

Our community college conundrum

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state-supported campuses in their backyards, writes Perry Swisher.

A lack of access to community college courses keeps the Idaho economy from growing. But if that's a problem, why was Idaho just declared the third fastest-growing population in America, just behind Arizona and Nevada?

Because noise, not logic, is what you make when beating the Chamber of Commerce drum. Years are apt to pass before Idaho even tries to make sense. Meanwhile, this fiscally conservative state will try to make higher education more available to the young while its politicians keep taxes under control.

There are only two areas where local community college access requires the people thereabouts to put their money where their mouths are. Those are the Coeur d'Alene area in the Panhandle and the Twin Falls area in the Magic Valley. After getting legislative permission to do so, residents in those two places voted to levy taxes on themselves by the creation of junior college districts.

In Pocatello and in Boise 20 years later, statewide funding was secured respectively for what are now Idaho State University and Boise State University. Including Blackfoot and Idaho Falls to the north of the ISU campus, students are within easy commuting access of degree-granting courses but don't pay general or junior-college fees for that access.

Equally fortunate are residents of the Clearwater Valley in the Lewiston area, where, reversing an earlier 1951 shutdown of a decades-old "normal" or state teacher-training school at Lewiston, in 1955 the Idaho Legislature breathed new life into what is the Lewis-Clark State College. Its budget is also a state budget. Its governing body is the State Board of Education, which since statehood had managed the affairs of the University of Idaho in Moscow just up the Palouse hills from Lewiston -- and the state board also governs the Boise and Pocatello state campuses, plus some UI and ISU facilities in Idaho Falls.

All these campuses are stimulants to the economies of the communities they're in. That is also true for the two towns with private institutions of higher learning: Caldwell, where Albertson College began life early in the past century as the Protestant school College of Idaho; and Rexburg, where the LDS church recently turned the modest, decades-old Ricks College into Brigham Young University-Idaho. From a few hundred at Ricks, it will undoubtedly blossom in this century into a student body of thousands: The dean of Harvard University's business college accepted the invitation of the church's president that he head up BYU-Idaho.

If Idaho's policymakers could wave a magic wand, what would they do about the status quo? They will stand in line for the opportunity to deny it, but if they could, they would impose a statewide property-tax levy on all the taxable land and improvements and use the proceeds to finance junior -college expenses for every student attending every state-authorized course in the state, be it the Moscow university -- which was created before the state was -- or a junior college in Nampa, which as yet has no state ivy.

Almost all of the lawmakers who are going into session as freshmen this week ran for office not knowing what a big ticket higher education is becoming. They probably told constituents they are for the community college concept. Same for outgoing Gov. Jim Risch and newly sworn-in Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter.

I know what these and a lot of other people are for. They're for making community college courses available wherever that can mean new job opportunities and new economic activity.

What I don't know is how they're going to achieve it or even get a start on it. And how they're going to make taxpayers who are already beneficiaries of existing state campuses share the local junior -college costs currently paid by the state and soon to be levied on other Idahoans who want courses close to their kids. This could be a long winter.

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