

Nellis: University is critical to state's economic well-being

UI president addresses meeting of area government, education officials

By Holly Bowen Daily News staff writer

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Public higher education is between a rock and a hard place, and what little wiggle room remains is getting increasingly cramped.

"Many universities are getting beat up because we keep raising tuition and fees," Duane Nellis, president of the University of Idaho, said to a quarterly gathering of area government and education officials Wednesday morning in Moscow.

He updated them on his experiences since taking the president's job seven months ago and made a case for why he believes the UI is critical to Idaho's economy.

"In the state of Idaho in the last 10 years ... higher education's proportion of the state budget has decreased in half of what it was, while prisons' has doubled," he said.

Nellis said he thinks many state legislators and taxpayers in southern Idaho aren't completely aware of or don't fully appreciate the extent to which the UI reaches past Moscow, and that can have an effect on support for funding. He said people often forget about the UI's multiple extension offices and research sites in 42 of Idaho's 44 counties.

For example, he said a newspaper reporter in Idaho Falls told him the paper doesn't normally cover the UI because the university wasn't active in that area. But a "staggered" Nellis pointed out that the UI has a campus in Idaho Falls.

"We need to be very vocal about what we are doing," he said. "We kind of sit back and kind of rest on our laurels, and we think that everybody understands what we're doing. We need to articulate that."

He said an analysis from a couple of years ago found that for every dollar the state of Idaho invests in the UI, the economic return to the state is \$7 to \$8.

"It truly is an investment - not a cost - and so often the state of Idaho's citizens think of us as just another cost, rather than recognizing that it's an investment, not only as far as economic return, but to the future economic development and quality of life of our state."

Moscow City Councilwoman Sue Scott told Nellis she has been "really impressed" with the research and cultivation of grapes in the Parma area, where the UI has an extension center. Scott and her husband own Camas Prairie Winery in Moscow.

Nellis has been trying to communicate that business connection, but he said it will take grass-roots efforts from alumni and friends being "more vocal about what they truly believe."

Moscow City Councilman Walter Steed told Nellis he noticed an increase in UI support during and following the Vandals' latest football season.

"I think that the success of the football team did a lot to fly the Vandal flag in the Treasure Valley," he said. "I would really hope that there's some way the university can continue to encourage the alumni down there who held their heads low for a long time to hold them high ..."

Nellis said despite the decrease in appropriated state dollars, research efforts at the UI are stronger than ever. He said competitive research expenditures have increased by almost \$9 million in the past year.

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