

Higher tuition today, tomorrow and forever

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Look out, Idaho college students.

Here comes another round of tuition increases.

For that, you can thank the Legislature's budget-writing committee.

Monday, the panel:

- Approved an 8 percent overall boost, bringing spending on Idaho's four-year schools to \$279.5 million. As generous as that sounds, it still falls short of the \$285.2 million higher education was allotted before the Great Recession decimated its budget. To compensate for the lost money, colleges and universities squeezed students. A decade ago, the University of Idaho set its tuition and fees at \$4,200 a year. That's now up to \$7,020.

In that same time, the burden has shifted. A decade ago, taxpayers covered about two-thirds of the cost of instruction with students paying the rest. Today, it's virtually 50-50.

- Rejected two modest attempts to hold the line on future tuition increases. This was nowhere near the dramatic turn their Republican counterparts in Olympia agreed to implement last year by dramatically boosting state support while cutting back tuition.

Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter merely wanted to guarantee next fall's entering freshmen they would continue to pay the same rates during the course of their college careers. Otter's "tuition lock" plan would cost nothing the first year, but would require \$1.6 million beginning in the fall of 2017 and cost \$8.1 million by the time it was fully implemented in 2020. But it also meant setting \$10 million aside to cover the state's obligation should the budget crash in the future.

With "tuition lock" off the table, Reps. John Gannon and Phylis King, both D-Boise, proposed allocating the \$6.3 million it would require to fully fund a 3 percent cost of living increase for all faculty and staff.

Instead, lawmakers are poised to provide just enough money to cover anywhere from 65 percent of the pay increase at the UI to about half at Boise State University. That's generally how the system works, but it leaves colleges and universities with some lousy alternatives.

They can spread out the smaller pay increases campus wide - and impose higher health insurance premiums - and wait for plummeting morale to aggravate their problems recruiting and retaining personnel.

They can cannibalize more programs in the name of retaining quality elsewhere.

Or they can take the comparatively easy route - seeking another round of student tuition increases. Odds are when the State Board of Education takes it up later this spring, the increases will come in somewhere near 3 percent. But 3 percent on a base of \$7,000 is going to pinch somebody.

Consider the context.

Idaho is a state with one of the lowest percentages of high school graduates electing to continue their education - and the trend is heading in the wrong direction. Idaho's go-on rate is about 50 percent - compared to a national average of 62 percent.

Cost isn't the only reason, but it can't help but be a factor in a state where the per capita income is near the nation's basement.

Moreover, it seems as if the state leadership - from Otter and the State Board to the state's economic development experts - all got the point this year. When it came to Idaho's low-wage, low-skill economy, they all agreed a better-educated work force was the best way to break the cycle.

An improving economy generating more tax revenues would put holding the line on tuition within Idaho's financial reach.

If Idaho lawmakers won't take such a modest step under these circumstances, they probably never will.