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College of Western Idaho shouldn't raise tax levy without strong public support Idaho Press Tribune – January 25, 2012

The College of Western Idaho has been a tremendous success story — not just locally, but nationwide. It has been one of the fastest-growing community colleges in the country.

Now college officials are urging more financial support to keep that success going. In other words, they want more money from you.

Even the biggest optimist probably wouldn't have predicted that in just three years enrollment would balloon from 1,208 students in spring 2009 to more than 8,000 in fall 2011, with estimates of more than 10,000 this spring. Gov. Butch Otter mentioned the school's stellar progress in his State of the State address earlier this month when he said North Idaho College and the College of Southern Idaho had agreed to give CWI an additional \$1 million in state funding.

But the College of Western Idaho also has higher tuition than those other schools. The board of trustees voted to raise it another \$7 per credit hour from \$129 to \$136 in April. Tuition at North Idaho College is \$125 per hour; it's \$110 at the College of Southern Idaho.

CWI officials say they want to keep their tuition as low as they can to make higher education as affordable as possible. Rather than continuing to raise tuition, they're looking at ways to generate more funding — including an increased tax levy. Trustees voted to contract a survey to see whether Ada and Canyon County residents would be willing to pay more of the share.

That could be a tough sell right now — especially in Canyon County. When the college went to a public vote in 2007, it was approved by 71 percent of Ada County voters, but just 62 percent in Canyon County. And that was before the economy really tanked.

Idaho's two other community colleges get more than \$80 in property taxes per \$100,000 in property value, whereas CWI gets just \$18.22. About a third of those other schools' budgets comes from students; at CWI, it's about half.

How would 2C voters feel about another property tax increase? Judging by the results of the last three elections for a new Canyon County Jail, they probably wouldn't be too tickled. They said "no" to the first two, "hell no" to the third. The final try in August 2010 got just 43 percent support when it needed two-thirds.

It's a safe bet many Canyon County taxpayers wouldn't support higher property taxes to help CWI in a prolonged recession such as this. School officials shouldn't proceed with any effort to increase the levy without broad support from the folks who would pay the freight. Until they do, they need to be as efficient as possible.