

Idaho State Journal, Monday, March 2, 2009 – by John O’Connell (2 pages)

Turf war simmers

Colleges vie for medical mission

Idaho State University’s assignment to the state’s health sciences mission traces back almost four decades. In 1969, a year after the Nevada Legislature authorized its own state medical school, Idaho designated ISU as the health science center for the state.

But now it appears the University of Idaho is also staking a claim for the medical mission.

After the U of I assumed responsibilities for the Washington-Alaska-Montana-Idaho Medical School, the State Board declared the U of I had a “regional medical mission” in that capacity. During recent public meetings about how the state should address a shortage of doctors, many participants have stressed the significance of the U of I’s “regional medical mission” as it pertains to a future in-state medical school.

Senate President Pro-Tem Bob Geddes, R-Soda Springs, believes the recent emphasis placed on the U of I’s “regional medical mission” is evidence of regional politics muddying the waters.

While the University of Idaho has three health profession degrees and Boise State University has eight, ISU offers 47 degrees in the health professions. ISU also offers 71 percent of the state’s terminal graduate programs in the health professions. ISU also houses family practice, dental and pharmaceutical residency programs.

“You have members of the State Board who are even questioning whether ISU was even given the medical mission. Where are most of the medical courses taught? At ISU. Did that happen by accident?” Geddes asked. “We’ve got a situation where the State Board has turned to regional politics and not looking out for the best interests of our state in terms of attracting medical doctors and training our own. It’s going to get so much harder in the future to expect Idaho students to be accepted into other state’s medical schools. I don’t think there’s a better solution than to have our own state’s medical school.”

Geddes was particularly concerned about insinuations made during a heated exchange that took place during a Nov. 12, 2008, meeting of his committee.

According to the meeting minutes, former House Speaker Bruce Newcomb, who attended the committee meeting on behalf of Boise State University, said it was his understanding that ISU had the health sciences mission and “medical education is U of I as directed by the State Board.”

In response, Sen. Bart Davis, R-Idaho Falls, said Newcomb’s description of the university missions was “a major over-representation of the language from the State Board, and it has been thrown about over the last several meetings such that it has become framed as reality.”

Davis went on to say it would be “intellectually inconsistent for the State Board to approve a specific plan for ISU to do X and then tell the committee the State Board never really meant X.”

Mission 1

“I’m very disappointed in the process so far because all I see is the universities fighting amongst themselves for territories and a State Board that is willing to facilitate it,” Davis said, according to the meeting minutes.

Former State Board Member Karen McGee, of Pocatello, argues the intent of creating eight-year plans was to minimize the likelihood of such infighting about school missions.

“That’s why the eight-year plan was so important. what it was spe-That’s cifically designed to be. Each university had their mission and if another part of the state needed something — if somebody wanted a health program up north by the University of Idaho — ISU would be the one to deliver it unless they couldn’t,” McGee said. “Then the University of Idaho would say, ‘We will deliver it in our region until ISU can. There’s no reason there would be any confusion about what the mission of ISU is.’”

State Board officials point out eight-year plans were merely guidelines, and many of the projects identified on them won’t come to fruition, particularly during these tough economic times.

Richard Westerberg, a Franklin County Commissioner who was appointed to fill McGee’s vacant seat on the board in April of 2007, argues both ISU and the U of I have legitimate claims to the medical mission, and the resources of both institutions will be needed for an in-state medical school to work.

“There is some room for overlap and confusion when you look at ISU’s mission versus the University of Idaho’s mission,” Westerberg said. “Pragmatically, the University of Idaho runs the WWAMI program. Clearly they have some authority to be in the medical education business. On the other hand, ISU runs the medical education programs for a lot of students in the state of Idaho. That’s a fact.”