

The tasks to complete for community colleges

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Some time back we wrote that "development of an efficient, affordable, and accessible state-wide community college network must become a key strategy in supplying the needed workforce and sustaining quality growth in the Idaho economy."

That statement was made based on these facts:

Idahoans have inadequate access to higher education. Our state is 45th in the nation in the percentage of high school students that go directly to college.

We aren't retaining enough of those who do go on to college. Idaho is last in the nation in the proportion of full-time freshmen who enroll for the second year

The costs for new college students are high. Three credit hours at a four year Idaho institution currently costs twice as much as the same three credits cost under a typical community college model \$520 vs. \$214.

In the past year many Idahoans including governors Kempthorne and Risch and gubernatorial candidates Jerry Brady and Butch Otter have called for creation of a community college network. The need remains.

The Idaho Legislature has appointed an Interim Committee on Community Colleges "to analyze post secondary education in Idaho and to make recommendations to the next Legislature." The Idaho Business Coalition for Education Excellence (IBCEE), an organization of current and retired CEO's from throughout Idaho applauds this effort and looks forward to the committee's recommendations. In our view a community college network will greatly benefit many post high school students and, ultimately, Idaho employers, who depend on a sustained, diverse and well-trained workforce.

Current law provides for six community college areas. Citizens in each may organize a community college district which may assess local property taxes to support a college. Creating such a district requires a two-thirds approval of the voters.

Two districts have been organized, resulting in the College of Southern Idaho in Twin Falls and North Idaho College in Coeur d'Alene. Each school has its own board of trustees elected by local citizens, each levies a modest property tax and each receives support from Idaho taxpayers through direct appropriations from the Legislature. This system has resulted in local governance and control in Twin Falls and Coeur d'Alene, thereby assuring that the schools are responsive to local needs.

The current system, which provides for local funding through property taxes, may be attractive in some areas of our state, and not in others. Therefore IBCEE recognizes there may not be one solution for the entire state. The object is to provide educational access to more of our citizens at lower prices and responsiveness to the training needs of Idaho businesses, not one unified community college system.

We believe that, in meeting its assignment, the committee must address:

- How to pay: Community colleges, while very efficient, will require new funding. They cannot be funded by reallocating money already dedicated to education. If we choose not to use property taxes, then other sources such as sales or liquor will have to be used.
- How to govern: There must be some degree of local governance. A centralized system without a measure of local control is unlikely to be sufficiently responsive to local concerns and opportunities.
- A framework that does not hurt Idaho's existing colleges and universities: Existing institutions must be held harmless. We must not penalize them as we develop a network of community colleges.

Other states have resolved these issues to the lasting benefit of their citizens. We are confident Idaho can too.

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