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For Immediate Release

August 13, 2020

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Higher Education is the Key to Idaho's Post-Pandemic Recovery

By Debbie Critchfield, President, Idaho State Board of Education

It feels like we are living in a time warp nearly six months after our lives were turned upside-down by the COVID-19 pandemic. At Idaho's higher education institutions, the public health crisis forced administrators to furlough employees, eliminate positions and cut programs, while simultaneously planning for a fall semester that will look and feel entirely different than at any time in the history of our state.

As president of the Idaho State Board of Education and on behalf of all Board members, I want to thank our college and university presidents, their faculty and staffs for their tremendous and tireless work these past months. From the moment COVID-19 abruptly closed our campuses, they have been working non-stop to finish out the spring semester and prepare for the coming academic year, while also managing state-mandated budget reductions, enrollment uncertainties, postponed fall sports and other revenue generating campus activities cancelled or altered as a result of coronavirus. The financial, operational and logistical challenges and disruptions are mind-boggling. We are so impressed, but not surprised, that our institutions rose to the challenge.

All eight of our institutions have solid plans in place to resume in-person instruction in bigger rooms with fewer students to ensure social distancing for

students and staff. Because safety is the top priority, they are creating a campus environment focused on what they *can* control in order to reduce spread of the virus. This means our institutions will also offer and deliver instruction in a variety of in-person and/or remote formats depending on students' needs.

With these and other measures in place, I believe a successful fall semester positions our colleges and universities to play a vital role in helping our citizens recover financially, while hastening our state's economic rebound.

Idaho's public colleges and universities generate over \$3.3 billion annually in gross state product, driving research and economic development, training the current and next generation of Idaho workers and delivering education that changes people's lives for the better

The Great Recession prompted many Idahoans to go back to college to earn a degree or certificate a decade ago. Enrollments increased and our institutions helped thousands of people position themselves to better weather the next downturn. Unfortunately, that downturn is here because of coronavirus. This is an opportunity for many Idahoans to improve their careers and lives. A degree or professional certificate from one of our public institutions will help accomplish that. Consider this: a bachelor's degree is worth about \$1 million more in lifetime income compared to a high school diploma. And we know how valuable a career technical certificate is too.

The State Board's [Next Steps Idaho](#) website has a lot of great information for high school students and adults about getting started, including contact information for all of our community colleges and 4-year institutions. Next Steps also has links to financial aid resources including the [Idaho Opportunity Scholarship](#) available to traditional students, and the [Opportunity Scholarship for Adult Learners](#) helping former students who for whatever reason stopped out, to go back and finish work on a degree or certificate.

Idaho Online, a new statewide digital campus will be offering online general education courses in the spring, but you will be able to start registering for those courses later this year.

“Adversity” seems to be a fitting theme for 2020. Let's change the narrative for the remainder of the year and beyond to, ***“Opportunity.”*** Idaho's higher education institutions are a catalyst for positive change to help our young people and our workforce persevere, even in the midst of the pandemic, and achieve individual success.

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