

UI candidate says he'd stick around

School has had five leaders in past six years

By Joel Mills of the Tribune

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University of Idaho presidential candidate Duane Nellis speaks at a public forum during his official visit to the Moscow campus Tuesday.

MOSCOW - Duane Nellis stood before a packed house at the University of Idaho on Tuesday and said he would like to finish his career by making it a better school.

Nellis, 54, is the provost and senior vice president at Kansas State University, and one of two finalists for the top job at the UI. He told those who attended a 90-minute open forum the next UI president needs to stick around for a while if he is to build lasting, fruitful relationships with donors, the business community and state government.

"You can't do it if you're only there for a few years," Nellis said. "You need some stability. I'm looking at my next move as a president as hopefully my last move."

He envisioned staying at the university for 10-12 years. And he noted his boss at KSU, President Jon Wefald, didn't start his long list of major accomplishments until he'd been on the job for nearly a decade. Wefald is retiring this spring after helming KSU for 23 years.

Counting interim presidents, the UI has had five leaders in the past six years.

After visiting the university's Coeur d'Alene center Monday night, Nellis lunched with students on Tuesday while his wife, Ruthie, toured downtown Moscow. After the open forum, he flew to Boise for a similar activity, and will visit UI operations in Idaho Falls today.

The other finalist, Montana State University Provost David Dooley, will visit the campus on Monday.

Nellis was born in Spokane and raised in northwestern Montana. He started his academic career at Oregon State University, where he earned his doctorate in geography in 1980. He became a professor at KSU and ultimately head of its geography department.

In 1997, he left for West Virginia University, where he was dean of its largest academic unit, the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences. In 2004, he returned to KSU as provost, the university's chief academic officer.

OSU, KSU and WVU are all land-grant universities, as is UI. Before taking questions at Tuesday's gathering, Nellis laid out his vision of what a modern land-grant university should be.

He said it needs to use technology more effectively to teach a new generation of students, something he promoted at KSU. And he said outreach activities need to be extended, so the whole state can benefit from the expertise at the university.

"It's mission is unrivaled in this state, no matter what some of the other universities may say," Nellis said.

But he acknowledged advancing any new agenda will be difficult in the current financial climate of budget cuts and program reorganization.

Nellis had a potential fix for fiscal shortfalls, however. He said the university needs to be more entrepreneurial and use partnerships with business, industry and other private ventures to bring in funding.

He said some people see that as selling the university's soul, but he sees it as a creative way to achieve goals by taking advantage of old partnerships, and creating new ones.

And to that end, Nellis said his role at the UI would primarily be an external one, massaging alumni for donations, cultivating new fundraising and wrangling with the Legislature for bigger appropriations.

"This university has been underdeveloped as far as fundraising opportunities," he said.

Nellis said he will let stand the program reorganization the university has undertaken over the past several months. UI Provost Doug Baker recently announced he will try to close or consolidate 41 majors so the university can focus on areas it sees as most important.

Nellis has been looking for a university to lead for some time. In 2007, he was a finalist for the WVU presidency. The faculty senate there endorsed him over attorney Mike Garrison, who was chief of staff for West Virginia Gov. Bob Wise. But the WVU Board of Governors ultimately picked Garrison, in what was seen by some as a politically motivated decision.

A committee led by Board of Regents members Sue Thilo and Paul Agidius has been searching for a new UI president since Tim White left for the University of California-Riverside last year. Former College of Natural Resources Dean Steven Daley-Laursen has been serving as interim president.

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