

The opportunity Duane Nellis squandered

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho needed candor from Duane Nellis as he departed the University of Idaho presidency on his way to Texas Tech in Lubbock.

Nellis didn't provide it.

In a farewell essay published in the Idaho Statesman Tuesday, Nellis wrote:

"If I could give one final piece of advice to my friends in the state Legislature, it would be to invest in these people (faculty and public employees). I would hope that your highest priority next year is CEC - Change in Employee Compensation."

Faculty and state workers have taken it on the chin these past few years as first the bottom fell out of the state budget and then lawmakers opted to funnel what little new money they received into tax cuts for the well-off and corporations.

But is that really the primary crisis facing Idaho education?

Take a high school graduate with the ability to perform college-level work. If he comes from a family with the means to pay for it, he has a 75 percent chance of going to school.

If that same student - same skill set, same motivation to succeed - comes from a low-income family, his chances of attending college drop to 44 percent.

Which scenario sounds more like Idaho?

This is, after all, a place where per capita income has fallen eight notches in the last decade and is second only to Mississippi.

This is an economy that produced a higher proportion of minimum-wage jobs than any other in the U.S.

A state where the wage gap has expanded from 15 percent behind the national average to 23 percent.

Where people working in many occupations earn a median income below their peers in every - or nearly every - other state.

Yet, the state leadership has relentlessly balanced the budget on the backs of its college students. Five years ago, Idaho tuition covered about 30 percent of the cost of instruction. Today, it's 47 percent and climbing.

Since 2008, state support for Idaho's college and universities has dropped \$48.6 million. In that same time, tuition has jumped \$89.5 million.

Idaho likes to think it delivers higher education for a bargain. But when you factor in Idaho's relatively high rate of poverty coupled with its scant investment in needs-based scholarships, the net cost of attending an Idaho institution is relatively high.

Hence, graduates emerge with huge debts. Last year, the average graduate debt load was \$24,134 - higher than half the states and all but one of Idaho's neighbors.

But you didn't hear Nellis say anything about that.

Nor did he delve into Idaho's backsliding.

Idaho's college enrollment is ninth from the bottom. The proportion of its high school graduates heading directly into college is better than only three states. And only four states do a worse job in retaining college students for their second year.

It adds up to this: One in 10 Idaho ninth-graders will graduate from college. Idaho is one of 17 states where today's younger workers are less well-educated than the earlier generation - and Idaho's performance on that measure is the fifth worst in the country.

Someday, Idaho will break free from this state of denial. Somewhere a leader will emerge who tells Idahoans what it will cost them to adequately fund a higher education system available to all its young people - and the price to be paid for failing to provide it.

Nellis had one final opportunity to be that voice.

And he squandered it . - M.T.