

Twin Falls Times News, Monday, Jan. 11, 2010 – Editorial

Where's the rainy-day fund for Idaho higher education?

In his 20 years in the Idaho Legislature, former Speaker of the House Bruce Newcomb was right more often than he was wrong. And four years after he retired, he still is. The Burley Republican, now a lobbyist for and faculty member at Boise State University, joined University of Idaho administrator Marty Peterson last week in arguing that it's time for Idaho to look into a stabilization fund for higher education, to protect colleges and universities from big budget hits from year to year. "There ought to be some way we can identify a revenue stream," Newcomb told the Spokesman-Review of Spokane, Wash.

"We need to get away from this thing of higher ed essentially being the savings account that we use to balance the budget," said Peterson, special assistant to U of I President Duane Nellis and budget director for former Gov. John Evans.

Amen. For the past two years, Idaho college students have paid through the nose to keep the rest of state government afloat. That burden has been mostly borne by students at Boise State University, Idaho State University, the University of Idaho and Lewis-Clark State College. But we're increasingly concerned about the threat to programs — and to the ability of students to afford — the College of Southern Idaho and the state's other two community colleges. By scrupulously careful management — and significant scholarship help from the CSI Foundation — the Twin Falls college has managed to avoid pricing its students out of school. But if the governor and the Legislature demand yet more cuts from higher ed for 2010 and again for 2011, all bets are off.

Students at CSI and at North Idaho College and the College of Western Idaho are the least able to afford sharp run-ups in tuition and fees. These students, by and large, are lower-middle class wage-earners with families — many of them single parents — tapping into the community colleges for job retraining and improving their earnings potential. For most of them, there is no margin of error. Without additional financial aid, an increase of \$100 or \$200 in tuition in fees each academic year will mean many of them can't attend college.

That's a tragedy on a personal level, but it also has potentially significant impact on a Magic Valley economy that depends on the ability of CSI to transform \$10-an-hour nurses aides into the \$25-an-hour registered nurses.

Simply put, CSI is an income-creating dynamo. Anything that limits access to the college jeopardizes the local economy. So when prosperity returns to Idaho, the Legislature should take a hard look at creating the same kind of rainy-day fund for colleges and universities that has cosseted public schools during the worst of the Great Recession. Nellis got it exactly right last year when he said "continued disinvestment (in higher education) should no longer be an option."

Lawmakers and Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter have been all too willing over the past couple of years to treat Idaho's college students like ATMs they can use to plug the holes in other areas of state spending. That must stop.