

Staben sets his university on the correct heading

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

University of Idaho President Chuck Staben put himself and his institution on the right path last week.

Formally taking over as the 18th president of Idaho's land grant university, Staben challenged the state to judge his success or failure by two quantifiable benchmarks:

- "Within 10 years, I anticipate a student body 50 percent larger than the current one, that represents all of Idaho."
- By 2020, Idaho will meet its goal of having 60 percent of young adults, ages 25 to 34, with some kind of post-high school education, either a degree or a certificate.

"We could be better than we ever could have imagined," Staben told the audience gathered for his inauguration.

No goal could better serve the needs of Idaho's young people. The difference between a high school diploma and something more could not be more stark.

Not going beyond high school means not only the risk of poverty, but a life pockmarked by instability and frequent joblessness.

A college graduate not only earns about \$21,000 more a year than a high school graduate, but he's half as likely to end up on unemployment.

No goal could better serve the needs of this state - which at the moment suffers from a perpetual cycle of low-skilled workers generating a low-wage economy. Median incomes for individuals and women are ranked dead last in the country. Per capita incomes are second to last. Only Mississippi's per capita income is lower - and that state is gaining ground. Only Tennessee has a greater percentage of its workers earning minimum wage.

Difficult doesn't begin to describe what's ahead for Staben. The state is headed in the wrong direction.

Just 36.1 percent of Idaho's young adults have some kind of post-high school certification or degree. That's actually a slight decline from two years ago. At the rate it's going, the best Idaho can hope for by 2020 is that 39.1 percent of its young adults will have some kind of post-high school education. By 2025, the state may reach 40.9 percent.

Meanwhile, the share of Idaho high school graduates headed directly to college dropped last year - to 51 percent from 54 percent - in spite of the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation's campaign urging young Idahoans to "go on."

While enrollments elsewhere in the U.S. are rising, Idaho is losing ground. Five years ago, the state ranked 43rd in the share of its high school grads headed to college. Today, it's dropped to last place.

You'll know Staben is serious if he admonishes Idaho's leadership to stop raiding higher education budgets. In the last six years, Idaho slashed spending on its public institutions of higher learning by the equivalent of 36.8 percent per student - the sixth largest withdrawal of support in the country.

You'll know Staben intends to follow through when he holds the line on tuition spikes. In the last six years, tuition shot up 28.5 percent, the nation's 19th fastest rise.

You'll know this is more than empty rhetoric if you see Staben's UI devoting more campus resources toward helping struggling students remain in class.

You'll know he means business when he speaks up for spending enough on public schools that its graduates get the academic curriculum and the counseling that leaves them capable of performing college-level work and confident of their ability to do so.

You'll know Staben is committed to this course when you hear him lobbying for more federal, state and private scholarships that ease the path of so many young Idahoans who will become the first in their families to walk through a college graduation line.

A careerist spying his next post would not take this on.

Neither would a caretaker who is satisfied with taking up residency at the UI.

This is nothing short of audacious.

Staben has raised the stakes on his presidency. - M.T.