

Idaho pays price for not rewarding talent

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Daniel Ames is the kind of guy Idaho wants to keep around. An associate professor at Idaho State University and Center for Advanced Energy Studies researcher, Ames is a respected scientist, is widely published and responsible for bringing hundreds of thousands of research dollars to the state.

And, Ames is leaving. In August, he begins a job at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, taking with him a great deal of expertise and half a million dollars in research grants. Sadly, Ames' departure didn't have to happen.

Ames has four children. In Utah, they will receive a 50 percent college tuition deduction, a recruitment and retention tool many universities across the country - in Utah, Montana, Oregon, California, Wyoming, Washington, Colorado and Arizona - have at their disposal.

Idaho's major universities and elected and appointed officials have been slow to embrace the reality that retaining talent isn't cheap. As a result, too many people like Ames have fled the state for institutions that understand in this age of rising college tuition and inflated student loan interest rates that even a small reduction can make a difference.

To the credit of Idaho's State Board of Education and two of the state's three major universities, that's beginning to change. In December, the board approved a two-year pilot program that will allow children of eligible Boise State University employees a tuition break. At its meeting last month in Idaho Falls, the board approved a similar, permanent break for children of University of Idaho employees.

These steps are long overdue, but they aren't enough. Idaho won't just lose a talented researcher in the prime of his career when Ames walks. We'll also be losing his kids. The sad truth, however, is that they were probably leaving anyway.

Ames said even had he decided to remain in Idaho, his kids may have ended up at Utah colleges. That's because Utah State University and BYU offer tuition breaks that can bring an Idaho student's costs in line with what Ames would have paid to educate his kids at the school currently employing him.

"I think a lot of kids fall into that category," Ames said.

Idaho hands out tax breaks to companies that locate here or expand operations. And many private corporations, in an effort to retain and recruit, offer employees discounted goods.

Keeping our best and brightest should be a higher priority for everyone - elected officials, appointed policymakers and the institutions themselves. The UI and BSU programs are good first steps, and we would urge ISU to join their ranks.

Idaho was a day late and dollar short on Daniel Ames. But we can learn from this example and, hopefully, begin keeping more folks like him around.