

UI's flagship had yet to set sail

It seems the coveted designation had been in place only a short time

JOEL MILLS of the Tribune

MOSCOW - Lost amidst all the controversy over the State Board of Education not allowing the word "flagship" in the University of Idaho's mission statement is the fact it was only there for five months.

Some statements from board and university officials - not to mention media reports out of the board's meeting last week at

Boise State University - led many to believe the board was stripping a word that had long been a part of the UI mission statement.

But the word "flagship" was only added during a Sept. 9, 2011, special board meeting that was conducted via teleconference. And board minutes from the meeting indicate the mission statements of the UI and other four-year public schools were approved in haste because they needed to be submitted to an accrediting agency.

At that meeting, board Vice President Ken Edmunds of Twin Falls said he felt the statements needed more work because they were inconsistent in how they were prepared and stated, according to the minutes.

Even board officials seemed confused about when "flagship" entered the statements. Spokeswoman Marilyn Whitney characterized the inclusion of the word at last week's meeting as something new.

"The previous (UI mission) statement dates back to 1998, with a slight update in 2007," Whitney said in an email to the Lewiston Tribune. "Neither contains the word 'flagship.' The update discussed at last week's meeting included that term."

In a unanimous decision, the board removed that and other comparative terms in the mission statements of other public higher education institutions, Whitney said.

Confusion aside, the UI countered the board's action with a public relations offensive. UI President Duane Nellis made strong statements on his Facebook page denouncing the decision, and comments there and on newspaper websites erupted with anger toward board members over what was seen as a serious affront to the university.

A press release from the university also outlined various definitions of a "flagship university," and offered 18 examples of how the UI fits those definitions.

UI student body President Samantha Perez added her criticism of the decision on her Facebook page, and encouraged students and alumni to write the board asking for a reversal. On Wednesday, Perez said she was one of the people who believed "flagship" had been part of the UI mission statement for several years, added in the 2007 revision.

"Regardless of whether the term was added in before or not, flagship still defines the University of Idaho, and I believe it should be in our mission statement," Perez said. "The board used politics, not facts, to make their decision and that makes me extremely disappointed in them."

Perez started a petition drive to get the word inserted into the UI's mission statement.

The opening sentence of the UI's rejected mission statement reads: "The University of Idaho is the state's flagship and land-grant research university."

Board President Richard Westerberg of Preston successfully argued such statements of superiority don't encourage "collegial" relationships between the institutions.

"We don't want to do anything that tries to indicate prominence, or to not encourage them to work together," Westerberg was quoted as saying at the meeting.

Whitney said even though the board denied the UI's request to keep "flagship" in its mission statement, the university is free to use the term in other venues like advertising.

UI spokesman Judd Wilson said having "flagship" in the mission statement was to clarify to others that the university has always been Idaho's premier institution, predating even statehood. The addition of the word did not indicate a change in university policy, programs or priorities, he said.

"Since 1889 the University of Idaho has been Idaho's flagship," Wilson wrote in an email to the Tribune. "Our flagship designation reflects who we are, where we've come from, and where we're heading. (One hundred and twenty three) years of statewide leadership and student success won't end with a word change."

Wilson also said the UI will use "flagship" wherever it wants, undeterred by the board decision.

"Since it's who we are, not a mere slogan, that will continue to be reflected in how we represent ourselves."