



Other Viewpoints

Tough choices can make or break education budgets

Status quo 1, students 0.

That was the score from a recent meeting of the Washburn University Board of Regents concerning Washburn University.

Faced with budget pressure brought on by the recession, the regents tentatively approved a 2 percent increase in tuition.

Meanwhile, the regents rejected a cost-saving proposal to privatize the school’s facilities management department.

The bold proposal would have saved the university \$538,000, a figure that Washburn students and their parents might find interesting. Why? Because the tuition increase will generate about the same amount \$550,000.

The regents’ decision on the proposal came amid strong union opposition.... At some point, decision-makers in higher education are going to have to realize it’s time to start looking at outside-the-box solutions to reduce college costs.

They simply can’t keep passing the buck to students.

At least the Washburn regents didn’t stick it to students as badly as the Kansas Board of Regents, which approved tuition increases ranging from 3.8 percent to a staggering 8.5 percent for students at the state’s six public universities.

But with the economic condition the state it’s in, any tuition increase is bound to be a hardship for some part of the student body. Too many people have lost their jobs or lost income for it not to be.

To Washburn’s credit, officials haven’t simply dumped their shortfall onto students’ shoulders.

They’ve cut \$4 million from the budget in recent months through a variety of means, including offering early retirement incentives....

As administrators at Washburn and other universities continue to cope with the recession, we’d encourage them to keep searching for proposals like the privatization plan.

It’s past time to get college costs under control.

— Topeka Capital-Journal, via The Associated Press

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U.S. Sen. Sam Brownback, 303 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. (202) 224-6521

U.S. Rep. Jerry Moran, 2202 Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515. (202) 225-2715 or Fax (202) 225-5124

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Death marks a sorrowful moment

It’s not every night you turn on the television and confront the image of a friend. It’s almost bound to be bad news when you do.

So the other night when I tuned in Sports Center to see the highlights of the Rockies game, there was Alexis Arguello, the fighter. Dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound at his home in Nicaragua.

I can’t claim to have known Mr. Arguello well. I only met him a couple of times, at his office when he was vice mayor of Managua, and later at a dinner party. He was the sort of person, though, that you feel is your friend after a few minutes.

Bob Sweeney, a friend and fellow publisher from Denver, had talked me into a trip to Nicaragua a few years ago that turned into a whirlwind, once-in-a-lifetime experience. We met three past presidents, hobnobbed with old Sandinistas and talked with many of the key and not-so-key figures from the Contra-Sandinista war.

Bob had promised the vice mayor, during a visit a year earlier, that he’d buy fight gear for his pet project, a boxing program for poor youths from the barrios of Managua. Bob shopped for \$1,000 in boxing gear and the rest of us chipped in for bags of soccer balls for the kids.

But let me tell you about Alexis Arguello, the fighter. He was the only man ever to have claimed world championships at three weights. His record was 82 and 8 in professional fights,



Steve Haynes

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with 65 knockouts, and *Ring* magazine named him the 20th best puncher of all time. At 5 foot, 10 inches, he had range and power that few light-weight fighters could match.

Fame and fortune were not necessarily kind to him. He developed a drug addiction he found difficult to kick, and in the revolution, lost much of his money and property. Later, though, as a true national hero, he joined the Sandinista party and ran for vice mayor.

When I met him, Mr. Arguello had been asked to replace the mayor, who was retiring.

We went to his office to give him the boxing gear. I thought we were lucky to make it, since Bob had nearly caused a riot in the barrio the day before, throwing soccer balls into a mob of teenagers who’d been playing with a flat, scuffed up ball.

Our host, our patron, if you will, owned a television station, so we were trailing a reporter and a camera crew. We did a standup, with Alexis and Bob talking about brotherhood and forging international ties for youth. It was great stuff.

Afterward, in a quiet moment, Arguello asked me if I thought he should run for mayor. He said he feared “the politicians” would not let him do what he wanted to with city government. I told him only he could decide that, but suggested he consider how he could accomplish the most for his people.

His decision, eventually, was to run, and he was elected mayor last fall in a campaign against Eduardo Montealegre, a brilliant U.S.-educated (Brown, Harvard) conservative who for all his polish, lacked the ex-fighter’s charisma.

No one knows what drove Mr. Arguello to shoot himself last week, if that indeed is what happened. I’ve seen no news of the autopsy reports, and while his death made headlines here, at least on the sports pages, the details won’t be news.

Perhaps those pressures he spoke of became too much for a gentle man who made his name in a violent sport. Maybe the devils from his personal past took control. We will never know.

A lot of people have lost a friend, though, especially the poor of Managua and everyday Nicaraguans, who revered him as a national hero, flaws and all.

Steve Haynes is editor and publisher of The Colby Free Press and president of Nor’West Newspapers. In his spare time, whenever that is, he like to ride and watch trains.

Openness takes both rights and ability

“An open and transparent government is essential to the democratic process. Under Kansas law, citizens have the right to access public records and observe many meetings where decisions are made that affect our state.”

That quote is taken from the Kansas attorney general’s web site. Unfortunately, the second sentence isn’t really true. Kansans may technically have the right to access some public records (those not hidden by more than 300 exemptions the Legislature has granted), but too often we lack the ability because of government opposition.

Our own ongoing struggle is a classic example of overt, and to some extent, coordinated, government efforts to deny taxpayers access to public information. On April 15, we e-mailed open records requests to county appraisers, asking for 2009 appraisal data and some historical information on residential appraisals. Initial replies ranged from full, speedy and courteous fulfillment of the request to no reply whatsoever, even though the Kansas Open Records Act requires that government agencies respond within three business days.

In some cases, the reply was essentially, “go away.” Some said the 2009 data wouldn’t be released until it was certified to the county clerk, even though there is no such exemption under the law. Others said they wouldn’t release the data until we signed their Open Records form, some of which asked for information that the law expressly prohibits.

Others hid behind a provision that permits government to reject a request that causes them to “create” a record, meaning they don’t have to provide information unless it is maintained in the exact manner in which it is requested. Government employees shouldn’t have such

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broad latitude, but they do. One part of our request is covered by that exemption, but even after we arranged for their software vendors to supply a free update that would generate the requested information, some counties refuse to provide the information.

Charging high costs to provide information is another way to discourage the public. The law allows government to charge the actual cost of providing information, but some counties attempted to charge us more.

There are other, even more egregious examples of government’s open attempts to discourage legitimate requests. The Shawnee County appraiser wrote a “Dear Colleagues” letter, encouraging others to seek the guidance of their lawyers and informing them of his intention to deny portions of our request. Last week, in front of a large gathering, the Sumner County appraiser screamed at me for “demanding” information and “threatening,” – having the temerity to challenge their county counselor’s decision).

Two months after our initial request, we have complete information from only 67 counties. Formal complaints filed with county attorneys were largely ignored, so we have notified the remaining 38 counties that our next step will be to file suit to compel compliance. Unfortunately, that is the only recourse, and one that

many citizens lack the means to pursue.

This travesty must end. The Legislature should completely rewrite the law so that citizens’ rights to access public information are protected. There should be no charges for information...limited exemptions ... requirements to find ways to comply even if it means creating a record ... and realistic enforcement provisions.

After all, an open and transparent government is essential to the democratic process.

Dave Trabert is president of the Wichita-based Flint Hills Center for Public Policy. He can be reached at dave.trabert@flinthills.org. For more on the center, go to www.flinthills.com.

Write us

The *Colby Free Press* encourages Letters to the Editor on any topic of general interest. Letters should be brief, clear and to the point. They must be signed and carry the address and phone number of the author.

We do not publish anonymous letters. We sign our opinions and expect readers to do likewise. Nor do we run form letters or letters about topics which do not pertain to our area. Thank-yous from this area should be submitted to the Want Ad desk.

Letters will not be censored, but will be read and edited for form and style, clarity, length and legality. We will not publish attacks on private individuals or businesses not pertaining to a public issue.

Before an election, letters (other than responses by a candidate) will not be published after the Thursday before the polls open.

Mallard Fillmore

- Bruce Tinsley

