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Online Idaho will make College Available to Everyone

By Kurt Liebich, President, Idaho State Board of Education

College of Eastern Idaho President Rick Aman is making a bold prediction about the trajectory of higher education in Idaho over the next decade: “I would say that half of the student population will be getting their training and education off of an online platform 10 years from now,” he said.

In Idaho, that platform will be Online Idaho, a collaboration between state agencies and all eight public higher education institutions to build a digital campus of fully online learning opportunities and support. “We already have a robust set of career technical and academic courses available online from our institutions. As we work together across institutions, this portfolio grows – yielding more potential,” said Dr. Jonathan Lashley, Associate Chief Academic Office at the Idaho State Board of Education. “A common platform lets our institutions focus on what students ‘want to learn’ first because they share capacity in delivering course and degree options that can reach every Idahoan. This is what ‘systemness’ looks like and it presents great access and affordability to our education community.”

Funded last year by Governor Brad Little’s Coronavirus Financial Advisory Committee via federal coronavirus relief funds, a course sharing portal is already in place for Online Idaho and will be improved through implementation and improvements over the academic year.

“Right now, students can visit the Online Idaho website, review courses that are open for registration and pass through to an institution’s existing registration process,” Lashley said. “Once implementation is finished however, students will have one place to go to search, register and pay for online learning experiences available from Idaho’s colleges and universities.”

These features are available at online.idaho.edu and are targeted at the following audiences:

- Currently enrolled college students who need more flexible class schedules
- Residents who want to pursue college coursework but can’t easily access in-person classes because they live in rural or remote areas
- Adult learners with some college or career technical experience who want to finish earning a certificate or degree

Dr. T.J. Bliss, the Board’s Chief Academic Officer says Online Idaho will enable students to progress through and earn a certificate or degree no matter where they live, and they will be able to do so in ways that better fit on their own unique schedules. “Currently, students can only take courses when they are offered at their own institution, even if that occurs later than when the student really needs a course, and sometimes it happens out of sequence,” Bliss said. “With eight institutions involved, students will be able take common online courses from institutions when they need them, not just when the courses are available at their own institutions.”

Last week, the State Board of Education approved two online Bachelor of Science cyber security-related programs; one at Boise State University, the other at Lewis-Clark State College, that will be available in collaboration with other Idaho institutions on Online Idaho.

The goal is to start rolling out Online Idaho’s course sharing system later this fall and that students will increasingly find it to be a resource for maintaining momentum in their studies while also saving some money along the way. “It’s all about access and affordability,” said Board Vice President Dr. David Hill, who has spent considerable time working on and advocating for the program. “Online Idaho is one of the of initiatives the Board has taken to help Idahoans meet their educational and career goals. I think it will make a real difference because it will provide students an affordable option to move forward with their plans without forcing major disruptions to their lives.”

After spending so much time taking online classes over the last 18 months, Bliss says, many students view online education differently than they did prior to the pandemic. “Students now value online instruction more than they did before. Many don’t want to do it fulltime, but now they know that they can learn and succeed in an online learning environment.”

Bliss and Lashley expect to have Online Idaho’s digital campus completely built out by 2023, with new cross-institution degree or certificate programs being added regularly. They also envision scenarios where programs are created in partnership with employers and institutions both within and beyond Idaho.

CEI President Aman, who co-chairs the Online Idaho Steering Committee, says the platform opens up affordable possibilities for Idaho residents from all walks of life. “We will be able to work with people who are working fulltime or have family commitments,” he said. “This is for everybody, not just those students who can afford to spend four or five years on a physical campus.”

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