

Here's your degree; don't forget your debt

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Each spring, the Idaho State Board of Education - usually in response to an inadequate higher education appropriation - boosts the price college students must pay for their degrees.

According to the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, only six states have cut deeper into college and university budgets, and Idaho has responded with the 19th fastest rise in student tuition.

Not to worry, say state board and college administrators. Idaho's tuition remains a bargain compared to other states.

As the Idaho Statesman's Bill Roberts reports, they can cite the College Board, which ranks tuition at Idaho's four-year schools as the seventh lowest in the country. Among the 15 members of the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, Idaho's tuition stands in the middle.

Of course, that sidesteps the fact Idahoans earn a good deal less than just about anyone else. Only Mississippi's per capita income is lower than Idaho's. The Gem State's median income for individuals and women is dead last in the country. And only Tennessee has a greater share of its workers earning the minimum wage.

Tuition is only part of it. You don't get much of a break on books, room and board in Idaho.

Net result: When they emerge from college, Idaho students are more deeply in debt than their peers.

And when they enter Idaho's low-wage economy, they're less able to manage their student loans.

Roberts' report is backed up by details provided by the Institute for College Access and Success:

- 65 percent of Idaho's college graduates leave school in debt. That compares to the national average of 60 percent.
- The average Idaho grad carries about \$26,751 in student loans, the 21st highest in a nation where the average debt comes to \$25,884. And it's much more than the \$21,915 debt load the average Idaho student carried five years ago.
- Looking forward, it's getting worse. At Lewis-Clark State College, 90 percent of the freshman class that enrolled in 2011-12 - the last year on record - carried loans.

That compares to 79 percent at North Idaho College, 61 percent at the University of Idaho, 59 percent at Idaho State University and 55 percent at Boise State University.

But what alternative do they have?

Don't look to the state grants and aid:

- Idaho has about \$29.26 available for every person between the ages of 18 and 24 - the 47th lowest in the country. By contrast, the state of Washington spends the equivalent of \$518.70 per young person, the nation's sixth highest amount.
- Idaho spends the equivalent of \$14.55 in needs-based scholarship per full-time undergraduate student - the lowest amount of any reporting state. Washington comes in highest at \$1,316.86 per student.

Students are paying the price for this neglect. As Roberts reported, more Idaho graduates are getting behind on their student loans at a time when the national default rate is dropping.

Officially, 2,910 Idahoans are in default - 13.1 percent - but the number is probably higher when you factor people attending schools in other states.

But you're getting hurt as well.

These young people aren't around to help jump-start Idaho's economy.

There was a time when people who had college loans were more likely to buy homes and cars. It made sense. Someone with a college loan had a college degree and therefore a higher income.

No longer.

As the Federal Reserve Bank of New York noted recently, people making payments on student loans were less likely to buy a home and possibly a car than someone who had avoided debt by not attending college.

All of which adds up to a discouraging message to the average Idaho 17-year-old and his parents: Go to college and risk taking on debts so debilitating that you'll struggle to live as well as your friends who stayed home and went to work.

Last year, the share of Idaho high school graduates headed directly to college dropped to 51 percent from 54 percent. Is it any wonder? - M.T.