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Idaho Poised to Buck Demographic Trends Affecting College Enrollment

By Kurt Liebich, President, Idaho State Board of Education

The Great Recession's impact still reverberates and is expected to cause steep drops in college enrollment over the coming years across the country. Why? When the economy tanked starting in 2008, birth rates trended downward in Idaho and across the United States. Within one year, Idaho birth rates dropped 7 percent. From 2008 through 2020, Idaho birth rates dropped nearly 30 percent.

Babies born during the Great Recession are nearing college age. Colleges and universities in the coming years will face a demographic cliff in terms of student applications and enrollment numbers, but will that trend hold true for Idaho? "We must do our best to anticipate the impact of this reduction on Idaho so that we can position our institutions appropriately," said State Board Secretary Dr. David Hill.

Our state has something many others do not; inward migration. People are moving here at such a pace that Idaho is one of the fastest growing states in the country.

The Idaho Department of Labor forecasts a 7 percent increase in the Idaho population age 15 to 19 by 2029, despite lower birth rates. And the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) predicts that population

growth will result in a 14 percent increase in high school graduates in Idaho by 2036.

“While we are projected to have more high school graduates, we don’t know if they will go to college and even if they do, whether they will attend an Idaho public institution or go elsewhere,” said the Board’s Chief Research Officer, Dr. Cathleen McHugh. “Students that have moved into Idaho may simply not have the strong ties to Idaho institutions that resident students have traditionally had.”

Right now, Idaho is an attractive alternative for many nonresident students due to comparatively low tuition rates, and our institutions have benefitted. But the drop in birthrates will affect the number of nonresident students coming to Idaho from states like California, Oregon and Washington where high school graduate numbers are projected to decline or remain stagnant.

Due to inward migration, Idaho is in enviable position compared to other states. But it is imperative that as a System we ensure all students, whether new to our state or multi-generational Idahoans, understand the excellent higher education opportunities available to them. Dual Credit and State Board initiatives such as Direct Admissions, Apply Idaho and Next Steps play a big role in introducing these and other students to Idaho institutions.

Because our institutions are governed by one State Board of Education, we can continue to work to ensure the programs are delivered strategically, that they offer value to students and that they are available across the system.

The Board study on student demographic projections for Idaho’s postsecondary institutions is posted on the Idaho State Board of Education website:

<https://boardofed.idaho.gov/resources/demographic-projections-for-idaho-postsecondary-institutions/>

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