

EDITORIAL

EOU
provides a
path forward

The new major created by Eastern Oregon University that focuses on agriculture entrepreneurship is not only a good thing — it is one of those innovative ideas that occasionally comes along with bright prospects for the future.

The four-year program will begin in 2022 and will mix pieces of agriculture science and business and include courses in marketing, finance and human resources along with farming and biology.

The idea is such a good one it is difficult to understand why it wasn't developed before now. Such a program fits perfectly into the predominant economy — and culture — of Eastern Oregon, and it will also be a solid platform for other like programs in the future.

Driving the move was input from major agriculture businesses in the region — such as J.R. Simplot Co. — that communicated a need for workers with specific skills the program will be able to teach.

In a sense, the new degree is a mix of education and business and is exactly the right program at exactly the right time that will help students across the region who might not otherwise see college as a way forward.

That problem — finding a path to higher education for some students who are geared toward agriculture — isn't just a local challenge. Across Eastern Oregon hundreds of students each year graduate and don't choose college because they don't see it as a match for their skills or interests.

Yet this program can provide part of the answer.

The program will provide students with a viable path toward higher education, and they will be able to enter the workforce with a specific set of abilities that match our biggest industries.

Agriculture throughout Eastern Oregon is the predominate economic engine. To ensure that engine continues to function at a high rate, we need more younger people who are interested in agriculture.

Another key element to the program is that agriculture has changed. Now, it isn't enough to have a desire to farm or ranch or to move into an existing family business. Today, our farmers and ranchers need to have a good business background and know their science. This program will help develop those skills in students.

Agriculture, food and fiber account for 9.1% of Oregon's overall economy, fueling 371,300 jobs. That's a big footprint in our state and our region.

Eastern Oregon University made a wise choice with this new program, and we are excited to see how it will pan out in the future.

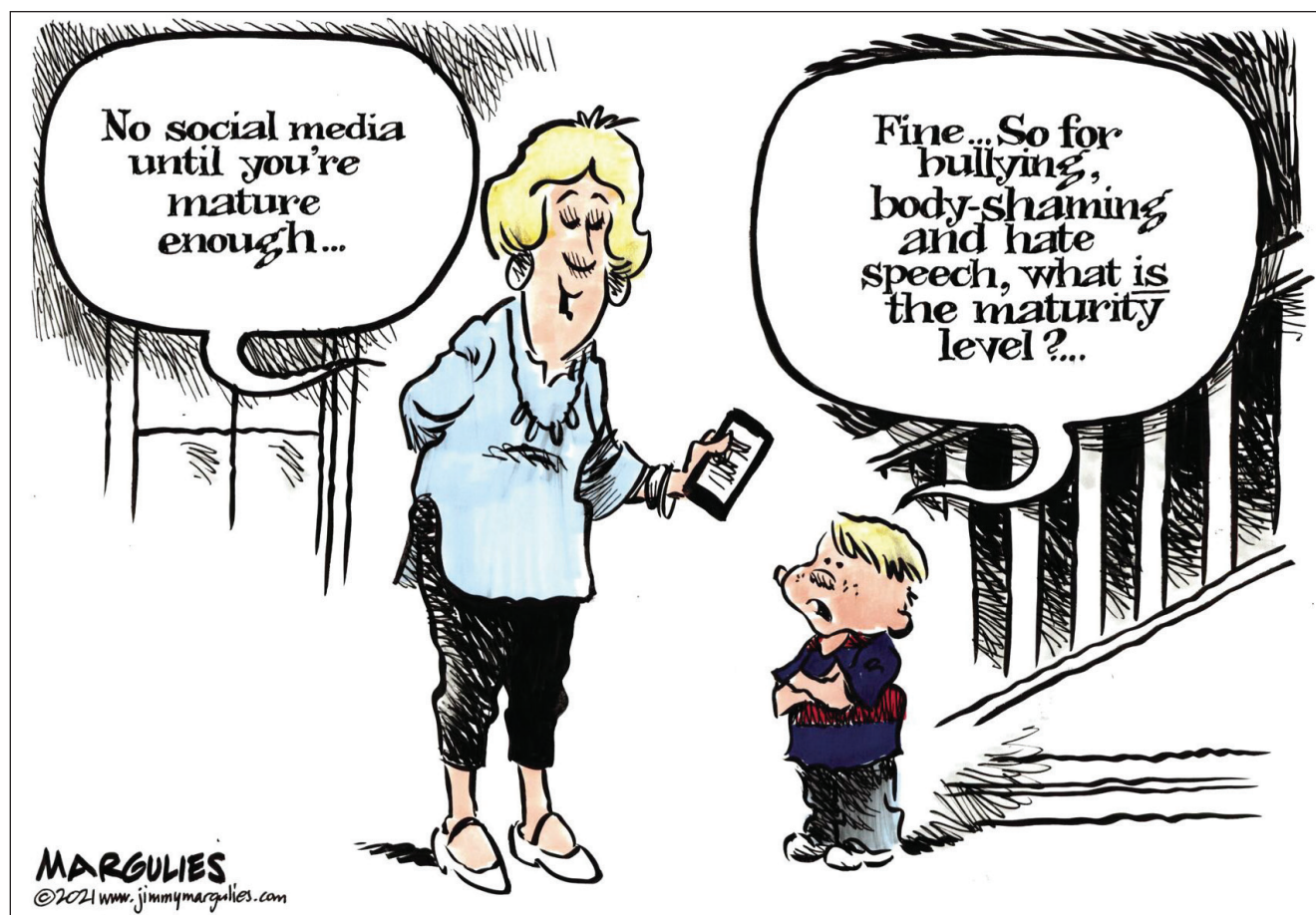
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From COVID to climate change,
what are we actually trying to say?

By LUCERO CANTU

While it is nonsensical to try to prescribe a diagnosis to America's current state of civic discourse — from dumping manure on the White House lawn in the name of climate action to attending the Met Gala to demand we “tax the rich” — we often blame partisan politics. But what if part of the problem is that we literally cannot understand one another? And, perhaps worse than that, the institutions we trust to lead the public have stopped trying to communicate to be understood.

Let's get the figures out of the way. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development found that 50% of U.S. adults cannot read a book written at an eighth-grade level. The National Institute of Literacy estimates that the average American reads at a seventh- to eighth-grade level. Despite these concerns, an analysis of 21 major media outlets found that consumers require a 10th grade reading level to comprehend any of them.

Most notably, Fox News and NPR ranked at an 11th grade level, while outlets like MSNBC and Politico exceeded a 12th grade level. This is not an isolated issue. Both the government and media fail to meet Americans where they are in terms of knowledge and vocabulary on critical subjects, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or climate change.

In 2010, President Barack Obama signed the U.S. Plain Writing Act,

requiring “federal agencies use clear government communication that the public can understand and use.” While the intention was to ensure government institutions communicated with national literacy and comprehension rates in mind, the COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated that some issues cannot be merely legislated away. A fall 2020 analysis of federal and state websites related to COVID-19 failed to meet the standards for communicating with the public identified by leading institutions such as the American Medical Association and National Institutes of Health.

These concerns can also be applied to how we talk about climate change. Climate change is a scientific concept at its core, which means it's spoken about in scientific terms. When vital information about climate change is being communicated to the public through words like “mitigation,” “adaptation,” “carbon neutral,” or, even worse, “carbon negative,” Americans are lost.

This was especially clear when a Twitter user recently pointed out that his milk boasted being “carbon positive” by 2045. Unsurprisingly, the replies were full of confusion and differing dictionaries of climate jargon. The general consensus was that Horizon Organic really meant “carbon negative,” or that the company will capture more carbon than it emits, but didn't want negative language on its branding materials. Other users also mentioned that the

terms “carbon negative” and “carbon positive” actually mean the same thing, which, of course, is problematic for the average citizen just trying to make sense of it all.

When the words we use to discuss one of the biggest problems of our life do more to confuse than inform, it's not a mystery as to why climate action has stalled for decades. From 3D data segmentation to workforce solutions and now climate action, I have spent the past five years creating accessible digital media on behalf of organizations. No matter the complexity or mundanity behind policy or scientific information, one thing remains the same — language that requires highly specialized knowledge is found everywhere, and it is intentionally alienating people.

To be clear, the goal is not to make every American an epidemiologist or climate scientist. Instead, communicators in the space need to be more deliberate with the language they use and its readability. At the pandemic's beginning, media outlets came under fire for hiding their COVID reporting behind a paywall. Similarly, if we as science and policy communicators do not work to deliver our information in a way that is accessible to the public, our words are also hidden away, just in plain sight.

Lucero Cantu is the digital director at the American Conservation Coalition.

OTHER VIEWS

It's time to eliminate the debt ceiling

Editorial from The Baltimore Sun:

All the back and forth between Democrats and Republicans over raising the federal debt limit — as the Oct. 18 default date loomed — has been exhausting. Though lawmakers struck a short-term deal Thursday, avoiding a government shutdown, the bickering is likely to start up again two months down the road, as the new December deadline approaches.

If left unresolved then, it's going to extract a terrible financial toll on the nation, not just because of potential delays in much-needed benefits from Social Security and Medicaid and in payments to states for basic services from schools to roads, but because it's going to shortchange bondholders — and their wrath will have consequences. Just the brinkmanship that's been played so far over the debt limit may well prove costly in higher interest rates on downgraded U.S. debt for years to come. The world expects the United States to pay its bills and if it doesn't (or even acts like it won't), there are global repercussions.

The most ridiculous part about such standoffs is that there is nothing gained from it. That's because the debt limit has nothing to do with future spending. Let's underscore that point: This isn't about how or how much the federal government spends from now on, this is about paying

bills that are already due. Requiring congressional approval of borrowing started around World War I, and the debt ceiling has been raised 100 times — almost always routinely and in a bipartisan fashion. Even when Congress last found itself debating the debt ceiling in 2019, it was raised with Democratic and Republican votes. Republicans didn't seem quite so upset about paying debts when they had a fellow Republican in the White House who would have been seriously inconvenienced by an impasse. Now, it appears they think Americans will hear trigger words like “debt” and “spending” and figure this is just liberals run amuck. And that would be an understandable criticism of the pending infrastructure and budget reconciliation bills that potentially represent trillions of dollars in added spending — if it weren't incorrect.

The problem is that one has nothing to do with the other. It's more akin to already having a \$28 trillion balance on your credit card. The bank expects you to eventually pay it off and instead of keeping that commitment, and at least paying the interest, you toss the bill in the trash. Your debt doesn't cease to exist. The money is still owed. Denial isn't a sound repayment strategy only a costly one. You think members of Congress don't know this? Of course, they do. And yet here we

are anyway because some think they'll be rewarded by their supporters for showing faux toughness. Filibustering a bill to raise the debt limit? That's just insanity, but that's exactly what Senate Republicans are willing to do. If Democrats have to go it alone to raise the debt limit, they absolutely should. Someone has to act responsibly. Chalk it up to the rule that two wrongs don't make a right.

We don't often find ourselves in complete agreement with both JPM-organ Chase Chief Executive Jamie Dimon and U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, but they are correct in their views expressed separately this past week that the whole debt ceiling concept needs to be put aside. These periodic and totally unnecessary standoffs are just partisan politics and a particularly costly form of it. Congress can't be trusted to raise the debt ceiling — we've now seen ample proof of that — so let's get rid of it entirely or at least make increases automatic whenever a spending bill is approved.

If Americans oppose new spending or new tax policies, they can always kick their elected officials out of office. That's the real check and balance on budgetary decisions and sticking with that kind of fiscal and political discipline will surely result in fewer self-inflicted economic crises coming out of Capitol Hill.