



Guest column: Grow our economy with education

Posted: April 6, 2017 12:30 a.m.



By Stephanie Cook

An eastern Idaho community college would allow workforce training to be customized to fit local needs, writes Stephanie Cook.

Before I ever stepped foot in a college classroom, I was married and had a baby. Money and time were in short supply. The local community college was affordable, offered a flexible schedule that allowed me to be with my young family and installed in me the confidence I could make it at the university level.

Students in eastern Idaho should have that same opportunity. The young mother with limited funds and big responsibilities at home. The recent high school graduate unsure of which academic path to travel or in need of college preparatory courses. The lapsed student looking to get back in following an extended absence.

A community college in Idaho Falls – serving all of eastern Idaho – would fill so many gaps. For some, as was the case with me, the community college experience leads to a four-year degree. Others, however, would pursue a two-year diploma, license or certification. In Idaho, that's often all it takes to land a good-paying job with health insurance and retirement benefits.

My employer, for example, hired roughly 1,000 people in the last two years. Many did not have four-year degrees. They perform a variety of tasks that enable Idaho National Laboratory's researchers and engineers to fulfill our expanding national security and clean energy missions.

By next year, it's predicted that 61 percent of jobs in Idaho will require a technical certificate or advanced degree. Only one-third of our citizens will be qualified to fill them.

In four years, the Idaho Department of Labor anticipates a "workforce gap" of 91,400. Not even a quarter of our young people have college degrees, well below the national average.

Idaho industries are working hard to draw a straighter line between education and employment. We do that by emphasizing STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education in our public schools, working directly with our colleges and universities and encouraging partnerships between academia, industry and policymakers at all levels of government.

At an eastern Idaho community college, workforce training could be customized to fit local needs. Area businesses would help shape curriculum. This would benefit employers and, in an era of rising tuition and massive student loan debt, is an example of the kind of efficient and targeted higher education we should strive to achieve.

The good news is we don't need to start from scratch, or give up what we already have at Eastern Idaho Technical College.

Expanding opportunities to thousands of students throughout the region would require no large-scale construction. The EITC campus can comfortably serve four times as many students as it currently does.

A long accreditation process could be avoided. And the Legislature and Gov. Otter, understanding the successes of community colleges in the Treasure Valley, Panhandle and Magic Valley, set aside \$5 million in seed money for an eastern Idaho community college.

As someone who attended a community college, I'm grateful every single day for that experience and opportunity.

It's time to put families and students first, lower barriers to the cost of higher education and grow our economy with a talented workforce ready to launch careers in eastern Idaho. It's time for EITC to become a full-fledged community college.

I hope you can join me in supporting this movement and vote "Yes" on May 16.

Stephanie Cook lives and works in Idaho Falls.