Opinion

A Kansas Viewpoint

Regents should not be fooled

From Lawrence Journal-World

It seems that Kansas University isn't the only state university trying to put a positive spin on rising tuition rates.

Officials at Kansas State University issued a press release this week indicating that the school was proposing a "lower tuition increase." The move, it said, was "to respond to difficult economic conditions and concerns from students and their parents."

The only problem is that the new tuition proposal actually will result in many students paying more than they would have under an earlier proposal taken to the Kansas Board of Regents.

K-State initially proposed to raise tuition by 4.5 percent for resident freshmen and sophomores and 7.3 percent for resident juniors and seniors. ...

The plan announced this week is to raise tuition by 5.85 percent across the board. ...

Although it seems disingenuous to portray this as a "lower tuition increase," K-State, like KU, offers various justifications for its action. The Kansas Legislature gets significant blame for not providing better higher education funding.

Officials also point out that "tuition increases are offset by additional financial aid and more scholarships."

This Robin Hood approach of taking tuition money from some students and sharing it with students who supposedly are more worthy or in greater need gets surprisingly little attention from higher education officials in spite of the fact that it displays a basic lack of fairness, especially to the students and their families who are scraping together loans and savings to pay full tuition. ...

When the regents consider those rates, they should keep their focus on the effect rising tuition is having on the availability of higher education to Kansas students and the cost of this education for families and students who already are facing severe fiscal challenges. Regents should not be fooled by the tuition spin being served up by university officials.

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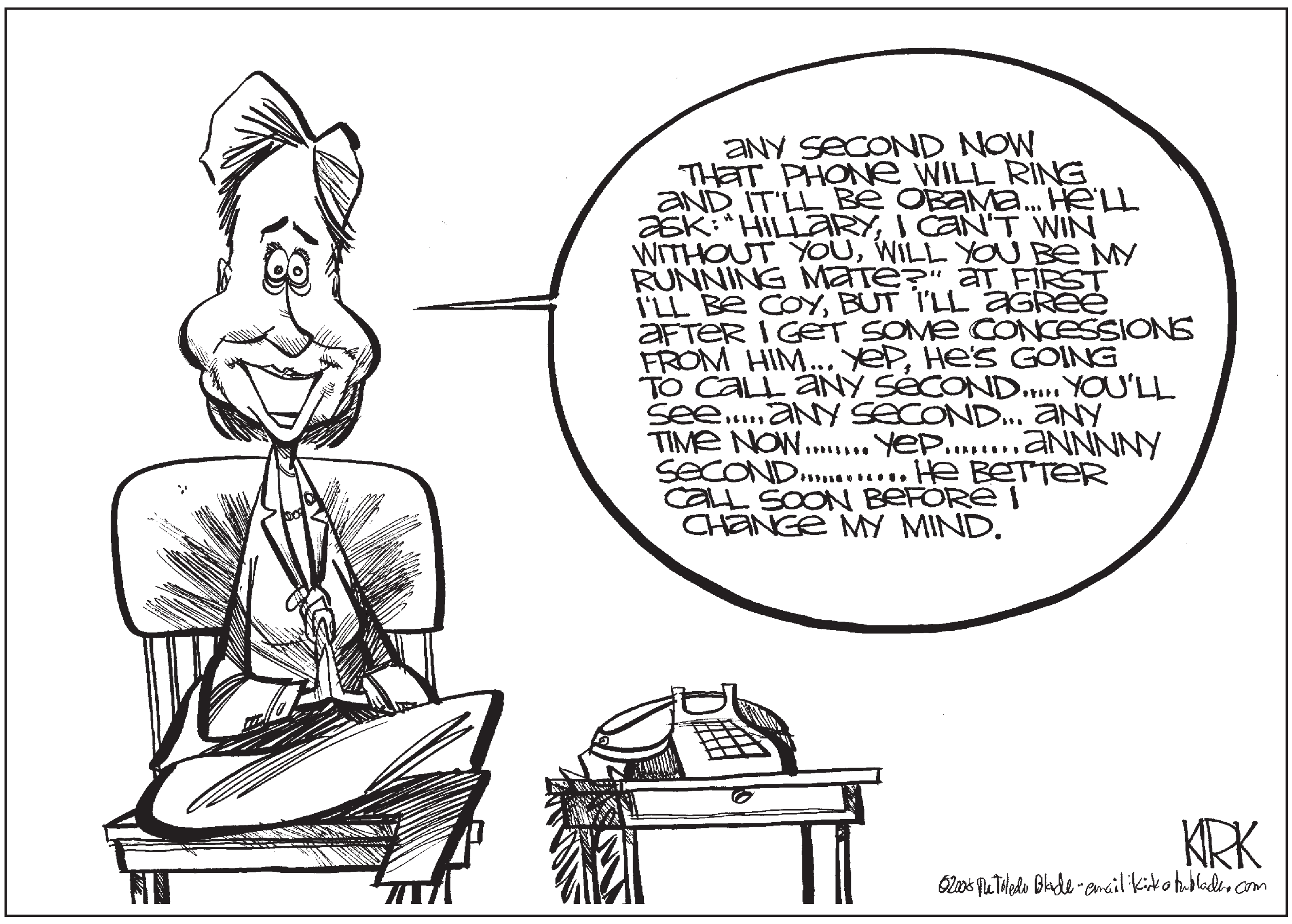

How good is your job?

Patty Decker

• Deep Thoughts

Whenever I think about the worst jobs I ever had, my mind always goes back to a short-lived career in corn detasseling or as a potato inspector for the federal government in Idaho one summer.

The money was good, but the problem for me was working outside in the hot weather. I am not fond of extreme heat.

What got me to reminiscing about my work history in those younger years, was something I read on America's 10 worst jobs. Looking back, I guess my jobs weren't all that bad.

For example, poultry processor was in the top 10.

According to the information I found, workers in a this job quit five times as often as in any other job.

One of the biggest reasons for the high turnover was because of smell, low pay and dangers associated with the work.

A couple of others mentioned included a sewing machine operator and farm laborer.

The problem with a sewing machine operator, according to this particular report, was due to low wages and continual threat of unemployment due to unregulated overseas competition.

The average wage was $7.70 an hour with less than 10 percent of people covered by a union contract.

Farm laborer jobs were tough because of the hours and seasonal work. Another factor in why a farm laborer isn't a great job is because in many parts of the United States, employers don't have to pay overtime and are exempt from many of the occupational health and safety laws.

Something I hadn't thought about in a farm laborer's job was also the dangers associated with using pesticides and long-term effects on health.

In a CNN report, some of the worst jobs cited involved industrial laundry and dry cleaning work.

The report specifically stated bio-hazardous materials in hospitals and when these items aren't disposed of properly can be a danger to workers doing the laundry. Another job was supermarket staff.

In the same report, it said baggers have the worst of it. The reason is because they stand on their feet all day, repeatedly lifting loads, sometimes as heavy as 80 pounds which can put people at risk for muscular disorders.

Years ago, when my first husband was in the military, we tipped the baggers carrying our groceries to the car. If memory serves, I don't believe the baggers were paid a salary, so the tips were all they made.

Although it wasn't mandatory, most of us tipped about a dollar a bag and I think those doing the job were making fairly good money. Hard work, though.

Nail salon workers were also in the worst job category, according to the CNN report. A lot of the larger cities hire Asian immigrant women and industry estimates noted they have little recourse when exposed to dangerous health conditions associated with cosmetic ingredients.

What surprised me was that in a report of the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum, 89 percent of the 10,000 chemicals used in nail-care products have not been safety tested by an independent agency.

In the last seven years, this has been changing, but still, it's disturbing to know so many people are being exposed to potentially life-threatening conditions.

Even though some jobs may not be glamorous and some downright dangerous, I think it's important for the government, employers and others to make workers as safe as possible and give people a fair wage.

Somebody needs to do these jobs and I am grateful for those who are willing do them.

* * *

Decker is editor of the Free Press. Her column appears on Mondays.

Feast or famine

By John Schlageck
Kansas Farm Bureau

While it's true 2007 was a good year for Kansas agriculture, few farmers are flush with cash. Here on the great High Plains bumper crops with bin-busting harvests aren't generally a yearly occurrence. In fact, in some areas of western Kansas this year is shaping up like so many before – little or no moisture for this year's wheat crop.

Kansas farmers aren't blessed like their corn belt neighbors in Iowa and Illinois where they merely plant the seed in deep, dark soil and wait for the rain to come and bless them with all they need.

Just the opposite is true in Kansas where our farmers are often referred to as "tweeners." We're always between feast and famine and Mr. Famine shows up at the farm gate a whole lot more often than Mr. Feast.

Until last year, much of western and central Kansas had been in the throes of drought for three to seven years depending on where you farmed.

Sure there were some stories where a few farmers received isolated, timely rains and harvested high-yielding crops. This was the exception.

Farmers, as a lot, are a conservative, pencil-wielding bunch. Most find it difficult to part with their hard-earned cash, even during those occasional dream harvests like 2007.

While many wouldn't mind having new tractors, combines and machinery every few years, not many are prone to wear out new paint. They're often caught in the clutches of catching up from those years of crop failure due to drought.

Hamilton County farmer Steve Hines farms with his two brothers and nephew near the Colorado border. Last year he raised his best wheat crop ever – 57 bushels per acre.

"That was the good, the bad and the ugly," Hines says in his slow, easy western-Kansas drawl. "We mainly used our extra money to catch up from when we fell behind during the previous five years."

Hines and his brothers did purchase some newer equipment including a later model combine and a new grain trailer.

Prices for crops were good last year. The Hamilton County farmer says some of the 2007 wheat was sold for $7 a bushel. The majority of the crop was probably sold for $5.25 a bushel or less.

"We didn't cash in like so many U.S. consumers hear about," Hines says. "Many of us forward contracted our wheat earlier in the year and we were tickled to death to receive $5 wheat. I never thought I'd see that in my life time."

Another reason Hines and many of his fellow Kansas farmers aren't flush with cash after 2007 was because input costs skyrocketed along with the increasing price of their commodities. Fuel, fertilizer, seed and other inputs doubled and in some cases tripled.

Still, with the good crop year in '07 and the help of irrigation, some farmers are buying new equipment. The demand for farm machinery is up. Some producers have to wait for their purchases.

The main reason some implement dealers don't have the inventory on their lots is due to a downsizing in the industry during the lean years when farmers didn't produce crops because of drought, wind, hail and other natural disasters, according to Gerry Heim, Hoxie Implement. Heim's been in the implement business since 1962 and his primary trade territory is a dozen or more counties in northwestern Kansas.

Heim says there's some money for Mr. Farmer today with good times in agriculture. His business is brisk. The longtime machinery dealer saw what was happening last fall and placed "relatively heavy orders" for tractors, combines and short-line equipment.

Ordering ahead has risks too. Today's manufacturing companies want cash upon delivery when they drop a tractor or combine on a dealer's lot. But after more than 45 years in the business, Heim's dealership is poised to provide for his customer base.

"We've got people running tractors they bought back in the '70s," Heim says. "A lot of our guys are still running a lot of old iron and they really want to update. They can't buy new but they can buy better used stuff and the bigger irrigation guys can buy new."

The northwestern Kansas dealer believes with the pent-up demand, he could probably sell much more equipment if he had it on his lot.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley