

# Community colleges' long road ahead

## **Sen Cameron gives perspective on obstacles and opportunities**

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**RUPERT** - When the state Legislature appointed 18 members of the House and Senate to the Interim Committee on Community Colleges, it selected lawmakers who would take a stand on one of Idaho's most volatile issues, making higher education more accessible to students.

Enter state Sen. Dean Cameron, R-Rupert. Although he doesn't remember requesting a seat on the legislative committee, he was appointed nonetheless. So, for the last five months he has visited colleges and universities in Idaho with other committee members who are trying to understand the complex challenges facing higher education.

But it hasn't been easy.

Many members still do not agree on how to improve access to higher education.

Cameron said one thing is clear: there is still a long road ahead.

**Question: The community college debate seemed to gain public attention when the College of Southern Idaho requested permission to offer lower-division courses in the area that's considered Boise State University's jurisdiction. CSI President Jerry Beck said the demand is high in that area, and CSI is capable of filling the need. Are the boundaries, which designate where colleges and universities can operate, making education less accessible?**

A. "Really, this was fully engaged before President Beck made his announcement. For the last couple of years, we have heard a cry from educators and community colleges, and the banner they are carrying is that there was a lack of accessible education in places like Canyon and Ada county areas."

"The question is: How do we save money? How do we prevent creating two different community college systems? And, How do we protect the current community college system? Which I do not believe is broken."

"Frankly, it makes no sense to me that we are allowing out-of-state institutions to operate in Idaho without any boundaries, and making in-state institutions operate within their boundaries."

"I think the last thing we need is more administrators and deans, as well as more bricks and mortar. What I do think we need is simply an expansion of our current system."

**Q. Some areas of Idaho do not have access to affordable higher education that is provided through community colleges such as CSI and NIC. Whose responsibility is it to ensure that those areas have access to higher education?**

A. "I don't think you can point the finger at any one person."

"I think the state has a role to play to ensure that (Idahoans) have access to affordable higher education. I think to a large degree we have done that, but the beauty of the community college is the support of the local community and the ability to respond to the needs of local residents."

"That desire to serve the local community is not prevalent in our state institutions. It's not that they're less important, they simply operate differently. They are more responsive to the State Board of Education, the State Department of Education and the state itself."

**Q. As the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, do you think the state can afford a community college system?**

A. "Our state cannot afford to provide a community college in every area of the state. Essentially it costs us \$53 million just to support the community colleges we have, and that includes funds like liquor funds, property tax, state money and tuition."

"If you're making a proposal to decrease the local community funds, which some members of the committee are doing, then you're looking at increasing those state funds. To pick up the full tab is something the state cannot afford, and it would also be blatantly unfair to areas that are already supporting community colleges."

**Q. Lawmakers say they expect a collaborative agreement from committee members in order to support any recommendations. Do you believe the Interim Committee on Community Colleges will be able to reach an agreement on any recommendations that will be sent to the Legislature?**

A. "At this stage, there may be some items that everybody agrees on, but they may be incidental and they really won't solve the problem."

"I don't think you will see full-blown committee support for a state-funded community college system; at least that is my reading of the tea leaves."

"But by everybody's measurement, we still have a very long and arduous road ahead."