

Momentum Builds for Idaho Falls Community College

Panel to look at bringing a community college to I.F.

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CSI Idaho Falls student Tiffany Hansen, 35, discusses the need for a community college in Idaho Falls on a recent Friday in an auditorium at Eastern Idaho Technical College. Hansen believes that by providing cheaper tuition, a community college would be beneficial for students trying to transition four-year universities. Pat Sutphin / psutphin@postregister.com



CSI Idaho Falls student Sally Young, 19, will earn her sociology associate degree in June. Afterward, Young plans to transfer to Idaho State University to pursue a career in criminology. CSI Idaho Falls allows Young, a 2014 Bonneville High School graduate, to save money by staying home. Kevin Trevellyan / ktrevellyan@postregister.com



CSI Idaho Falls student Tiffany Hansen, 35, discusses the need for a community college in Idaho Falls on a recent Friday in an auditorium at Eastern Idaho Technical College. If EITC was converted into a community college, it would offer a wider course selection to students, especially for general education classes. Pat Sutphin /psutphin@postregister.com

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With four classroom and 16 instructors, a College of Southern Idaho satellite campus is the only place to take a community college course in person in eastern Idaho.

Roughly 200 students attend the CSI Idaho Falls campus, which opened in 2014. At capacity, it could serve about 600.

Eastern Idaho Technical College, if converted into a community college, could serve at least 3,000 students without needing another building on campus. A city-appointed citizen panel is analyzing the viability of converting EITC into a community college. The proposal could face voters as early as next year.

“EITC would make a perfect fourth Idaho community college,” said Rick Aman, EITC interim president. “It could easily be supported by eastern Idaho, so the demographics are good. The campus is good. All of this stuff is in place, and the demand is huge compared to what (EITC) can offer.”

A community college, if approved, would increase local property taxes for those living within a yet-to-be proposed taxing district. It also would allow eastern Idahoans the opportunity to pursue a college education at one-third of the cost of a four-year university without having to move.

“I went to a university my freshman year, and I didn’t do as well as I could have had I gone somewhere where it wasn’t such a drastic change. A lot of the schools around here are little — Firth, Shelley, West Jefferson,” said Tiffany Hansen, a student at the CSI Idaho Falls campus. “With a community college you have that smaller classroom, so you don’t get the shock of going straight into a university, and it’s cheaper. If I had to do it all over again, that’s what I’d do.”

Hansen, 35, attended the University of Idaho for a year after graduating from Firth High School in 1999. The next year she transferred to CSI in Twin Falls, where she earned a degree in welding. Since moving to Idaho Falls, she's enrolled at CSI Idaho Falls to pursue a degree in childhood development.

Still, for all that the satellite campus offers, many are forced to rely on online classes to fill out their associate degrees.

"Some classes like math and English, those can be ridiculously hard online. So for some students, it's better to take those in person," said Josh Sakelaris, director of CSI's Idaho Falls campus.

Some of the college's courses are also only available at the CSI Twin Falls campus.

"I absolutely love the campus here, but I really wish that there were more programs," Hansen said. "I have four friends that are driving to Twin Falls twice a week because they're getting agriculture business degrees and those classes aren't offered online, but their jobs are here in Idaho Falls."

A full-fledged community college would offer a wider course catalogue to a larger population of students.

EITC, if converted, would retain its technical courses, and provide more general education classes and transferable degrees and credits. As is, the school offers primarily terminal degrees, which typically can't be extended at a four-year college.

Because EITC already has technical accreditation from the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, only a change in paperwork and new faculty hires would be needed to convert the school. CSI's Idaho Falls faculty would likely be absorbed, and EITC could become a community college in about a year if the proposal passed ballot today.

Sally Young, 19, is set to earn her associate degree in sociology from the CSI Idaho Falls campus in June. She moved to Twin Falls for her first semester at CSI, but found it was too expensive.

"I was paying rent, about \$350 per month, plus food, and I was trying to work, but with my school load it was very difficult," Young said.

After her first term, she decided to move back home to Idaho Falls. If there was a community college open when Young graduated from Bonneville High School in 2014, she would have attended it.

"I was pretty interested in EITC, but it didn't have my program. And I looked into Idaho State University, but each credit was over \$300, and I definitely didn't have the money to afford that." Young said.

Typically, about 5 percent of a region takes advantage of a community college, Aman said. The region's current enrollment, approximately 200 students at CSI Idaho Falls and 700 at EITC, is well below that.

"I think there is a demand for a community college. Over the last year, the Idaho Falls area has led the country in job growth," said Christopher St Jeor, regional economist for the Idaho Department of

Labor. “It’s a very tight labor market, so the better trained you are, the more you’re going to be worth.

“I think it would add some really positive value to the surrounding communities, and not just in Idaho Falls. It’s a good time to start increasing your skill sets.”

A community college would churn out better educated workers, bolstering the workforce, and in turn the economy.

“Businesses (with) high-paying jobs are the types of businesses that we want to attract here. That depends on a skilled workforce, and having a community college really helps drive that,” St Jeor said. “It’s really going to make Idaho Falls a more attractive place to bring a business, or expand a current business.”

In January, Gov. C.L. “Butch” Otter pledged \$5 million of state money toward converting EITC into a community college. On Tuesday, a bill to create an account to hold the funding passed in the House by a wide margin, and now goes to the Senate. A bill to approve the \$5 million in funding hasn’t been printed yet.

Officials at Idaho National Laboratory have thrown their support behind the measure.

“Eastern Idaho will greatly benefit from more training and technology education to support our growing need in skilled labor and certified talent,” said Stephanie Cook, INL’s Economic and Workforce Development program manager, in a January news release. “The governor’s support and willingness to invest \$5 million into an eastern Idaho community college connects the needs of industry to education to develop more talent — from welders to radiological technicians and lab technicians.”

Idaho Falls Mayor Rebecca Casper doesn’t expect the community college proposal to make it on the ballot before next fall, sometime after a research report is released by the city’s citizen study panel.

If the conversion does make ballot, it’ll need to be approved by a supermajority vote of two-thirds of voters within the taxing district created for the college. A similar proposal didn’t pass ballot last time it was voted on in 1991.

“To actually start up a community college would be easy. The difficult path is to convince voters that it makes sense to increase property taxes,” Aman said. “But community colleges serve a real important purpose. They’re very economical for a lot of people, and they feed nicely into the university system. There’s a lot of good reasons to do it.”