

OPINION PACKAGES

Our VIEW

Endearing endowment

Plan to divide money must be sensible

When the university accepted its \$125 million endowment, it also approved a plan to divvy up the handsome sum of interest it collects each year – likely more than \$6.25 million, figured at a low 5 percent interest.

Some of the money is already earmarked, but the remainder will be distributed as determined by the chancellor and approved by the university president.

That vague “remainder” allows us to whet our chops and anticipate the good a few well-spent million could do on campus each year.

We emphasize: well-spent.

For students, money is well-spent when it makes every class day more enjoyable – not with cheaper pop or more campus concerts – but with a more invigorating academic and living environment.

That could mean spending a few dimes to renovate plain and aging residence hall rooms.

But it also must mean spending what’s available from the endowment to increase academic departments’ resources and to provide scholarships for more students.

We want more sections of popular courses, more variety in available courses and smaller class sizes. We want funding made available for small or overworked departments to hire more faculty members and offer fairer pay to graduate assistants.

This means adding faculty and funding to programs such as women’s studies, where classes offered fill up so quickly that women’s studies majors have a tough time registering for them.

Classics is another deserving department. There, a small group of faculty members teaches eclectic, mind-opening material, some of which has formed the basis for a liberal university education for a few hundred years.

Astronomy could use the resources to teach more courses above the freshman level, and the new film department could use a little fiscal fuel for its explosive popularity.

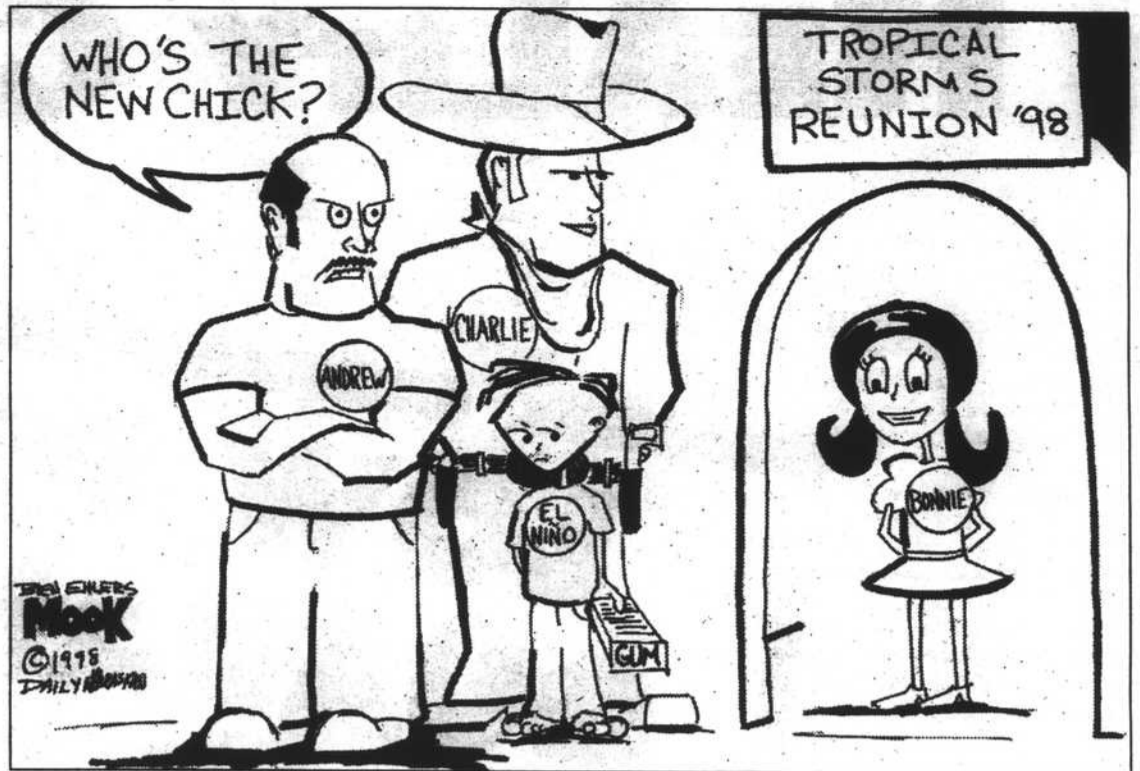
And don’t forget the all-too-quick-to-fill-up English composition courses. Hiring more faculty or graduate students to teach them could help freshmen register for freshmen-level courses and help all students get a jump on solid writing – the most essential element of a college education.

One English class titled “Poets Since 1960” was so popular the last time it was offered that the waiting list to get in topped 40 students.

We know this list is the tip of the who-is-deserving iceberg, and we couldn’t list every department that has earned a chunk of the university’s biggest gift to date. Someone likely will be overlooked when the sum is doled out.

But when that day of wallet-thickening arrives, improving academics from the smallest details and departments to the largest courses must be the priority.

Mook's VIEW



Under fire

Nebraska is finally in on the tobacco war



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Watch your back, Mr. Marlboro Man. Head for the dunes, Joe Camel. Nebraska’s legal eagles have finally decided to file suit against you and your cronies.

So be it that about 80 percent of the country has beaten us to the courtroom (four have already settled). Nebraska’s been on the sidelines too long, and we’re ready to give our two cents worth in court to recover the enormous expenses that tobacco has cost the people of our state. The end of Big Tobacco’s easy road to big profits and zero responsibility is long overdue.

The Lincoln Journal Star reported on Saturday that Attorney General Don Stenberg filed suit against seven of the United States’ largest tobacco producers and two industry groups in Lancaster County District Court on Friday.

As reported by Journal Star reporter Fred Knapp, the suit alleges a “massive unlawful course of conduct and conspiracy” by the industry, including failing to disclose health risks, destroying incriminating research evidence, conspiring not to produce “safer” cigarettes, concealing the addictive nature and manipulation of nicotine and promoting illegal purchase of cigarettes by minors.

These are all very serious accusations that need to be examined by the courts of this state. It’s about time Nebraska gets in on the war against tobacco and attempts to collect the millions of dollars spent out of the state purse to fight tobacco’s disastrous effects.

Estimates of the escalating cost of long-term health care attributed to extended tobacco use are staggering.

Again referring to Knapp’s article in the Lincoln Journal Star, Deb Thomas, Nebraska Health and Human Services system policy secretary, said approximately \$40 million dollars of the state Medicaid dollars were spent for tobacco-relat-

ed expenses.

That’s a pretty hefty bill for the taxpayers of this state to foot for our wealthy tobacco friends. A little accountability for the producers of a deadly product is warranted here.

Watching Mississippi and Minnesota lead the fight against Big Tobacco was a little hard on my pride in Nebraska. I’m a lifetime resident who’s bought into the “Good Life” slogan.

I guess it’s not the overly healthy state though. It took a few years to get the wheels of justice turning against one of the least beneficial products of our day.

Granted, we did save a bundle of cash by holding off our attack in the courts. The attorney’s fees in many of the states that compiled the bulk of legal evidence against Big Tobacco were in the millions of dollars. Much of this money has to be repaid before the settlement moneys can be used for other purposes.

That’s unfortunate because that money is desperately needed to fund health and educational programs. The longer the process is dragged out, the less and less the dollar amount against the tobacco companies has become.

While the initial figures being thrown around were reaching into the trillions, current settlement figures have bottomed out to a couple hundred billion dollars over a quarter of a century.

Sorry, but that’s not enough. When the tobacco attorneys are the ones naming the figures, one has to wonder what possible retributive effect this will have on the accused.

If I understood the initial argument, the point of this whole battle was to hurt Big Tobacco where it mattered the most – in the pocket-book.

Repeated denials of the ill effects of tobacco by the industry and its “studies” were frustrating and purposefully misleading. It took the courage of many insiders to blow the door open on Big Tobacco’s cover-ups, and we owe it to them and ourselves to take this fight as far as we can to right the wrongs of the past.

Countless numbers of lives have been cut short directly because of tobacco. A lot of things will kill you out there, but few are as expensive and damaging as tobacco.

Don’t get me wrong here, if you’re a smoker and proud of it, I’m not the one to tell you that you have no right to do so. This country was founded by more than a few wealthy

tobacco farmers who reaped enormous profits from the sale of their product.

Tobacco has always been popular among the people of this country. A large number of jobs in this country depend on tobacco’s products. Run into your local quickie mart or scan through any magazine on the waiting room table, and you’ll see what I mean.

Big Tobacco has many friends and signs a lot of people’s paychecks, but that doesn’t mean we need to weakly let them off the hook.

If your product reaps havoc on your customer’s health, it seems only fair that you pay to fix the damage you caused. When the entire industry willingly misleads its customer base and denies the findings of every new report of the ill effects of your product, it becomes harder to sympathize with their side.

It’s not like Nebraska hasn’t been ready for some action against Big Tobacco. This spring, the Nebraska Legislature passed LB 1070 establishing a trust fund for any of the money recovered from the tobacco companies to be used for public health and education programs.

The framework’s all there, we just need to take our battle to court to recover the damages done by Big Tobacco.

This won’t be so easy now that the initial passion of the debate has waned as more current issues have arisen. The president’s sex life and the threat to American lives by world terrorist organizations has removed the tobacco war from the spotlight.

That doesn’t mean the fight should end.

How much money is enough to really have an effect on those within the tobacco industry and the people who buy their products? That is a question that we’ll have to leave up to the attorneys, legislators and judges of this country.

All I know is that it should be higher – much, much higher.

Past efforts to tax tobacco products have had minimal effects on the industry. Court orders calling for Big Tobacco to reimburse the states for tobacco-related expenses have the potential to seriously hinder the industry.

Thanks to the attorney general and his staff for joining the fight to defend the taxpayers against an industry that has taken advantage of the public for far too long.

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