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Going on means getting past Boise's obstacles

Idaho's high school students are receiving two incongruent themes. So you could forgive them - in fact anyone who is looking at getting retrained - for feeling conflicted. On one hand, they've been recipients of a well-timed awareness campaign. The J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation has committed \$3 million toward persuading Idahoans to continue their educations. "Go on!" the slogan declares. In the modern economy, a high school education won't take you far enough, certainly not anywhere near a job with a living wage.

It's a message other institutions are spreading to other students in other states. But as the Albertson Foundation notes, it's especially pertinent in Idaho. For instance, the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems reports:

- Idaho is 43rd in the percentage of high school grads who complete college. Idaho's 14.4 percent is half that of the top performers, South Dakota (29.7 percent), New Hampshire (29.3 percent) and Massachusetts (29 percent) - and well below some of its neighbors such as Wyoming (25 percent), Montana (18.4 percent), Utah (17.7 percent), Washington (17.3 percent) and Oregon (15.6 percent).
- When it comes to high school graduates who immediately transition into college in the fall, Idaho is ranked 49th with 45.7 percent.
- In terms of the percentage of people ages 18 to 24 enrolled in college, Idaho is 41st (31 percent), slightly better than Washington (29.5 percent).
- If you judge an education system's success by the percentage of people who start at the ninth grade and wind up in college, Idaho is ranked 42nd (36 percent). Top-performing South Dakota is 58.9 percent.

Yet, while the Albertson Foundation advises Idahoans to "go on" to higher education, Idaho's leadership responds: "Oh, go on!" To that leadership, higher education is not an investment. Instead, Gov. C. L. (Butch) Otter and the Legislature see it as (a) an expense or burden or (b) a piggy bank that can be raided to shore up other parts of a faltering state budget.

Addressing the Legislature's budget committee last week, University of Idaho President Duane Nellis noted his institution has lost 22 percent of its budget in the last two years. Boise State University President Bob Kustra said students are picking up where state taxpayers have left off. Lewis-Clark State College President Dene Thomas promised more cuts and tuition increases.

When a farmer runs short of water or a rancher hasn't got enough grain, he at least ponders the possibility of getting more - even if it costs money. But Idaho Republicans won't even look at the possibility of raising more cash. So higher education may be slashed another 14 percent next year. Students, who are told their future prosperity depends on education, will find the state placing more obstacles in their way.

Tuition will rise, probably by double-digits. They'll be forced to take on even greater debts. Programs will be cut. Staff will be furloughed. With fewer offerings, getting through college takes longer and becomes even more expensive. But let no Idahoan, whether she be a high school junior, a non-traditional student or an employee looking to improve his education, be confused. The Albertson Foundation's message to Idaho students is the genuine one. Go on.- M.T.