

University of Idaho's Staben offers to freeze tuition

Providing the Legislature fully funds a 3 percent salary increase for faculty and staff on campus

William L. Spence/Lewiston Tribune

BOISE - University of Idaho President Chuck Staben wants to freeze resident undergraduate tuition rates next year, if the Legislature commits to fully funding a 3 percent salary increase for faculty and staff.

Staben, making his first presentation to the joint budget committee since being hired as UI's 18th president last March, noted the governor is already recommending a 3 percent "CEC," or change in employee compensation, for all state employees in fiscal 2016.

However, state funding only covers a portion of the salaries for higher education employees.

"We only get about 50 percent of the general funds needed to pay for the CEC," Staben said. "The rest has to come from a dedicated fund - and that fund is tuition. We're asking the Legislature to fully fund this 'salary gap.' If you do, our plan is to not raise resident undergraduate tuition this year."

At the University of Idaho, the gap amounts to \$1.6 million. For all four-year institutions combined, it's \$3.8 million, on top of the \$5.6 million in general funds recommended by Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter.

Staben made it clear the freeze is simply a proposal, since the State Board of Education has final say over tuition rates.

Emma Atchley, president of the state board, said tuition increases of 1.5 percent to 3 percent will be required if the Legislature decides not to cover the \$3.8 million. That will vary depending on the institution.

Budget committee co-chairman Sen. Dean Cameron, R-Rupert, said the proposal "poses the committee with an interesting dilemma."

The Legislature typically only appropriates the general fund portion of any change in employee compensation increase, he said, even though many agencies are in the same position as UI. If it suddenly changes that policy for colleges and universities, then community colleges and state agencies would likely make similar requests.

"Obviously, we want to provide as much (money) as we can for the universities and provide opportunities for kids to go to college," he said. "But enrollment is down ... yet student tuition and fees continues to increase dramatically, something like 25 percent (since 2011). If we continue on that trajectory, we may soon outpace the ability of kids to go to college. We may already be there; in my opinion, the single largest impediment to college is affordability. What do you recommend we do to address that?"

Stemming the tuition tide is the main factor motivating UI to propose a freeze, Staben said. However, maintaining competitive staff and faculty salaries is also a top priority.

"Competitive salaries are critical to recruiting and retaining the people who make our teaching, research and outreach excellent," he said. "Our salaries are approximately 84 percent of the average for our peer institutions. Turnover increased from 16 percent last year to 18 percent this year; faculty turnover is at 14 percent. That's much higher than at other institutions I've worked at. ... Salary non-competitiveness puts us at risk of losing our stars and rising stars."

Following the budget presentation, Cameron suggested the state higher education institutions might want to take a lesson from the Idaho Transportation Department.

Several years ago, lawmakers were highly skeptical of the transportation department. Before providing more money for highway maintenance and repairs, they wanted assurances the agency was using its existing funding as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Consequently, Transportation Director Brian Ness spent five years making improvements, including eliminating an entire layer of management and adding performance measures to make sure people were focused on the highest priority jobs. He now highlights those improvements every time he talks with the Legislature.

"It does increase our confidence," Cameron said of the changes Ness made. "I think higher education, for some time, has needed to make that same demonstration."

What the four-year colleges and universities have done instead, he said, is hire more employees - despite static or declining enrollment. And now they're asking the budget committee to pick up a greater share of employee pay.

Staben said UI has made a number of improvements, including strengthening internal processes and shifting resources to help increase enrollment. It also completed a program prioritization effort last year that was designed to improve its effectiveness.

"I'm a public servant using public funds that are brought to us by Idaho families," he said. "I'm very aware of the necessity to use those funds as responsibly as possible."

Spence may be contacted at bspence@lmtribune.com or (208) 791-9168.