

The incredible shrinking University of Idaho

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

The numbers crunchers at the University of Idaho last week put the best spin on the latest enrollment figures.

Rather than dwell on another decline, they highlighted a slight boost in the number of in-state freshmen.

Truth be told, an improving economy lured more young people to the job site instead of the classrooms this year. Full-time enrollment is down 2.3 percent at UI, while it dropped 3.1 percent at Idaho State University, 3.6 percent at Lewis-Clark State College and 0.2 percent at Boise State University.

Of course, that's heading in the wrong direction in a state where the go-on rate hovers around 50 percent of high school graduates - compared to a 62 percent national average. Because only one of every three Idaho adults have completed any kind of post-high school education, the culture discourages young people from considering college. And the state hasn't helped by steadily boosting tuition and not investing more in scholarships.

Far more troubling - from Moscow's point of view - is the long-term trend. As the Tribune's Elizabeth Rudd noted, this is the third consecutive fall that fewer students have attended UI.

In good years and bad, the UI has lost considerable ground while its sister schools have enjoyed modest, if not rapid growth.

Since 2004:

- UI's head count fell to 11,372, an 11.3 percent decline. Its full-time count is down 15 percent to 9,384.
- At 22,113, BSU's head count grew 20 percent. Its full-time enrollment of 15,433 is nearly 16 percent higher.
- ISU reached a total of 13,032 students, up 5.5 percent - although its full-time count has fallen 1.8 percent to 9,993.
- LCSC has grown to 3,635 students - up nearly 16 percent - and it accounts for 2,728 full-time equivalents, an increase of nearly 6 percent.

Extrapolate that trend out another decade and you would see the UI facing the unpleasant prospect of falling 10,000 students behind its sister school on the Boise River.

Certainly, the UI has had its share of obstacles. At least BSU, ISU and LCSC have had the benefit of administrative stability. The Moscow-based institution has seen five presidents in 10 years - hardly an environment to promote long-term planning.

It's also priced itself beyond the reach of many Idaho families. Students in the Treasure Valley or eastern Idaho can keep costs down by commuting to class at BSU or ISU. Moving to Moscow involves adding living expenses on top of tuition.

That's not to say UI's future is bleak. Among its assets is its president, Chuck Staben - who came aboard with the twin mandates of restoring stability in the administrative ranks and reversing the enrollment declines.

So far, he's delivered two out-of-the-box innovations: A direct admissions process that welcomed at least 10,700 high school seniors to the state's four-year and community colleges as well as a survey asking non-college bound students why they're not attending school.

Diminished enrollment has a silver lining for the university - it has excess capacity. Theoretically, it could fill seats - and collect tuition dollars - without the need to add staff or infrastructure.

As always, the UI can draw on its footprint in Idaho Falls, Boise and Twin Falls as recruitment tools.

But none of this is going to work effectively until the UI aggressively finds its niche in this new century and then capitalizes on it. Somehow, it must find a message young people will find compelling and relevant.

Staben has proven himself adroit at marketing. The question now is can he deliver the vision to match.