

What a time to chop away at higher ed

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If you operated an airline and more people were making reservations, would you slash routes and boost fares?

If you ran a dental office and more people needed cavities filled, would you cut your hours and send them home?

Of course not.

So why in the world does Idaho choose to cut back on higher education in the middle of a recession?

People lose jobs in recessions. Eager to land on their feet, many show enough initiative and faith in the future to put themselves back in a classroom, acquiring the skills to become competitive in the new job market.

Lewis-Clark State College's heat count surged to 4,200, cresting the 4,000 mark for the first time.

At the University of Idaho, enrollments rose slightly to 11,957.

After shedding students to the newly created College of Western Idaho, Boise State University's enrollment still was up 2.3 percent for a total of 18,936,

Even Idaho State University had more students, up 6.6 percent to 13,493.

Those students will have less to work with.

Throw in the latest round of budget cuts Gov. C. L. (Butch) Otter announced Friday, and the UI has sliced \$22.6 million in one year. The latest loss comes to nearly \$5 million.

During the same period, L-C has lost nearly \$3 million. Friday's hit came to \$808,000.

Why?

The answer, say state budget writers, is blatantly obvious. Tax revenues continue to fall. They're down \$151 million so far this year and may slide further. Idaho's constitution demands a balanced budget. Nobody's going to support raising taxes. Something's got to give. Colleges and universities have to accept their share.

Asked to anticipate the cuts, the schools listed the usual suspects. Staff furloughs. Less equipment purchases. Leaving unfilled positions vacant. Deferred maintenance.

Just when people are returning to school, programs and resources start disappearing. Libraries will have fewer offerings. Accreditation problems may surface.

Many students will find the process of becoming retrained takes longer. And they get to pay more.

To cope with declining taxpayer support, state schools have boosted tuition by 25 percent in the past five years. Fees now cost nearly \$5,000 annually at the UI. The latest round of cuts guarantees that trend will continue, and possibly accelerate.

Idaho already has one of the least college-educated work forces in the United States.

It has difficulty getting many of its high school graduates to enter college, and an equally tough time keeping students in school once they arrive.

Student debts keep piling up.

Slicing away at higher education when people need it most just to balance a faltering state budget may make fiscal sense. To lawmakers unwilling to raise taxes, it's smart politically.

But by just about any other measurement of a successful society, it simply doesn't add up. - M.T.