

Idaho's incredibly shrinking college campus

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

The University of Idaho lost enrollment this year.

The UI lost enrollment last year.

In fact, the UI is shedding students while its sister schools are at least stable if not growing.

Consider the following:

- The UI dropped 2.9 percent to 11,534 students.
- Boise State University gained 1.1 percent this year, putting its enrollment at 22,239.
- Idaho State University gained just under 1 percent to reach 13,455.
- Lewis-Clark State College also gained almost 1 percent for a total of 3,616.
- All of the schools are smaller compared to 2012. But the UI's 7.6 percent two-year decline is the state's steepest.
- Even the full-time equivalent count - which favors UI's mix of students - now puts Idaho's senior institution of higher learning in third place, behind ISU and BSU.

Cost and location put the UI at a disadvantage.

Idaho's economically struggling families are less able to move a child to Moscow - where tuition, room and board can easily approach \$20,000 a year. Living at home and commuting to school in Boise or Pocatello cuts that cost at least in half.

And a high school senior reared with the amenities of an urban center might have reservations about trading downtown

Boise for Moscow's Corner Club.

Add to the mix the impression of a UI seemingly in denial. Some of the explanations UI Enrollment Management Consulting Director M.J. Huebner offered to the Tribune's Elizabeth Rudd provoked head scratching: What does a large UI graduating class have to do with a smaller entering class or the hemorrhaging of returning students? Boosting the number of graduate, international and law school students is good news, but these are not the UI's core markets.

This has to be sobering for UI President Chuck Staben, who nearly two months ago formally launched his tenure with this pledge: "Within 10 years, I anticipate a student body 50 percent larger than the current one, that represents all of Idaho."

If Staben is talking to the right people, he's getting this kind of advice:

- Lock in tuition rates by class. Guarantee freshmen the cost of their instruction will not change for the next four years. It's a dramatic way to begin the recruitment conversation on the right note.
- Scrap former President Duane Nellis' rule requiring freshmen to live on campus. That's only making the UI less attractive to students who want to keep costs down and there's no evidence that it's helping to retain them.
- Get very aggressive with dual enrollment programs that allow high school students to earn college credit.
- Except for graduate programs, end the fixation with Boise. Going up against BSU and the College of Western Idaho is a losing strategy. Instead, shore up the UI's base by recruiting aggressively from Riggins north.
- Market the UI's strengths: An extensive alumni network - the so-called "Moscow Mafia" - that offers any graduate a leg up in the job market. And a residential, Ivy League education at an Idaho price.

They'd tell the UI's new president one more thing: Standing still is not an option. There's no guarantee the UI reached an enrollment plateau. Rather than a decade of expansion, Staben could find himself presiding over an enrollment freefall. - M.T.