models and visualizations were developed for DHW to consider. It was a model developed by Dr. Benjamin Ridenhour, assistant professor of math at the University of Idaho that the Coronavirus Working Group found most useful.

"The model gave us the evidence we needed to plan for the reopening of Idaho because it showed that the mitigation strategies that reduce contact rates between people – avoiding nonessential travel, physical distancing – were flattening the curve and slowing the spread of COVID-19," DHW Director Jeppesen said.

The model is built on a complex series of mathematical calculations that takes into account mitigation measures and the timing of those measures such as the Governor's April stay at home order. The model is nimble too, able to be updated as more information becomes available.

"It has been an honor for me to get the opportunity to provide assistance to the people and government of Idaho during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to represent the University of Idaho in these efforts," Dr. Ridenhour said. "The rapid assembly of a collaborative group of researchers from across Idaho's institutions of higher education speaks volumes about the talented group of faculty within Idaho and their willingness to pitch in. Having the infrastructure and personnel within our institutions affords us the critical ability to be self-sufficient and develop the best possible models for our needs."

In a piece I wrote last fall, I said that Idaho's 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.

I believe we can also say they are saving lives too, as demonstrated by Dr. Ridenhour and his colleagues across Idaho whose expertise is helping state leaders plot effective strategies to combat coronavirus.

"The universities and colleges were excellent partners as we worked through the process of finding the model that would allow us to assess various scenarios and assumptions to inform the decisions Gov. Little has made and continues to make to reopen the state as safely as possible." Director Jeppesen said.

We are all anxious for students to be able to return to campuses, schools and classrooms at all levels. Our colleges and universities are filling an important role in helping state leaders make informed decisions in a critical and uncertain time.

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