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## U.of Utah may cut med school seats

*ISU officials say changes underscore the need for regional program*

POCATELLO — Idaho State University officials argue the need for an in-state medical education program has been evidenced by recent talk of cuts within the University of Utah Medical School.

David Bjorkman, dean of the University of Utah School of Medicine, told the Salt Lake Tribune this week seats at his program may eventually have to be cut due to a combination of state and federal budget cuts and funding source reductions spurred by the faltering economy.

Currently, Idaho trains its medical students by subsidizing eight medical school seats at the University of Utah and 24 seats at the University of Washington. But ISU President Arthur Vailas has lobbied for Idaho to enact a medical school using the distributive model, which would utilize existing resources throughout the state. ISU has concluded the medical school could be started for less than the cost of out-ofstate seats, and by establishing its own program, Idaho would benefit from the stability of controlling its own destiny.

Bjorkman said out-of-state seats would be the first cut. However, an official with the University of Utah said Tuesday Idaho’s eight seats would be protected. Idaho’s contract with the University of Utah allows Idaho students to pay in-state tuition, and Idaho taxpayers pick up the difference.

“We are committed to that relationship, and we are committed to those eight spots,” said Chris Nelson, a University of Utah Health Sciences spokesman. “As we look at where we would cut students, we wouldn’t cut those eight spots.”

Under the worst-case scenario, Nelson said the program could lose 20 seats. He stressed nothing is definite, and it’s still early in the process. He said at least 75 of the medical school’s 102 seats must always be reserved for Utah students.

The University of Utah has already been asked to absorb a 4 percent budget cut and is bracing for additional cuts of between 7 and 14 percent that would take effect July 1, 2009.

“What’s so frustrating is in the past, we were even talking about expanding the medical school until the economy hit a slump,” Nelson said.

ISU spokesman Graham Garner acknowledged that ISU continues to enjoy a strong relationship with the University of Utah. But even if ISU’s eight seats are safe, Garner believes ISU should take home a message from the current situation.

“The simple fact that the possibility is raised in public, that tells us that people have to consider those kinds of things in lean times,” Garner said. “We have good relationships and we want to maintain those, but ultimately, those institutions are sovereign. They have to do things that are best for their taxpayers. We need to take responsibility for our future, and a grow-your-own program is taking more responsibility.

“There are benefits for us to be able to determine the number of seats we should have.”

The situation at the University of Utah is no cause for alarm to the Idaho State Board of Education.

“I probably wouldn’t read that much into it at this point. I think we’ve been a good customer to the University of Utah and to the University of Washington both,” said board spokesman Mark Browning. “There are cuts going on in every agency across state government. There are services that are impacted and taxpayers are impacted across the board that nobody is happy about.”

Sen. Bob Geddes, president pro tem of the Senate and a Soda Springs Republican, agrees the seats are probably safe. But he foresees an increase in tuition due to Utah’s funding situation, and he argues Idaho isn’t generating nearly enough doctors to cover the state’s workload under the current system.

“If you look at the current medical professionals that are practicing in our state, they’re getting a little older. Within the next 10 to 12 years, a significant number of those will be retiring or at least retirement age,” Geddes said. “

Geddes served as co-chairman of Idaho’s Legislative Interim Committee on Medical Education, which recommended that Idaho create more in-state residencies to improve retention of physicians. He does see some significance in the University of Utah funding situation in that it highlights the limitations on Idaho’s ability to produce enough doctors to meet demand.

“I agree with President Vailas that in order for us to attract more medical professionals who are willing to practice in Idaho, we have to do something different than what we’ve done in the past,” Geddes said.