

Departing Nellis left his footprint on sand

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Duane Nellis came to the University of Idaho presidency demanding more money than the state had intended to pay.

He's poised to depart for Lubbock, Texas-based Texas Tech guaranteed to make a good deal more shepherding a much larger institution with more resources and a better football team.

Like it or not, that is all most Idahoans - separated by one time zone and no less than five hours of driving from the UI's Moscow campus - will ever know about him.

There's no reason to think Nellis was anything less than sincere about making Moscow his final career destination when he arrived in 2009, the seventh UI president in less than 20 years. To get him, the State Board of Education allowed the UI Foundation to add \$37,000 to the \$298,000 salary Nellis said was inadequate.

Neither is there any reason to doubt that Texas Tech came head-hunting for Nellis rather than the other way around.

Once the Texans offered, however, Nellis had few reasons to remain.

In Idaho, the political environment toward education at all levels ranges between neglect on a good day and contempt on a bad day. Outside Idaho's college towns, higher education simply is not a priority.

During the past four years, there have been more bad days - budgets have been slashed as often as not to free up cash for tax cuts.

With fewer resources from the state, the UI boosted student tuition, pricing a college degree - or at least spending four years at a remote, residential campus - beyond the reach of many middle-class Idaho families.

Higher education may be a prerequisite to surviving in a modern economy, but the message isn't getting through in a culture where three-quarters of parents did not complete college themselves.

Rather than leapfrog that environment, Nellis worked within it. Problems that came across his desk, he resolved adequately.

But the bulk of the leadership team that greeted Nellis upon his arrival remains in place today.

The UI's failing football team still has no conference to call its own.

Boise State University, its traditional rival, is ascendant. Its politically savvy President Robert Kustra has parlayed all of his assets -a successful football program, corporate alliances and proximity to the state's political and population vortex - toward a new paradigm.

Meanwhile, the UI brand continues to sag.

Outside its own region, the university remains best known for its failed Boise campus fiasco, the shooting death of graduate student Katy Benoit by former professor Ernesto Bustamante and the troubling spate of student injuries or fatalities linked to excessive drinking, topped off by Joseph Wiederrick's death due to hypothermia in January.

Legislative initiatives - such as seeking to launch a second-year law school in Boise when the job market for lawyers is glutted - are batted down.

Rallying the Vandals last year in defense of the UI's "flagship" status was an exercise in futility. If the slogan was such a vital part of the UI's role and mission, why didn't Nellis first secure a majority on the State Board of Education before making the pitch? Failure further fueled the perception of a university in decline.

Nellis proved a capable manager whose indentation was shallow and imprinted on sand. But his departure offers the UI the chance to seek what it sorely has lacked: a visionary with a sober assessment of the institution's present, a strategic flair for its possibilities and the audacity to seize those opportunities.- M.T.