

# When it comes to legal training, legislators know best

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Idaho lawmakers can't do math. They have missed the state's revenue targets two years in a row.

They can't run a school system. The results are apparent.

And they have difficulty accepting new ideas. Just take a look at how tone deaf they've been about protecting gays from discrimination.

But they do know one thing better than anyone else: what it takes to be a good lawyer.

At least 20 of them think so.

Along with House Speaker Lawrence Denney, R-Midvale, Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star, House Education Committee Chairman Bob Nonini, R-Post Falls, and Sen. Russ Fulcher, R-Meridian, this crew wants University of Idaho law school Dean Don Burnett to lighten up on the diversity training.

Earlier this week, law school students at Moscow and Boise were supposed to attend a 75-minute session on professionalism and diversity hosted by Blake Morant, dean of the Wake Forest University School of Law in North Carolina.

Those who did were to receive a certificate they could note on their resumes. For those who blew it off without an excused absence, Burnett offered a minor consequence: a statement in their private UI file. It wouldn't block anyone from graduating. Certainly, no one would fail the bar exam because of it. And since the memo would not be part of a college transcript, no prospective employer would know.

But when college students complain - or at least when they gripe about being compelled to confront diversity training - Boss Denney and company spring in to action:

"As a publicly funded institution, using the threat of a memo suggesting clearly that a student is unprofessional, bigoted or both for not attending an extracurricular activity not part of the university's course catalog is simply unacceptable," the lawmakers said.

These Idaho lawmakers know more about the legal profession than an accreditation team from the American Bar Association and Association of American Law Schools. After spending four days in Idaho in October, that panel "stated emphatically that the College

of Law should focus additional attention upon professionalism and diversity," Burnett said.

These 20 legislators from every walk of life except the law also think they know more about a legal education than the UI faculty. Since when did law school become a democracy? If the faculty decides a student will spend a year grinding away at the basics of trusts and estates - even if he has no intention of practicing in that field - he will do so.

There's good reason for law schools to promote diversity training. Dealing with a deaf client, a lawyer may need to learn that he talks to the client, not the interpreter. In immigration law, a lawyer may confront cultural values far different from his own. A criminal defense attorney is likely to see a strata of society totally new to her. Ethical standards governing a lawyer are complex and entail constant attention.

No teacher would throw a student into a career unprepared.

Finally, the 20 lay legislators know more than the attorneys serving among them. Not one of those lawyers in the Legislature signed their protest letter.

This is what happens when a Legislature that is predominantly white, male and old relies on its own narrow perspective.

Were it to look harder, it might recognize how little diversity exists within Idaho's legal profession. As Idaho Women Lawyers pointed out Monday, only 11 percent of Idaho's judges are women, the lowest in the nation. There is no woman on the Idaho Supreme Court, a distinction Idaho shares with one other state.

And it would be the first to understand that the law student who resists attending diversity training undoubtedly needs it most. - M.T.