



# College Competition

Schools have discovered Boise's metropolitan market

By Larry Burke

In the competitive world of higher education, metropolitan universities have at their doorsteps what other schools want — a convenient supply of students, a portfolio of supportive businesses and a potential political base.

Those attributes, however, don't go unnoticed by competitors eager to tap into the cornucopia of riches resident in a metropolitan area.

And so it is with Boise State University.

While Boise State is the only university in the city, it faces competition from schools in all corners of the country who come to the university's backyard to recruit students, raise funds and offer programs.

Boise's white-collar population and good school system have made the city a main stop on the recruiting trail for many colleges.

More than 130 schools from Vermont to Alaska flock to Boise each October for the National College Fair. Last year 8,000 local students attend the event, which is one of only 16 in the country sponsored by the National Association for Collegiate Admission Counseling.

"Any admissions director — especially those in Idaho — is going to look at the state's population center. All of them want to stake a claim in the Boise market," says Mark Wheeler, dean of enrollment services.

He adds that even small private colleges have discovered the Boise market. "The secret is out that Boise has done well economically and grown in population. Colleges know families in Boise have money to invest in their childrens' education. And many of

our competitors come bearing scholarship gifts to gain a foothold in the market," Wheeler says.

Wheeler says Boise State counters the competition by a simple message to local students. "We know our niche as a metropolitan university. We are in the heart of one of the most vibrant U.S. cities. Our message is, "This is the place to be — why leave it?"

If universities can't get the students to come to them, they will bring their programs here.

Five out-of-state schools are registered with the State Board of Education to offer academic programs in the Treasure Valley that compete with those Boise State offers.

Each of them is tailored to serve a segment of the regional market: Lesley College from Cambridge, Mass., offers two master's programs in education; George Fox from Newberg, Ore., offers bachelor's and master's programs in organizational leadership; Emporia State from Kansas offers a master's of library science; the University of Oklahoma offers a master's in public administration at the Mountain Home Air Force Base; and the University of Phoenix is laying the groundwork to offer a mix of 12 online undergraduate and graduate programs.

George Fox, the only school that maintains a Boise office, has offered business leadership degrees to a niche market of students who have at least two years of college but haven't completed a degree.

Stan Frame, who until recently served as director of the Boise program, says George Fox first became interested in the Boise market after looking at the 1990 Census figures, which indicated there

were 70,000 people in the Treasure Valley who had completed two to three years of college work.

"We have met our expectations for the last five years and expect that to continue," says Frame of the program that graduates approximately 80 students per year and has just added a master's degree in organizational leadership.

In applied technology, the ITT Technical Institute is a long-time competitor for career training programs. The Boise institute, one of 70 operated by the company based in Indianapolis, Ind., offers courses in computers, electronics and business technology.

The state's other universities — Idaho State and the University of Idaho — have also taken steps to tap into the Treasure Valley market.

A long-standing State Board of Education policy divides Idaho into three service regions, each served by a university. That policy prevents one university from offering duplicate programs in the home university's region. But schools can offer programs that the home university doesn't offer.

Thus, Idaho State and the U of I provide a mix of professional programs that range from graduate nursing to a doctorate in school administration.

"We look at Boise through two different lenses," says U of I marketing director Bob Hieronymus.

"One, we obviously have a large number of students from Idaho's largest city coming to Moscow for the residential campus experience we offer. We also serve the place-bound student in Boise looking to further a career through an advanced degree."

The U of I recently announced plans to build Idaho Place, a complex of buildings on Broadway that will bring all of the school's Boise programs together in one place.

"Our programs now are tucked away in a corner. The Idaho Place will provide greater visibility," says Hieronymus. "Our efforts are largely directed at graduate level programs. We are approaching these as partnerships in terms of what we offer."

Competition, says Boise State President Charles Ruch, is now a way of life for a university that at one time had the Boise market all to itself.

"We can no longer approach our activities as if we are the only provider. Our strategy of a distributed campus with a priority on student access and increasing involvement of the community through partnerships should continue to serve us well," Ruch said in a recent speech to faculty.

"If I, as a student, can receive desired courses from a local institution that is high quality, student-oriented and community sensitive, why would I go to one of our competitors who have neither the resources nor the priority to serve me?"

"In my view, if we continue our tradition of quality service and scholarship, we will do well in any marketplace," Ruch says. □

## BOISE STATE'S CAPITAL GAINS

By Larry Burke

Boise State's campus is less than a mile from the state Capitol. Some would call that a convenient walk. Others might say it's just the right distance for a protest march.

Does that proximity to state lawmakers and other government offices make the university a valuable asset or a vulnerable target?

The answer: a lot of the first, a little of the second. Metropolitan universities in state capitals can leverage their location by forging close ties with government agencies, which in turn yield a wealth of internships, consulting contracts and networking opportunities. Proximity opens an array of opportunities for universities to provide valuable services, from conducting public policy research to providing training and certification programs.

On the other hand, with the Statehouse only a mile away and the glare of the media omnipresent, universities in a capital city can be under the high-powered lens of critical examination, especially when a controversial speaker is on campus or students stage a demonstration.

For Boise State's political science internship coordinator, the proximity means frequent requests for students to serve as researchers and interns in the Legislature and other branches of government. "I can't tell you the number of midnight calls I get asking for help," says Patricia Fredericksen, who placed 20 students in Statehouse offices this semester.

"We have a phenomenal relationship with the Legislature. Legislators keep coming back because they know we provide competent students. That's a subtle relationship, but in the long run it is very powerful for the university," she says.

Boise State students take advantage of the location by lobbying for various causes. In 1990, for example, Boise State students, led by then-student body president Eric Love, were instrumental in securing passage of the legislation authorizing a Human Rights Day state holiday.

Boise State also provides an array of training and research services through the Center for Public Policy and Administration, the Environmental Finance Center, the Local Government Training Institute and a number of academic departments. All of those programs create goodwill and build valuable personal contacts for the university, says Jim Weatherby, chair of Boise State's public policy and administration department.

The capital city location also defines a marketing niche that no other university in the state enjoys. To live and learn in a capital city, the place where all the state's political attention is focused, appeals to students and parents shopping for a school. As President Charles Ruch puts it, "We are the university where you can experience politics rather than just study politics."

But location in a capital city can have another effect. And this one you won't find in any university marketing materials.

With familiarity can come contention. The university's diverse student population holds a variety of views that are expressed in a variety of ways. Sometimes those views are shouted from the Capitol steps.

Explains Weatherby: "Some opinions aren't always going to sit well with legislators and the general public. That hurts us from time to time."

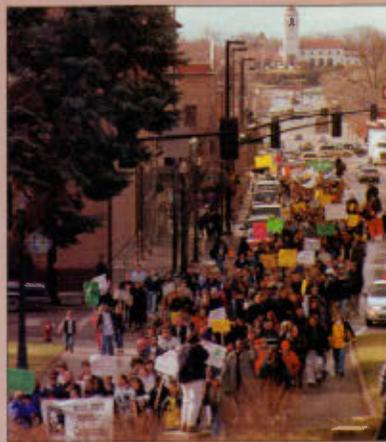
A case in point: In mid-February Boise State students were among those arrested for disrupting the state Senate. Their protest on behalf of minimum wage legislation for Idaho's migrant farmworkers drew the ire of legislators who accused the university and some faculty of enabling, if not aiding, the students' actions. In a letter to legislators, Ruch wrote: "It is stating the obvious to say the breach of legislative decorum and the subsequent arrests are not activities we endorse. To the contrary, we value the legislative process ..."

While the demonstration was unprecedented in the state's history, Ruch says it was an unfortunate example of how proximity to the Statehouse can put Boise State in the spotlight, whether it wants to be or not.

"As long as there is legislation that people pursue with passion, our students and faculty are likely to weigh in with their opinions. We ask that they do so in a lawful and reasoned way, and that they be held personally accountable for their opinions and actions," he says.

Ruch says that despite the scrutiny and an occasional lecture on the floor of the Legislature, the benefits of Boise State's location in the capital city far outweigh the liabilities.

"We are a large organization that is different than most. We become an easy target. But in this city we are surrounded by a wealth of resources that aren't found in many universities," he says. "Our location in a state capital is an asset that we value very highly, despite the occasional need to explain ourselves." □



CHUCK SCHERER PHOTO