

Staben's tin ear

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to Chuck Staben. In a Nov. 27 interview, the Idaho Statesman's Bill Roberts asked University of Idaho's next president about a "growing feeling that Idaho universities are pricing themselves out of the market. ..."

Currently vice provost at the University of South Dakota, Staben conceded that accessibility is a national problem and that he hoped to do "a little more awarding of financial aid beyond strictly merit, which is what we are limited to in South Dakota.

"I often think price is not a big issue for a lot of people. ... If you know the payoff to you personally, professionally and probably monetarily is going to be sufficient, then you will invest," Staben said. "You will do what it takes."

Doesn't that sound like Staben's predecessor, Duane Nellis, who in four years at the helm never forcefully challenged how Idaho's political leaders had balanced the state budget on the backs of college students?

In five years, state support for higher education dropped nearly \$49 million while tuition jumped nearly \$90 million.

Idaho incomes have dropped to 50th out of 51 slots. Idaho's college enrollment is ninth from the bottom. Only three states have a smaller proportion of high school grads continuing on to college. And only four states have a more difficult time keeping students in college once they get there. No wonder Idaho is one of 17 states where today's youngest workers are less well educated than the preceding generation.

Talk about making an unfortunate first impression.

CHEERS ... to Nez Perce County Clerk Patty Weeks. In 1968, a dime would get you a candy bar and a buck would buy three gallons of gas. And if you got called to jury service, you were paid \$10.

Candy bars cost more.

You know the price of gas.

But jury pay remained pegged at 1968 rates.

Talk about a set of lousy choices: Expect jurors to take a financial hit, accept a 25 percent no-show rate or empanel only wealthy people to judge the guilt of others.

Almost unanimously, Idaho lawmakers this year opted to raise jury pay to \$50 per day, \$25 for a half day. But they left it to individual counties to decide.

Following Weeks' recommendation, Nez Perce County commissioners Monday voted to pay their jurors the maximum compensation.

"We really want to support our jury system," Weeks told The Associated Press' John Miller. "We need the whole gamut: From the person who is a part-time, minimum-wage worker to the person earning \$100,000 a year."

But Ada and Bonneville counties are downright chintzy about sticking with the 1968 jury pay. At least Latah County boosted jury pay to \$30 a day and Idaho County will pay \$20.

CHEERS ... to the Lewiston School Board. Local officials occasionally run afoul of Idaho's law obligating them to conduct the public's business in public. But it's not often you see a board admit mistakes and make things right.

On Nov. 12, President Brad Rice and his board met to review applicants for outgoing member Brenda Forge's slot. Using paper ballots, they conducted a straw poll to eliminate three of five candidates, eventually zeroing in on Staci Baldwin.

Taxpayers Against Unfair Taxation head David Estes said that violated the Open Meeting Law, which mandates a posted agenda and that all votes be taken in public.

The stage is littered with cases of public officials going into court rather than conceding the error. But in Lewiston, Rice and his colleagues concluded Estes was correct, voided their decision and will resume interviews with the five applicants this month.

JEERS ... to Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter and state Sen. Russ Fulcher, R-Meridian.

Rivals for the GOP gubernatorial nomination, they were singing in two-part harmony Tuesday when Boise businessman A.J. Balukoff announced he would run as a Democrat.

Warbled Otter's campaign: "The governor looks forward to discussing with voters the implications of a Democrat working to advance the Obama administration's big-government priorities here in Idaho."

And, crooned Fulcher: "Let's not forget that he represents the party that authored Obamacare."

Sing that tune loudly enough, Otter and Fulcher believe, and Idaho's Obama-loathing voters will forget that on the GOP's watch, they've endured miserable incomes, depleted school budgets, tax relief for the wealthy and skyrocketing college tuition.

What's the second verse?

JEERS ... to Congressman Raul Labrador, R-Idaho. One of the architects of the recent government shutdown, Labrador joined 18 Republicans who want to pass a "clean" continuing budget resolution.

They want the \$1.2 trillion sequester left untouched - a move that could cut off Idaho County's \$1.6 million Payment in Lieu of Taxes check while draining away support from everything extending to the Idaho National Laboratory and the overwhelmed federal courts.

Labrador and his list of usual suspects - including Michele Bachmann, R-Minn., and Steve King, R-Iowa - accuse Democrats of angling for another shutdown.

That's a bit premature, considering Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., and Congressman Paul Ryan, R-Wis., are negotiating a budget deal to head off another shutdown.

Reports Politico: "Most Republicans - conservatives and moderates alike - are hoping Ryan and Murray succeed because they believe sequester level spending is unsustainable."

So what is Labrador really up to ? - M.T.