

Idaho's college cuts yield a bitter harvest

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

When the Great Recession pulled the rug out from under state budgets, the nation's public college students paid the price.

Desperate to balance their budgets - without boosting taxes too much if at all - lawmakers raided public institutions of higher learning, which in turn recouped their losses by charging more tuition.

It's a story common to virtually all 50 states.

But you'd have to search a long time to find any state that leaned as hard on its college students as Idaho has.

Last week, Idaho Kids Count and the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities reported the following:

- In six years, Idaho's spending per student had dropped by \$3,857 (inflation adjusted). Only four states - Louisiana, Hawaii, New Mexico and Alabama - withdrew more money from higher education.
- Idaho's level of support declined 36.8 percent per student - the sixth worst in the U.S., behind only Arizona, Louisiana, South Carolina, Oregon and Alabama.
- On the eve of the recession, Idaho put \$10,943 of public funds behind the education of each college student - the 12th best level of support in the country. When the bloodletting was over, Idaho's per student spending had slipped to 27th. Only three states - Louisiana, Massachusetts and South Dakota - fell further and faster.
- After cutting programs and class offerings - which often meant students took longer to graduate - Idaho raised tuition at four-year schools by 28.5 percent. Only 18 states - including Washington (ranked sixth) raised tuition more.
- Idaho lawmakers restored some funding for institutions of higher learning - but nowhere near enough to repair the damage and considerably less than other states. In the current fiscal year, Idaho devoted an additional \$320 toward each student's education - behind 25 states including Washington (ranked third). At the same time, tuition increased (inflation adjusted) by \$248, higher than all but 10 states.

If this were a high-income state such as Connecticut, it wouldn't be as bad. Typically, 80 percent of children from families in the top 25 percent income bracket attend a four-year school.

But this is Idaho - No. 2 for minimum-wage jobs, second to last in per capita incomes. In our neighborhood, the bottom quarter income bracket, your chances of attending a four-year school drop to 44 percent.

Making things even worse is a callous attitude on the part of Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter and the GOP-led Legislature. To balance the budget, they reduced spending. Then they cut some more - under the guise of lowballing revenue estimates. And when their overly pessimistic projections proved false, Otter and the Legislature spent this freed-up cash not on education but on tax breaks.

First they lowered income taxes for corporations and high rollers.

Next came a cut in the property tax businesses pay on equipment.

And finally, they yanked the sales tax businesses will pay on software purchases and doled out goodies for business expansion.

Guess what happened next: In a state where too few people have the kind of education the current job market requires, college enrollment is slowing.

In 2008, 49.1 percent of Idaho's high school graduates went directly to college. Only three states did worse. Two years later, the percentage of Idaho high school grads heading directly to college slipped to 45.1 percent - the worst showing in the United States.

About 21 percent of young Idahoans have a four-year degree compared to a national average of 32 percent.

Only 36.1 percent of Idaho workers have a two-year degree or better - which has slipped a bit since 2011.

By 2020, 60 percent of Idaho's jobs will require some kind of training beyond high school. Yet a new study, issued by the Lumina Foundation, says Idaho will be lucky to reach 40.9 percent by 2025.

Otter and his allies willfully disinvested in the education of Idaho's next generation.

Now their bitter harvest is in. - M.T.