



Other Viewpoints

Arts investment has payoff value

The Kansas Senate is poised to vote on a bill that would block Gov. Sam Brownback’s move to dissolve the Kansas Arts Commission and transfer fund-raising responsibilities for community arts to a private nonprofit corporation called the Kansas Arts Foundation.

Considering that the arts – everything from operational costs at an art center to a cultural event to renovation of a historic theater – already are supported by some amount of private money, it is unlikely the loss from the Kansas Arts Commission could be absorbed by well-financed lovers of art.

Brownback’s plan isn’t all that surprising. Facing a large budget deficit and the need to make cutbacks, the arts must seem far less of a priority than many other programs. But there are consequences to cutting back in any area – even the arts – and legislators must decide if the sacrifice will be worth it.

Government could write off the arts, but support has a definite payoff to the investment.

The arts play an important role in the quality of life in a community, and in turn that quality of life contributes to a town’s attractiveness to new businesses and residents who are looking for a home.

New businesses add to the tax rolls provide more jobs, which will better support the local economy. And given that population is declining in most of Kansas’ counties, especially rural ones, our representatives should think twice before they turn their backs on one of the amenities communities can offer to appeal to residents.

The state spends only about \$750,000 annually – a drop in the bucket where the budget deficit is concerned – to secure National Endowment for the Arts matching grants for arts programs across the state. If the governor succeeds in dissolving the commission, the private Kansas Arts Foundation would have to raise that amount in private donations or lose the matching grants, which would be an even bigger loss to our communities.

A shift to more private financing of the arts is not out of the question, but a transition toward less money from government – rather than an immediate withdrawal of support – might be met with more acceptance and fewer immediate consequences for our communities.

– The Hutchinson News, via the Associated Press

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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

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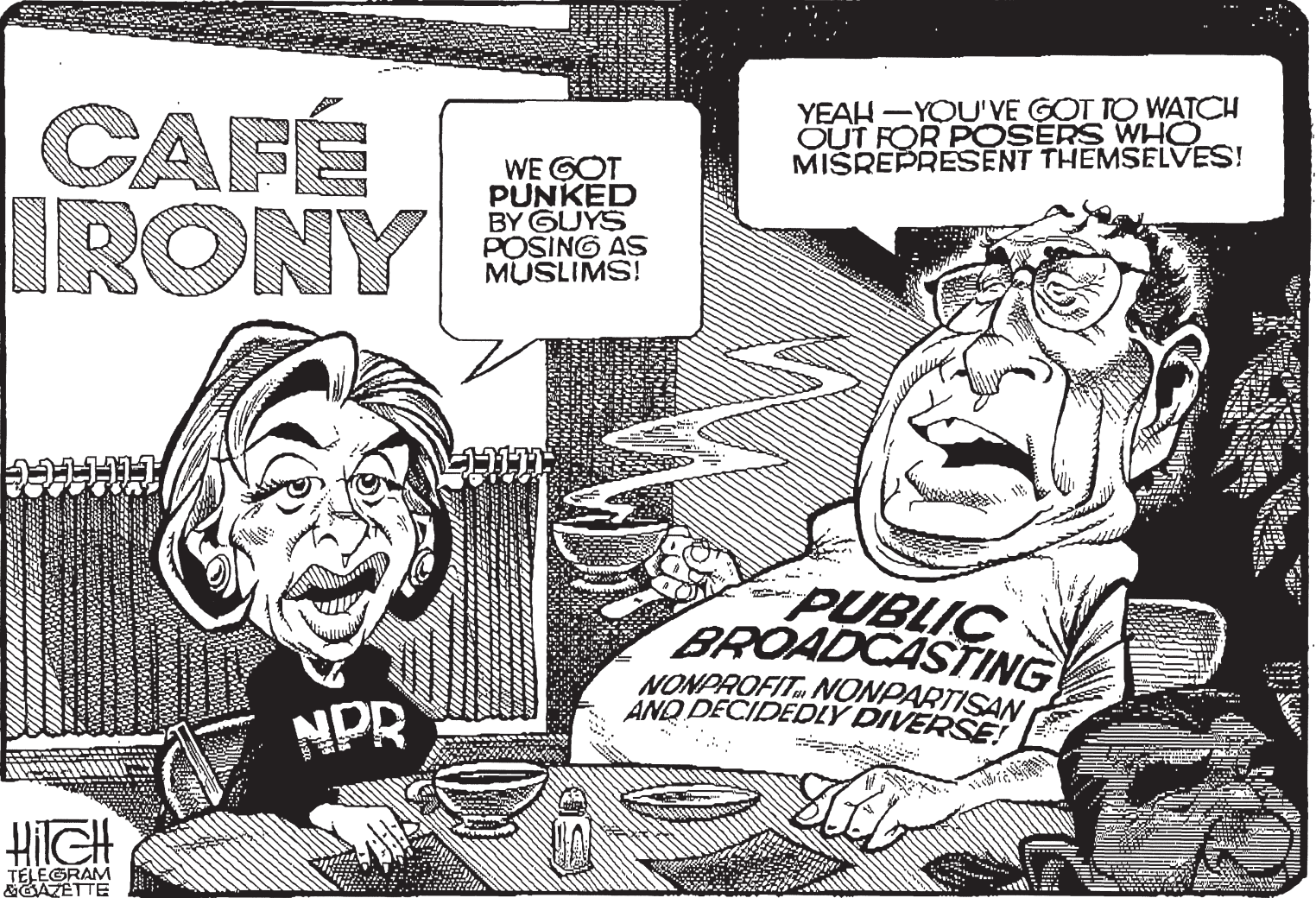
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THE COLBY FREE PRESS (USPS 120-920) is published every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, except the days observed for Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year’s Day, by Nor’West Newspaper, 155 W.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



Uniform college courses sacrifice quality

Again there is a push to make college coursework uniform across the state. Whenever a student complains about difficulty transferring a course taken at other institutions, we soon see plans resurrected for “seamless articulation.”

The Kansas Board of Regents is contemplating the uniformization of courses: 1) for all general education to transfer from two-year colleges to the four-year universities, 2) for transfer of upper division courses across the four-year universities and 3) for community college courses to transfer for major programs at the four-year universities.

Kansas universities have good reasons to not always accept transfer credit from another institution. And it is not a matter of wanting to charge more tuition.

One major reason is that we do not offer the same programs. Courses that may be adequate preparation for a two-year nursing program may not begin to meet the rigor required of a four-year registered nursing program. With over 60 percent of our college students changing major at least once, to insist that a course that was adequate for one program be accepted for a more rigorous program will lower all programs to the lowest common denominator.

A second factor is teacher quality. Teach a few years in Kansas and you will recognize that students coming from College A are well prepared in Program A, but similar students from College B have not gone beyond high-school-level work, although they took a course with the same title. Some schools have excellent faculty, programs, facilities and leadership. Some do not.



John Richard Schrock

- Education Frontlines

Quality university programs have solid teachers who have been observed and evaluated by their peer faculty, and given tenure based on direct class observation and the professional judgement of colleagues in that discipline. But in this new tuition-driven atmosphere, some faculty are now being hired by community college and university administrators who are unable to make judgments of teaching. This is especially rampant for outreach and online courses. Faculty at those institutions are not happy with administrators usurping their academic quality control responsibilities.

Universities that refuse to accept the resultant questionable coursework are protecting the quality of their own graduates.

Requiring common syllabi, uniform course numbers, common tests, or asserting they achieve the same course objectives, does not touch the faculty-quality problem. University and community college faculty, trying to coordinate “core competencies,” have met time-and-again and sent reports to the Board of Regents asking for enforcement of the minimal credentialing of instructors and faculty oversight of adjunct teacher hiring, but to no avail.

Before drastic actions are taken that will de-

stroy solid programs at Kansas universities, it would be wise to examine the effects “seamless articulation” had in a state to the west of Kansas. Under legislative mandate, their freshman and sophomore courses had to use the same course numbers, syllabi and tests at community colleges and public universities. Realizing that their unique programs would now only begin at the junior level, the public universities hired part-time adjuncts to teach those entry courses.

Hire-a-profs who drove in to teach a course and then leave were economical. But it left the remaining half the faculty to do all of the advising, program sponsoring, committee work, and research. Separating faculty into lower-class assembly line teachers and upper-class research faculty was a disaster that produced discount-store education.

The best colleges and universities of Kansas have good-but-unique courses taught by good-but-unique teachers. The simpleminded drive to standardize courses, syllabi and testing will only serve to drag the best programs down to the lowest level. Uniform and generic products may be a way to run a cheap discount store, but a quality university system needs quality teachers and unique programs to educate unique students.

John Richard Schrock, a professor of biology and department chair at a leading teacher’s college, lives in Emporia. He emphasizes that his opinions are strictly his own.

Fire remains vital management tool

Every spring, this ritual continues.

Viewed up close or at a distance, prairie fires are riveting. Across the vast, open grasslands we call the Flint Hills, fires can be seen for miles. The flames lick at the blue Kansas sky as the brown, dry grass crackles, cracks and bursts into orange.

But these fires aren’t recent phenomena and they aren’t strictly for the viewing pleasure of those traveling up and down our highways. Long before civilization invaded the prairie, fires were ignited by lightning storms and the prairie was charred to restore the health of the native grasses.

Native Americans were the first practitioners of prescribed fires. They used the fire to attract the buffalo for easier hunting.

The artificially ignited controlled burning of the tall-grass prairie in east-central Kansas is an annual event designed to mimic nature’s match. It has become a tradition, part of the culture of the communities and the people who inhabit this region of our state.

Fire is an essential element of the ecosystem. Burning these pastures is one of the best management tools for maintaining the native prairie.

This annual pasture burning only occurs for a few days each year. It is not a procedure that is drawn out and lasts for weeks. However, weather conditions dictate the length of the burning seasons most years.

Not every cattleman burns his pastures each and every year, as is sometimes portrayed. Instead, individual ranchers and landowners survey and decide each spring which pastures will benefit and produce a healthier, lush grass for livestock after burning. Often neighbors plan



John Schlageck

- Insights Kansas Farm Bureau

and burn together, giving them more hands to ensure a safe, controlled burn.

“Forage quality and ecosystem health are both dependent on fire,” says Steve Swaffar, Kansas Farm Bureau Natural Resources Division. “Without fire, we have woodlands in the Flint Hills and the livestock industry loses a fantastic resource.”

Spring burning is one of the easiest and most effective methods of controlling the invasive eastern red cedar.

“There’s nothing better for the control and eradication of this extremely invasive tree than to run a fire through the grassland every two or three years,” he says.

Kansas State University experts recommend burning take place when wind speeds are between five and 15 miles per hour, relative humidity is from 40 to 70 percent and temperatures fall in the range of 55 to 80 degrees.

Landowners in all counties must notify local officials prior to planned, controlled burns. This notification is key to keep prescribed fires from turning into accidental wildfires and ensuring burning is allowed under the expected conditions.

The Kansas Department of Health and Environment recently completed the Kansas Flint Hills Smoke management plan, intended to

help alleviate air quality issues in urban areas generated by prescribed burning in the Flint Hills region. Coupled with associated web tools, it should give stockmen better decision-making abilities when planning and implementing prescribed fires.

Producers can now assess how the smoke from their burns may affect urban areas downwind, Swaffar says. This kind of information can make a difference in keeping ozone within acceptable levels and keeping regulatory restrictions from affecting ranchers. This new website is www.ksfire.org.

The real crux of this plan is that actions to control smoke in the Flint Hills ranching community remain mostly voluntary. Copies of the plan can be found on Kansas Farm Bureau’s website, www.kfb.org.

The farm and ranch community is tuned into ever-changing weather conditions and will continue to keep prescribed fire in the tall-grass prairies confined to a minimum time period. This process is part of the culture of the rural communities that dot the Flint Hills region.

Prairie fires help Mother Nature rejuvenate the grasses that carpet her fertile hills. That means good things for cattlemen, for agriculture, for rural communities and the Kansas economy.

John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. He grew up on a diversified farm near Seguin, and his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.

Mallard Fillmore

- Bruce Tinsley

