

## Idaho Statesman, Tuesday, May 4, 2010 – Editorial

# New school confronts old-school budget realities

Apparently, the College of Western Idaho could have used an extra \$1 million. Instead, the new kid in Idaho higher education faces the same kind of problems plaguing the rest of a statewide system. Revenue is not keeping up with enrollment. That will result in staff cuts, and larger classes for students attending the Nampa community college.

That's a tough way to launch a new college. Especially because CWI's problems are exacerbated by CWI's success.

The fledgling school is doing what its backers predicted in 2007, when Ada and Canyon county voters approved a new property tax levy to establish the college. As promised, CWI is filling a large unmet need for higher education in a Valley that long was without a two-year college.

Enrollment is 4,800 and growing - rapidly. If anything, the economic downturn makes CWI a more popular option for students seeking basic postsecondary courses, or workers seeking new job skills. Gov. Butch Otter recognized the need, and recommended an extra \$1 million of scarce state dollars to help CWI meet the demand. Unfortunately, legislative budget-writers never gave the idea serious consideration.

Remember their decision come fall, when CWI classes are more crowded. The college is balancing its books as best it can by going after a main expense: salaries. About 15 jobs will be cut. About 35 other instructors, staff and administrators will take pay cuts of \$900 to \$20,000.

Not an ideal way to save \$770,000 in 2010. But probably the best option, if it allows CWI to limit increases in student fees - at two- and four-year colleges alike, affordability and access are synonymous. The payroll cuts also could help hold the line on local property tax levies that supplement state funding. To their credit, CWI administrators are trying to keep the promise they made to voters three years ago. They are reluctant to increase their property tax levy, which now comes in at about \$13 per \$1,000 of property value.

There is this lingering perception in state government that public funding is not that critical, especially when compared to funding for K-12. After all, the two- and four-year schools can simply jack up their student fees - and community colleges such as CWI also collect local property taxes.

True enough. But that doesn't change the fact that the state's higher education system is hurting. Idaho's newest college is not in this alone. At the state's land-grant campus, University of Idaho President Duane Nellis was brutally candid last week about the effects of a 21 percent funding cut that threatens longstanding programs. "We're at the threshold of no return."

CWI's situation is no better. The school is struggling to establish itself - with a distinct lack of help from the Statehouse.