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Colleges need holistic approach for student gains

After a decade of starvation, ill-equipped to handle a major influx

All politicians — from President Obama to governors — know that praising community colleges is a guaranteed applause line. But for all our vaunted appreciation of the role these community-based colleges play in the post-secondary education matrix, the Oregon Legislature has been starving them. It is no secret that Oregon ranks 46th among states for its support of higher education.

A just-released audit and a state Senate bill are useful windows on what's wrong and what might be practical as countermeasures after decades of neglect.

The audit by the Secretary of State — “Community Colleges: Targeted Investments Could Improve Student Completion Rates” — notes Oregon's low standing for community college completion rates. It notes that programs designed to generate degree completion don't reach most students. The audit recommends devoting assets, financial and logistic, to move more students to degree completion.

At the same time, a legislative triumvirate proposes a remedy for one element in the student challenge. The legislators are Senate Democrats Mark Hass and Tobias Reed and House Republican Mark Johnson. Their proposal is alternatively termed Last Dollar In and free community college. The idea is to use federal Pell Grant money and state funds to ensure that qualified Oregon high school graduates could attend community college, effectively tuition-free.

But college leaders say this concept could swamp unprepared Oregon institutions.

Noble aim, but unclear outcome

Bill would make criminals of employers who seek truth

Should the criminal activity of a job candidate be hidden until the final stages of the hiring process? That is the essence of a bill that seems likely to pass in the waning days of the Oregon Legislature.

HB 3025 is our state's version of a national campaign to give ex-cons a break in landing a job. Pushed by labor unions and social activists, the legislation would make it unlawful for a business to inquire about an applicant's criminal history until either a conditional job offer is made or an interview is conducted with the candidate.

HB 3025 would eliminate the “criminal conviction” check box commonly found on job applications. Advocates claim that requiring that employers defer background screening until a later point in the hiring process would allow ex-cons to be evaluated on their merits rather than being automatically disqualified. Such legislation, they say, will lead to more jobs, reducing the crime rate.

The idea behind HB 3025 is noble. Everyone deserves an opportunity to become gainfully employed. But essentially hiding criminal activity from an early

background check is artificially deceptive.

Screening applicants is an essential part of the hiring practice. It allows employers to narrow the pool of applicants before setting aside time and resources to review finalists. Most small businesses don't have human resources departments to handle these tasks.

Federal and state laws have made the termination process more risky, so employers must place more emphasis on making solid hires. But the traditional reference check has been gutted by legal restrictions on what former employers can say. Adding yet another barrier further cramps the hiring process.

Under the bill, any employer who runs afoul of the new law may face a lawsuit and the prospect of a hefty fine and compensatory and punitive damages. A judge also could order the business to hire the aggrieved candidate under a section of the bill.

Making it lawful to conceal an applicant's criminal activity while making it a crime for an employer to seek that information is complicating, even Kafkaesque.

The Lone Star Stumble

By PAUL KRUGMAN
New York Times News Service

Remember the Texas economic miracle?

In 2012, it was one of the three main arguments from then-Gov. Rick Perry about why he should be president, along with his strong support from the religious right and something else I can't remember (sorry, couldn't help myself). More broadly, conservatives have long held Texas up as a supposed demonstration that low taxes on the rich and harsh treatment of the poor are the keys to prosperity.

So it's interesting to note that Texas is looking a lot less miraculous lately than it used to. To be fair, we're talking about a modest stumble, not a collapse. Still, events in Texas and other states — notably Kansas and California — are providing yet another object demonstration that the tax-cut obsession that dominates the modern Republican Party is all wrong.

The facts: For many years, economic growth in Texas has consistently outpaced growth in the rest of America. But that long run ended in 2015, with employment growth in Texas dropping well below the national average and a fall in leading indicators pointing to a further slowdown ahead. In most states, this slowdown would be no big deal; occasional underperformance is just a fact of life. But everything is bigger in Texas, including inflated expectations, so the slowdown has come as something of a shock.

Now, there's no mystery about what is happening: It's all about the hydrocarbons. Texans like to point out that their state's economy is a lot more diversified than it was in J.R. Ewing's day, and they're right. But Texas still has a disproportionate share of the U.S. oil and gas industry, and it benefited far more than most other states from the fracking boom. By my estimates, about half the energy-related jobs created by that boom since it began in the middle of the last decade were in Texas, and this extractive-sector windfall accounted for about

a third of the difference between growth in Texas and growth in the rest of the country.

What about the other two-thirds? Like the rest of the Sunbelt, Texas is still benefiting from the long southward shift of America's population that began with the coming of widespread air-conditioning; average January temperature remains a powerful predictor of regional growth. Texas also attracts new residents with its permissive land-use policies, which have kept housing cheap.

But Texas wasn't supposed to be like other states. It was supposed to be the shining exemplar of the economic payoff to reverse Robin-Hood economics.

Now one of the three big drivers of Texas growth has gone into reverse, as low world oil prices are bringing the fracking boom to a screeching halt. Hey, things like that happen to every state now and then.

But Texas wasn't supposed to be like other states. It was supposed to be the shining exemplar of the economic payoff to reverse Robin-Hood economics. So its recent disappointments hit the right-wing cause hard — especially coming on the heels of the Kansas debacle.

For those who haven't been following the Kansas story, in 2012,



Paul Krugman

Sam Brownback, the state's hard-right governor, pushed through large tax cuts that would, he promised, lead to rapid economic growth with little, if any, loss of revenue. But the promised boom never materialized, while big budget deficits did.

And, meanwhile, there's California, long mocked by the right as an economy doomed by its liberal politics. Not so much, it turns out: The budget is back in surplus in part because the emergence of a Democratic supermajority finally made it possible to enact tax increases, and the state is experiencing a solid recovery.

The states, Louis Brandeis famously declared, are the laboratories of democracy. In fact, Brownback himself described his plan as an “experiment” that would demonstrate the truth of his economic doctrine. What it actually did, however, was demonstrate the opposite — and much the same message is coming from other laboratories, from the stumble in Texas to the comeback in California.

Will anyone on the right take heed? Probably not. Unlike real experimenters, Brownback wasn't willing to take no for an answer, whatever happened, and the same is true for just about everyone on his side of the political divide. Or to put it another way, belief that tax cuts are a universal elixir that cures all economic ills is the ultimate zombie idea — one that should have died long ago in the face of the facts, but just keeps shambling along. Nothing that has happened in the past quarter-century has supported tax-cut mania, yet the doctrine's hold on the Republican Party is stronger than ever. It would be foolish to expect recent events to make much difference.

Still, the spectacle of the Texas economy coming back to earth, and Kansas sliding over the edge should at the very least make right-wing bombast ring hollow, in the general election if not in the primary. And someday, maybe, even conservatives will once again become willing to look at the facts.

The separation strategy on Iraq

By DAVID BROOKS
New York Times News Service

In 2006, Joe Biden, Les Gelb and many others proposed plans to decentralize power in Iraq.

Biden, then a U.S. senator from Delaware, Gelb and others recognized that Iraqi society was fracturing into sectarian blocs. They believed that governing institutions should reflect the fundamental loyalties on the ground. According to the Biden plan, the central Iraqi government would still have performed a few important tasks, but many other powers would have been devolved to regional governments in the Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish areas.

The administration of George W. Bush rejected that federalist approach and instead bet on a Baghdad-centric plan. The Iraqi prime minister at the time, Nouri al-Maliki, and his band of Shiite supremacists enflamed sectarian tensions even more, consolidated power, excluded rivals, alienated the Sunnis and Kurds and drove parts of the opposition into armed insurrection.

The Obama administration helped oust al-Maliki and replace him with a group of more moderate and responsible leaders. But that approach is still centralized and Baghdad-focused. The results are nearly as bad. The Sunnis continue to feel excluded and oppressed. Faith in national institutions has collapsed. Sectarian lines are hardening. Over the last several years, the number of people who tell pollsters that they are Iraqis first and foremost has plummeted.

Vastly outnumbered fighters for the Islamic State keep beating the Iraqi army in places like Ramadi because the Islamic State terrorists believe in their lunatic philosophy while the Iraqi soldiers no longer believe in their own leadership and are not willing to risk their lives for a dysfunctional, centralized state.

This attempt to impose top-down solutions, combined with President Barack Obama's too-fast withdrawal from Iraq, has contributed to the fertile conditions for the rise of the Islamic State. Obama

properly vowed to eradicate this terrorist force, but the U.S. is failing to do so.

That's largely because, mind-bogglingly, the Iraqi government has lost the battle over the hearts and minds to a group of savage, beheading, murderous thugs. As Anne Barnard and Tim Arango reported in The Times on Thursday, the Islamic State is hijacking legitimate Sunni grievances. Many Sunnis would apparently rather be ruled by their own kind, even if they are barbaric, than by Shiites, who rob them of their dignity.

America's goal should be to help lower sectarian temperatures so that eventually a moderating dynamic replaces the current brutalizing one.

The United States is now in the absurd position of being in a de facto alliance with Iranian-backed Shiite militias. Up until now, these militias have plowed through Sunni territory “liberating” villages from the Islamic State and then, often enough, proceeding to execute the local leaders, loot the property and destroy the towns.

The Obama administration is hoping that these militias will restrain themselves and listen to the central authority. But that would be to defy all recent Iraqi history. The more likely scenario is that the militias will occasionally beat the Islamic State on a tactical level while making the larger climate even worse.

The centralizing strategy has



David Brooks

been a failure. Instead of fostering cooperation, efforts to bring Sunni and Shiite elites together have only rubbed at raw wounds, exacerbated tensions and accelerated the slide toward a regional confrontation. The Islamic State is now targeting Shiite pilgrims in Saudi Arabia in order to enflame that country

and widen the religious war that is brewing across the region.

Iran is sponsoring terror armies across the region and trying to turn Shiite Iraq into a satellite state.

A brutalizing dynamic is now firmly in place: Sectarian tension radicalizes the leaderships on both the Sunni and Shiite sides. These radicalized leaders incite bigger and uglier confrontations.

Maybe it's time to shift course.

America's goal should be to help lower sectarian temperatures so that eventually a moderating dynamic replaces the current brutalizing one. The grand strategy should be to help the two sides separate as much as possible while containing the radicals on each side. The tactic should be devolution. Give as much local control to different groups in different nations. Let them run their own affairs as much as possible. Encourage them to create space between the sectarian populations so that hatreds can cool.

This was the core logic of the Biden/Gelb style decentralization plan, and it is still the most promising logic today.

The best objection has always been that the geography is not so neat. Populations are intermingled. If decentralization gets out of control and national boundaries are erased, then you could see ferocious wars over resources and national spoils.

That's all true, but separation and containment are still the least terrible of the bad options. The U.S. could begin by arming Iraqi Sunnis directly and helping Sunnis take back their own homeland from the terrorists, with the assurance that they could actually run the place once they retook it.

Central politicians love centralization. But this is the wrong recipe for an exploding Middle East.