

Higher ed should launch new road show

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University of Idaho President Duane Nellis can get a headline in Coeur d'Alene when he tells that community budget cuts have left his school "bleeding. In fact, we're kind of starting to take off parts of the university."

Same goes for any of his counterparts. Boise State University President Robert Kustra, for instance, can get some attention in the Treasure Valley when he complains about making health insurance more expensive for his part-time employees.

Usually, it's a one-day story. Rarely does anyone in Burley get a sense of the scope of the problem from reading Nellis' comments in Coeur d'Alene or Kustra's in Boise. For that, you need something dramatic.

Back in the mid-1980s, Idaho's institutions of higher learning found themselves in a similar hole. A deep recession had taken hold. State tax revenues had fallen. Then, as now, the path of least resistance involved slashing college and university budgets. Student fees were hiked. And there was talk of shutting down programs and institutions.

So leaders at UI, BSU, Lewis-Clark State College and Idaho State University launched what became known as the presidents' tour. Putting aside their turf battles, the presidents communicated one message as they criss-crossed the state. Their partnership conveyed the gravity of the situation and helped shift the tenor of the debate. Before the tour, Idahoans asked how higher education could absorb its losses. Afterwards, they asked how the bills might be paid.

Sending all four presidents on the road once again would seize public attention beyond the four college and university towns - all of which now rely predominantly on Democrats to represent them in the GOP-controlled Legislature. It would enable higher education to convey its message directly to Idaho voters - rather than relying exclusively on relationships with key lawmakers. And it would telegraph to Idaho parents and students alike the severity of the demolition job now in progress. In one year, 20 percent of the money Idaho invested in its four-year schools has disappeared. Given the faltering state budget, more cuts are expected.

Is that what Idahoans want? Do they support jacking up student fees or canceling course offerings when jobless workers are seeking retraining? Do they want research programs constricted in an economy that urgently requires diversification? And how well do they perceive that any university or college budget reduction is permanent? When the economy recovers, Idaho invests the extra dollars in new prisons or health programs, not rebuilding its college and universities.

Going directly to the citizenry doesn't translate into a one-sided lecture. Presidents can expect to hear some pointed questions from the people paying the bills - such as why a university president in a low-wage state earns about \$330,000 a year?

But isn't it time these presidents try a different approach? - M. T.

