

Other Viewpoints

Both hope, worry follow higher ed

State lawmakers had ample opportunity to get answers about higher education before and during a six-day tour of Kansas Board of Regents campuses last month.

Whether seeing is now believing we won't know until the 2014 Legislature reconsiders the 2013 session's counterproductive and disproportionate two-year cuts to state universities, but there is as much reason to hope as to worry.

Gov. Sam Brownback can be expected to be in universities' corner, having argued unsuccessfully for flat funding last spring.

About 76 percent of the lawmakers have at least a bachelor's degree (up from 68 percent in 2011), which should give them a firsthand understanding of what a higher education means. Twenty years after graduation, for example, those with at least a four-year degree each earn \$25,000 more a year than those without, according to Business Insider. That's real money in the Kansas economy as well as Kansans' pockets.

The Regents' goals line up nicely with those of the governor and Legislature, especially those about supporting the economy with university research, reducing workforce shortages in high-demand fields, and meeting "industry expectations for core workplace skills" such as math, analytical reasoning and communication.

And it's impressive that as the state and nation have tried to pull themselves out the Great Recession, Kansas universities have helped launch 37 startup companies and 20 businesses have moved to Kansas to partner with a university.

Kansas can use more of that. So the Legislature ought to be excited about big ideas, such as Wichita State University President John Bardo's plans for a new engineering building, with room for business research, and for a multi-building tech park on campus.

Such bold thinking is going on across the system, which is why Kansas should join the post-recession trend of states reinvesting in higher education. As it is, Kansas' system is operating on \$77 million less in state money than it got in 2008, and the 2015 budget includes another \$32.8 million reduction.

Regents Chairman Fred Logan says the board's top priority for the session starting in January will be restoring the money that was cut for this year and next. Bardo expressed the more modest hope that legislators would "not do any further cuts."

Logan said the legislative tour was not adversarial, and he is optimistic that the relationship will continue to be positive and productive.

University leaders and regents will need to assure lawmakers they are doing everything possible to limit tuition and fee hikes, and take seriously concerns about ever-increasing student debt.

In turn, lawmakers should not try to pit colleges against public schools or other state services.

Speaking about the tour, Senate Ways and Means Committee Chairman Ty Masterson, R-Andover, told the Associated Press: "The real impact is the realization that we are closer together than we think we are."

That's a welcome change. State lawmakers would do well to treat our universities as the economic movers and shakers that they are, not the first place to look for budget cuts.

- The Wichita Eagle, via the Associated Press

COLBY FREE PRESS

155 W. Fifth St. (USPS 120-920) (785) 462-3963 Colby, Kan. 67701 fax (785) 462-7749

Send news to: colby.editor@nwkansas.com

State award-winning newspaper, General Excellence, Design & Layout, Columns, Editorial Writing, Sports Columns, News, Photography. Official newspaper of Thomas County, Colby, Brewster and Rexford.

Sharon Friedlander - Publisher sfriedlander@nwkansas.com

NEWS

R.B. Headley - Sports Editor colby.sports@nwkansas.com

Marian Ballard - Copy Editor mballard@nwkansas.com

Sam Dieter - News Reporter colby.editor@nwkansas.com

Heather Alwin - Society Editor colby.society@nwkansas.com

ADVERTISING

Kathryn Ballard - Advertising Representative kb Ballard@nwkansas.com

Sharon Funk - Advertising Representative sfunk@nwkansas.com

Kylee Hunter - Graphic Design khunter@nwkansas.com

BUSINESS OFFICE

Office Manager

Melissa Edmondson - Office Manager medmondson@nwkansas.com

Evan Barnum - Systems Administrator support@nwkansas.com

NOR'WEST PRESS

Richard Westfahl - General Manager Gary Stewart, Foreman

Jim Jackson, Jim Bowker, Pressmen

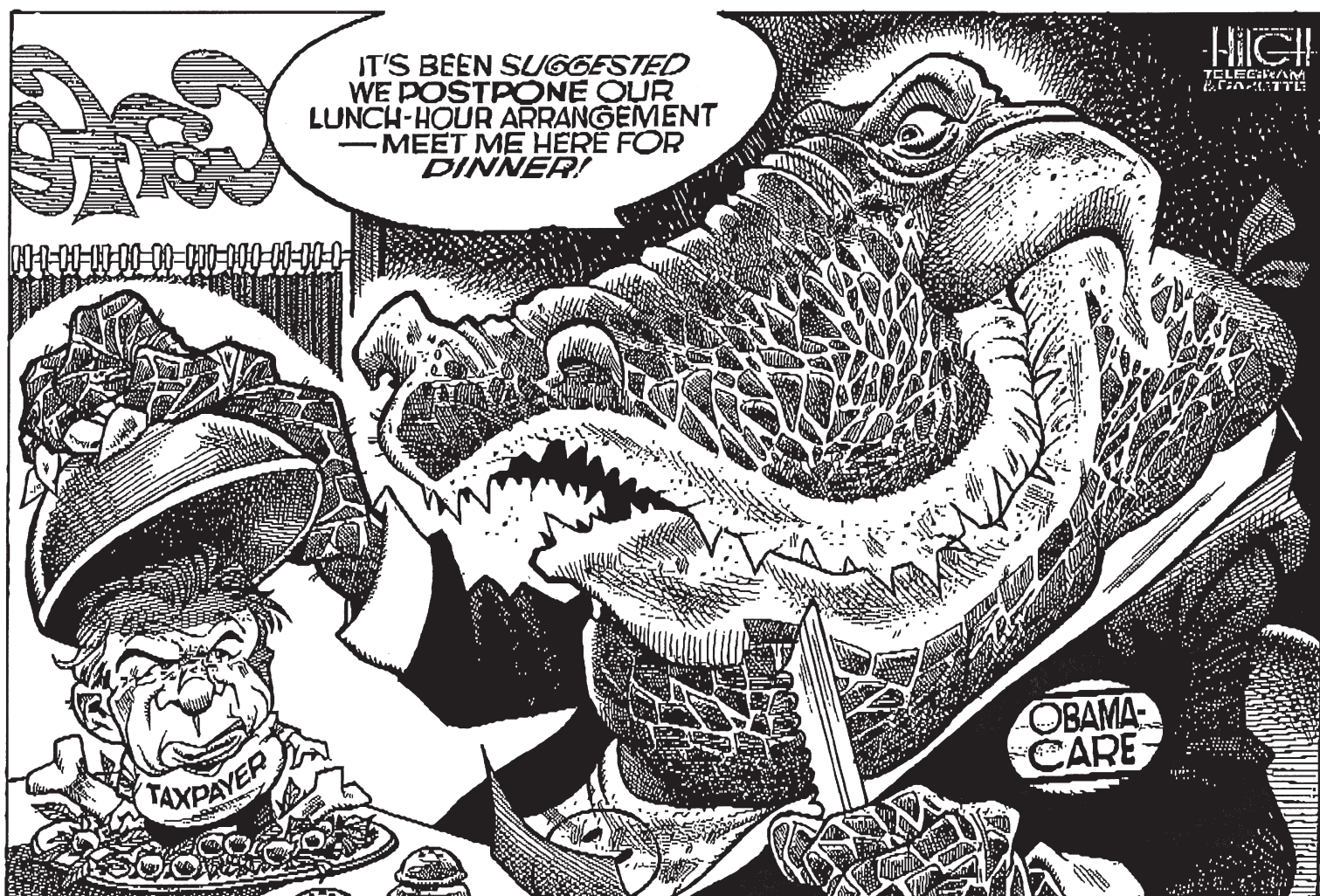
Kris McCool, Judy McKnight, Tracy Traxel, Sheri Arroyo, Mailing

THE COLBY FREE PRESS (USPS 120-920) is published every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, except the days observed for Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year's Day, by Nor'West Newspaper, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

PERIODICALS POSTAGE paid at Colby, Kan., 67701, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Colby Free Press, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

THE BUSINESS OFFICE at 155 W. Fifth is open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Friday, closed Saturday and Sunday. MEMBER OF THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, which is exclusively entitled to the use for publication of all news herein. Member Kansas Press Association and National Newspaper Association.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: In Colby, Thomas County and Oakley: three months \$35, one year \$85. By mail to ZIP Codes beginning with 676 and 677: three months \$39, one year \$95. Elsewhere in the U.S., mailed once per week: three months \$39, one year \$95. Student rate, nine months, in Colby, Thomas County and Oakley, \$64; mailed once per week elsewhere in the U.S. \$72.



Flawed start points to better health care

Much of the criticism aimed at President Barack Obama's administration for its glitch-filled launch of healthcare.gov has merit.

Conservatives are right to accuse the president of lying when he told Americans the Affordable Care Act wouldn't force people to leave their current health-care plan if they didn't want to.

"No matter how we reform health care, we will keep this promise to the American people," Obama told the American Medical Association in 2009. "If you like your doctor, you will be able to keep your doctor, period. If you like your health-care plan, you'll be able to keep your health-care plan, period. No one will take that away, no matter what."

This was a lie, pure and simple. We now know that some of the small percentage of Americans - about 5 percent - who buy their own insurance instead of obtaining it via an employer or a government program now face higher premium prices or are being told their policies will be canceled because these plans don't meet the requirements of the Affordable Care Act. The anger and disillusionment these people feel is understandable, and justified.

Even though this group only represents a small slice of the American electorate, they still number in the millions. According to Marilyn Tavener, administrator for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, which oversees the healthcare.gov website,



Andy Heintz

- Wildcat Ramblings

this group will face higher premiums but will receive more complete coverage than before. Many will qualify for public subsidies to help pay the premiums.

So should the law be repealed, as so many Republicans vociferously called for? No, and here's why: Despite its obvious flaws, the positive aspects of the act outweigh the negatives.

Because of this law, Kansans can no longer be denied health insurance because of a pre-existing condition. And as economist Dean Baker pointed out in an article published by the Huffington Post, most people who sign up for state-level exchanges, online stores where people can shop for policies, will qualify for public subsidies based on their income and family size. This means the cost of insurance will be less than the advertised price.

"This is good news," Baker wrote. "It means that tens of millions of people who are uninsured now will likely be insured in the next year or two as a result of the Affordable Care Act."

But, Baker writes, this isn't even the most important aspect of health-care reform. He points out that for the first time Americans who currently have health insurance won't have to shop for individual insurance if they get sick or lose their jobs.

Now, instead of getting health care in the individual market and paying tens of thousands in premiums, sick, unemployed Kansans will have access to affordable insurance. Plus, older Kansans who are in poor health and are forced to work because they are still a couple years away from being eligible for Medicare, and can't afford insurance on the individual market, can now retire early and still have access to affordable care.

The Affordable Care Act has its flaws. A single-payer system or the addition of a public option to compete with private insurers would have been better, but neither option was politically feasible. But the law is better than what we had, and represents a positive step forward towards a day when everyone has access to affordable health insurance.

Andy Heintz, a K-State journalism graduate and former Colby Free Press sports editor now living in Ottumwa, Iowa, loves K-State athletics and fishing, sports and opinion writing. You can find his blog at www.orble.com/just-one-mans-vision, or find him at twitter.com/heintz23.

Morningstar ratings misguide public

Morningstar Inc., a firm known for its ratings of mutual funds, began trying to evaluate Section 529 college-savings plans 10 years ago. Since then, the company has attempted to revise its approach, but blatant inconsistencies remain in its methods.

State treasurers built the Kansas 529 program to include many investment options and low fees to provide Kansans and out-of-state investors with choices to accommodate their needs. Yet, Morningstar's methodology emphasizes fees over performance and services offered, which sometimes come with additional cost.

The "Morningstar College-Savings Plans Industry Survey," released recently, is a prime example. Parts of the Kansas plan received unfavorable ratings and others were left out completely. This alone wouldn't be as much of a problem if it weren't for the lack of transparency, subjective ratings and contradictions associated used to evaluate our state's program.

Morningstar rates plans based on five "pillar" scores for process, performance, people, parent and price, but their report provides no clue as to how the scores are derived or how they are weighted to come up with the overall rating. While it's understandable that process, people and parent pillars may be ranked subjectively, the evaluation of price and performance should be quantitative and the methodology disclosed, as is Morningstar's practice with mutual funds.

This lack of transparency leaves us wondering why their evaluation focuses on certain aspects of a plan rather than assessing the whole picture.

For example, Morningstar penalized Kansas plans for not having the absolute lowest fees in the industry, but neglected to consider annual account maintenance fees charged by each



Ron Estes

- Kansas State Treasurer

of the "gold" rated plans. Kansas plans don't charge a dime for annual fees.

Morningstar's misguided bias towards 'low fees' also fails to account for the benefits investors obtain when working through an actively managed account.

What I find troubling with the report are the blatant contradictions within the rankings of each 529 plan. After comparing the overall rankings among the states, I am disappointed that plans with the or even worse "pillar" scores have received better overall ratings than Kansas'.

For example, plans sponsored by Maine, Nevada, Ohio, Oklahoma, Vermont and Schwab 529 all received identical pillars ratings with the exception of performance, where the Schwab 529 received a higher ranking.

But the Schwab 529 plan received a negative overall rating, while the others were given a neutral rating. If anything, performance net of fees should be weighted more heavily than the other pillars.

Another bias in Morningstar's ratings is that they are more positive on a plan's price and performance rating if the state offers a large tax deduction only for residents who use that state's plan. Kansas has generously chosen to extend its tax deduction to residents who choose any state's 529 plan, in what the industry calls "tax parity."

Overall, the conclusions in Morningstar's

overall ratings are unclear, subjective and inconsistent, which is inexcusable for a company whose strength is analytics.

Kansas 529 Program account owners and the general public, who are all affected by these ratings, deserve to know how these evaluations are determined by Morningstar. The firm should follow a transparent standard and openly present the data. Otherwise, how do we know one state's ranking isn't purely based on an opinion or agenda?

Ron Estes is the Kansas state treasurer, a member of the College Savings Plans Network executive board and the Midwest Regional Vice President for the National Association of State Treasurers.

Where to write, call

U.S. Sen. Pat Roberts, 109 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. roberts.senate.gov/public/

State Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer, State Capitol Building, 300 SW 10th St., Room 136-E., Topeka, Kan. 66612, (785) 296-7399 Ralph.Ostmeyer@senate.ks.gov

State Rep. Ward Cassidy, (120th District) State Capitol Building, 300 SW 10th St., Room 151-S, Topeka, Kan., 66612, (785) 296-7616 ward.cassidy@house.ks.gov

State Rep. Don Hineman, (118th District) State Capitol Building, 300 SW 10th St., Room 50-S, Topeka, Kan., 66612, (785) 296-7636 don.hineman@house.ks.gov

Mallard Fillmore

- Bruce Tinsley

