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State Board Delays Action on a Draft Policy on Diversity, Educational Equity and Inclusion to Accept more Public Input

By Kurt Liebich, President, Idaho State Board of Education

When the Idaho State Board of Education meets at the end of August, we will not consider a draft policy defining the terms diversity, educational equity and inclusion at our four-year institutions as was originally planned.

Instead, we will wait until our meeting in October. The reason is simple; we want to provide more opportunity for public input.

Since the draft policy was first discussed at a special Board meeting in late June, we have received only about a dozen comments from the public. As Idahoans' understanding of this topic has evolved over the summer, we want to be sure that members of the public have plenty of opportunity to weigh in.

Here is a link to the draft policy:

<https://boardofed.idaho.gov/meetings/board/archive/2021/062821/IRSA.pdf>

Comments about the draft policy can be submitted to: board@osbe.idaho.gov

It is important to understand the rationale and context behind this draft policy. The State Board of Education wants to ensure that all people from all backgrounds and political ideologies feel welcome and that they belong on our public campuses. In

short, we want to be sure that all voices are heard, and that freedom of expression is valued and encouraged.

The draft policy defines common terms that are used by both public and private institutions and organizations throughout our state. Yet these terms are often misunderstood or conflated in public discourse.

As a businessman, I have learned that it is an asset to have diversity in the workplace. Diversity of thought creates innovation, and innovation is the key to long-term sustainability. The marketplace itself is large and diverse. Idaho employers, big and small, understand how important it is to have the right people in place if they are to compete locally and globally. Many business executives are calling on our universities to provide them with trained and educated employees who can help their businesses succeed and who can thrive personally in an increasingly diverse and global workforce.

It is also important that all Idaho citizens can envision themselves and their children living and learning on an Idaho public college or university campus, regardless of their cultural heritage, place of birth, or economic situation. We must continue to strive to provide equitable opportunities for all students to succeed in their postsecondary pursuits. When a student drops out, our system has failed. We must do all we can to prevent that from occurring.

We also have to make sure that people are not ostracized for their political or ideological views. Our campus environments must promote awareness for the dignity of others and respect for differing viewpoints. Freedom of speech and freedom of expression are foundational principles that we must promote and defend.

Idaho cannot compete economically and we certainly cannot continue to thrive as a state without an educated citizenry. Our state's founders recognized that when they added these words to our state's constitution: "The stability of a republican form of government depending mainly upon the intelligence of the people...."

There has been a significant amount of debate in recent months around the merits of our diversity, educational equity and inclusion efforts. We must work from a place of common definitions and understanding if we are to move our state forward. Like our public K-12 schools, our public higher education system belongs to, and must serve all people of Idaho. I encourage you to read the draft policy, draw your own conclusions and let us know what you think.

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