

New president takes reins: Nellis begins tenure as University of Idaho's 17th president

By Halley Griffin, Daily News staff writer

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Duane Nellis has a laundry list of projects ahead of him.

Nellis, 54, assumed the University of Idaho's top job Wednesday, becoming the institution's 17th president.

"I'm extremely excited to be finally, officially the president of the University of Idaho," Nellis said.

Before he was even halfway through his first day, Nellis said he had met with senior administrators to outline his priorities for the institution.

He said he wants to improve relationships with stakeholders around the state, in addition to creating a more entrepreneurial culture at the UI, improving distance education and bumping up fundraising.

"The state's contribution to this institution is very important, but we need to look at additional (funding) sources," he said, adding that the university's general fund has been cut by 25 percent over the past three years.

He cited the need to "generate other sources of revenue, to give people hope for the future."

Nellis acknowledged that fundraising will be difficult in the current economic climate, but said he believes the resources of the university's wide alumni network have not been fully tapped.

He said he'd like to demonstrate the UI's potential to alumni and other stakeholders to inspire them to become a bigger part of the university's mission.

Nellis also said he'd like to work on relationships with private donors and corporations to create endowed professorships and increase funding for faculty salaries, which he said "are well below national average."

Nellis will begin to work on those stakeholder relationships next week, when he and wife Ruthie embark on a "listening tour" around the state.

His itinerary includes a stop at the likely-to-be-closed Parma Research and Extension Center, where he concedes he may receive an earful.

He said the university is moving forward with plans to close the Parma center and merge operations with the UI's outpost in Caldwell, but added that "we're still in dialogue with industry people" about the proposal.

While UI students and employees alike have their own wish lists prepared for Nellis, they acknowledge that expecting a major turnaround in his first year may be asking too much.

"I think the first year is going to be a lot of fixing," student Megan Kehrein said.

She said the bigger transformations probably will come in subsequent years, and she hopes some of the improvements include better communication with students.

"I think it will hopefully be a great change for the university," she said.

UI Video Production Manager Steve Hall hopes to see Nellis attract new and creative talent to the university.

"I just hope he does well with the state Legislature," he said.

Alumni Relations Program Coordinator Katie Dahlinger said she doesn't have one specific expectation of Nellis. She'd just like to see him keep up with the good impression he's already started to make.

"I really like how President Nellis includes his wife in everything, because we always talk about the University of Idaho as a family," she said.

On the Web:

- www.uidaho.edu/idahovandals/listeningtour.aspx

Halley Griffin can be reached at (208) 882-5561, ext. 239, or by e-mail at hgriffin@dnews.com.