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Idaho's Higher Education System Deserves Commendation

By Kurt Liebich, President, Idaho State Board of Education

Now that Idaho's public higher education spring 2021 commencement ceremonies are over, as Board president, I want to congratulate the administrators, faculty, and staff at each of Idaho's colleges and universities, and draw attention to their remarkable accomplishments since March 2020 when the pandemic disrupted the entire education system.

More than 10,400 students graduated this spring from our eight public community colleges and four-year institutions. This is an extraordinary accomplishment that occurred because of the agility demonstrated by the institutions, first by quickly transitioning to remote learning 14 months ago, and then by immediately getting to work on detailed plans to bring students safely back to campus as soon as possible.

Institution leaders held daily and then weekly conference calls, sharing ideas and strategies. They operated as one system and it paid off. When most colleges and universities across the nation were shut down, Idaho's public institutions opened their doors last fall and they have remained open. It was an extraordinary effort and I commend everyone involved.

Institution presidents and administrators also did an amazing job managing finances during a very uncertain time. The pandemic caused enrollments to drop, forcing furloughs and even layoffs. The colleges and universities were the only entity in state government that reduced their payrolls as a result of the pandemic.

The University of Idaho actually eliminated its \$20 million operational deficit in less than two years - a notable accomplishment during normal times, let alone during a national crisis. Unfortunately, several hundred people across the higher ed system lost their jobs or took early retirements as a result of restructuring.

The pandemic warranted hard choices, and our college and university presidents stepped up and made many difficult decisions, keeping our institutions financially sound.

We cannot forget how important these institutions are to our state's economy – generating more than \$3.3 billion annually in gross state product, providing a trained and educated workforce for Idaho businesses to compete and grow. More than 10,400 newly minted graduates are now prepared to make their mark in Idaho and beyond.

These graduates will lead productive and fulfilling lives as a result of their time at one of our public institutions, all of which worked extremely hard to keep their students in school and on track, while managing perhaps the most difficult crisis in the 132-year history of higher education in Idaho.

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