

Thursday, August 14, 2014

OUR VIEW

Idaho has to raise its 'go on' rate

Finances certainly play role in slight drop over last year, but if state wants to get its per-capita income up, it must have workforce with postsecondary skills

Although it doesn't necessarily represent a reason to panic, the slight downward trend on the number of Idaho kids who are "going on" to some form of higher education does show that we have a difficult task ahead of us.

Slightly more than half — 52 percent — of Idaho's 2013 high school graduates have enrolled in a two- or four-year college, compared to 54 percent last year. The national average is 65.9 percent, and Connecticut had the highest rate at 78.8 percent — and also has the highest per-capita income.

Going on to higher education is a complex issue with many moving parts, perhaps the most significant being economics. Higher education costs continue to increase while Americans have less disposable income due to more expenses and stagnant wages. Idaho ranks 44th in the nation in per-capita income according to the most recent U.S. Census data, which makes it tougher for families to afford sending their kids to college.

For that reason, the enrollment rate could be slipping simply because some high school graduates want to work for a few years, save up the money and then go on to higher ed. And Idaho has one of the highest Mormon populations in the country, so you have to consider that some of those kids will be serving missions before coming back home to go to college.

Still, the state Board of Education's goal of having 80 percent of high school graduates enroll in a postsecondary program — four-university, community college, vocational-technical program — within a year of receiving their high school diploma appears to be a million light years away. And while the 80 percent number is arguably a bit on the Pollyannaish side, we have to get that number up if Idahoans want to improve — or even maintain — the standard of living they've gotten used to. It's a matter of necessity.

Why? Because technology will make more and more low-skilled jobs obsolete. Just look at all the jobs the Internet has wiped out already, not to mention all the companies that have outsourced their call centers and manufacturing overseas. It's an increasingly competitive world out there.

There are many good postsecondary four-year options locally — The College of Idaho, Northwest Nazarene University, Boise State University — as well as lower-cost community colleges such as Treasure Valley Community College and College of Western Idaho. Throw in the vo-tech options at Stevens-Henager College, and there's lots to choose from. And some high schools offer college courses at high discounts, as well.

So what can we do to get our "go on" rates up?

- Parents, stress the importance of education to your kids. Don't blow it off as nothing more than free babysitting.
- Students, it isn't cool to be ignorant — unless you think it's cool to be poor.
- Schools should find a way to provide regular consultations between counselors and students to find out what their interests are, how their studies are going and how they can navigate the complex system of looking at colleges, applying for financial aid, etc.

If we want to get that low per-capita income ranking up higher, we need more skilled workers with postsecondary certification. It really is that simple.

■ Our view is based on the majority opinions of the Press-Tribune editorial board. Members of the board are Publisher Matt Davison, Editor Scott McIntosh, Opinion Editor Phil Bridges and community members Marie Baker, Autumn Short, Bruce Krosch, Richard Maffei and Scott Hogan.