

## **GOVERNOR SEEKS 6.9% BOOST FOR HIGHER ED**

Brooke Adams

*The Salt Lake Tribune. Salt Lake City, Utah: Dec 11, 1999. pg. D.1*

*Copyright The Salt Lake Tribune Dec. 11, 1999*

Gov. Mike Leavitt proposed the largest-ever increase in higher education funding Friday, calling Utah's colleges and universities the "leavening" that will help the state's economy survive a post-Olympic bust.

Leavitt wants a \$43.6 million hike for higher education next year, a 6.9 percent increase over this year's \$680 million budget. Last year, he sought \$23.5 million, a 3.4 percent increase, and the Legislature ultimately gave a \$25.6 million boost to higher education.

Money in Leavitt's proposal comes from lengthening the payback time on highway construction debt, the same source he plans to use to fund an increase in public education funding.

The proposal is drawing raised eyebrows from some legislators.

Said Sen. Howard Stephenson, R-Draper: "Most legislators are wondering where he is getting the money. I haven't been able to fully understand where the money is going to come from."

Stephenson, who sits on the Senate's education standing committee, also said it is unlikely the Legislature would be willing to fund record increases in public and higher education in the same year.

"It is important to note that Utah already spends more tax dollars per thousand dollars of personal income on higher education than any state in the nation," Stephenson said. "I don't know how much sympathy there will be for that size of increase."

But Leavitt maintains more funding is critical to keeping Utah's economy robust, and proposed three measures that higher education could implement as "big gears" to keep things rolling.

Leavitt challenged the regents to teach more students faster, reducing by 10 percent by 2004 the average time it takes a student to graduate.

Right now the average student takes 5.6 years to obtain a four-year degree. "Let's provide more people with more education faster," he said.

Second, he asked regents to increase by 10 percent in the next four years participation of counties now least-represented in higher education enrollments. Those counties include: Grand, Tooele, Beaver, Summit, Uintah, Daggett, Kane and Morgan.

Lastly, he asked them to increase by 50 percent over the next decade the number of engineering and computer science degrees awarded by Utah colleges.

Leavitt said a solid supply of engineering and computer science graduates from Utah schools will generate economic development as they fill jobs in the community and start businesses of their own, particularly in high-technology fields.

"I think it is the fuel of the next decade," he said.

Leavitt announced his budget during a Board of Regents' meeting Friday at the University of Utah. His proposal drew warm applause from the regents, even though it falls short of the \$71.5 million budget increase proposal they plan to present to the Legislature.

"I've been asking for years when will there be a higher education year for funding," said Cecelia Foxley, commissioner for higher education. "I'm very pleased to see this will be a higher education year."

Rep. Ralph Becker, D-Salt Lake and House minority whip, said the proposal was a "welcome change. We have recognized for a long time that higher education has been getting the squeeze."

Leavitt's budget leaves it up to the regents to decide how to divvy the \$43.1 million in new money among such needs as enrollment growth, employee compensation, improving salaries and rewarding performance of individual schools.

He has designated \$300,000 for health education centers, \$200,000 in one-time funds to buy equipment at applied technology centers, and \$40,000 for the state's New Century Scholarship program.

Leavitt emphasized the importance of higher education in today's information-based economy, saying the link between advanced education and personal earning power "has never been this clear."

"Higher education will have to produce more people having more education, and it will have to be done faster," he said.

But Stephenson had a different view of what is going to be needed in the future.

He said 80 percent of the jobs available today don't require a four-year degree, yet that is where the bulk of Utah's education money goes.

"We're putting the funding toward four-year degrees when the job market requires technical training without a four-year degree. Vocational training in Utah has been the stepchild of both higher and public education," he said.

In other action at the regents meeting, the board approved master's of business administration programs at Weber State and Southern Utah universities. They plan to ask the Legislature for money to establish a fund that can be used to compensate other colleges that are negatively impacted by such new programs.

Also, the regents approved an increase in tuition for the law and business graduate programs at the University of Utah, and a decrease in tuition for graduate-level courses in education.