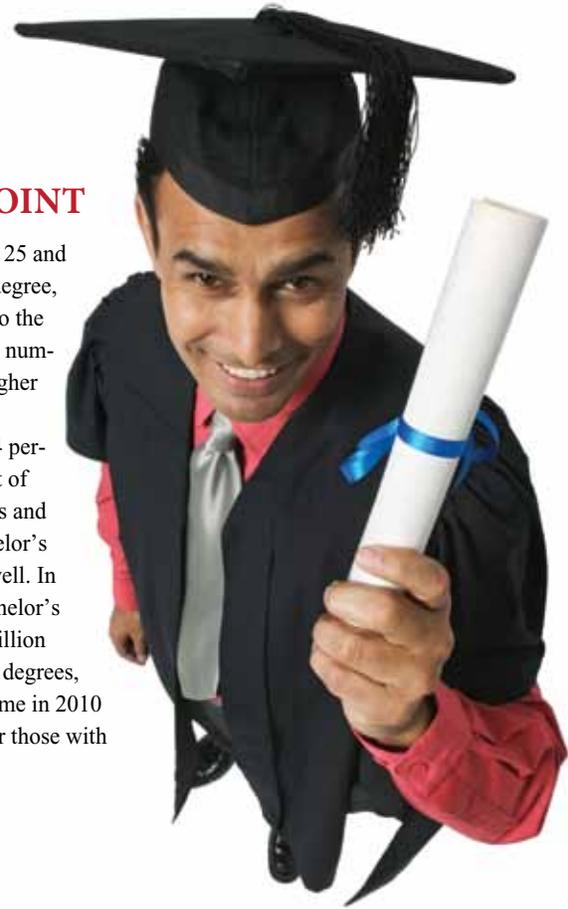


# 1 SHINE THE LIGHT

Sunshine Review, which promotes state and local government transparency, announced 214 winners of its third annual “Sunny Awards.” The awards honor the most open and accessible state and local government websites. The group judged websites on the availability of information on such things as budgets, meetings, audits and lobbying. This year, 10 state websites received an “A” (in order of points earned): Delaware, Indiana, Maryland, New York, California, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Washington and West Virginia. Half the local government awards came in six states: Florida (28), Texas (21), Illinois (19), Virginia (14), Ohio (10) and Pennsylvania (10). The group also generated a list of states that pay public employees the most: California, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Texas and Wisconsin.

# 2 EDUCATION HIGH POINT

More than 30 percent of Americans age 25 and older have earned at least a bachelor’s degree, the highest percentage ever, according to the Census Bureau. From 2001 to 2011, the number of Hispanics with a bachelor’s or higher degree increased by 80 percent, African Americans by 47 percent and whites, 24 percent. Fifty percent of Asians, 34 percent of whites, 20 percent of African Americans and 14 percent of Hispanics now have bachelor’s degrees. Women have seen a surge as well. In 2011, of the 61 million people with bachelor’s degrees, 30 million were men and 31 million were women. For those with bachelor’s degrees, the good news is that their average income in 2010 was \$58,000 compared with \$31,000 for those with only a high school diploma.



# 3 TEXT SECRETS

Parents can easily find out what phone numbers their children are texting to, but they can’t find out what they are texting without a court order. Arizona Senator Rich Crandall (R) wants to change that. He says the issue is important enough to start the discussion and has proposed a bill that would require cell phone companies to release kids’ text messages, but would allow them to charge a fee to do so. The bill, a first, faces some significant opposition. “Why don’t you take a flashlight and go in the closet and read the texts?” Senator Judy Burges (R) told the Arizona Republic after voting against it in committee.



# 4 H2O-CANADA

Quebec, Canada, is home to the world’s largest producer of hydroelectricity—the Hydro-Quebec power plant. The province contains 3 percent of the world’s fresh water, which it uses as its primary electricity resource. NCSL took a group of U.S. lawmakers to the area last fall to learn more about the policy issues and the technology of this clean, renewable energy. The tour “provided some very good insight into the possibility of expanding hydro power not only in Quebec, but in other parts of North America as well,” says Kansas Senator Stephen Morris (R), NCSL president. “The magnitude of the amount of electricity produced is very impressive.”



# 5 PASSWORD UNPROTECTED

The Maryland General Assembly has passed a bill to ban employers from asking any employee or job applicant to provide a username, password or other account information in order to gain access to their social networking website. According to a report by MSNBC, more and more government agencies and colleges are doing just that. About 75 percent of scholarship providers are deciding recipients based on the candidates’ social networking pages. They look for references to underage drinking and illegal drug use, provocative pictures, and racial slurs, anything they believe would reflect poorly on the scholarship, according to the San Francisco Chronicle. This has made the difference in several cases—with about on-third of applicants being denied a scholarship and one-fourth receiving one, based on the content of their pages.

## 6

**THE INCOME GAP**

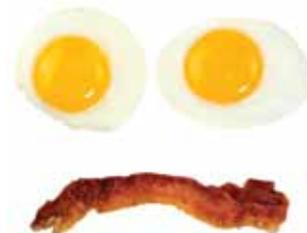
Income inequality has grown 18 percent since 1967, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Almost half that growth occurred in the 1980s, but has tapered off. Why this has occurred is up for debate. Some argue the Bush-era tax cuts widened the gap between the haves and have-nots, but others say it's a result of natural economic fluctuations. According to a new report by The Tax Foundation, although income inequality has been attributed to everything from the computer revolution and globalization to immigration and super-sized super-star salaries, the actual reason "might be better described as simply the reasonable outcome of a growing market economy." Whatever the reason, some areas of the country have larger gaps than others. The five counties with the largest disparities between the rich and the poor are: East Carroll Parish, La.; Edwards, Texas; New York, N.Y.; Mineral, Colo.; and Pitkin, Colo. The counties with the highest level of equality are: Loving, Texas; Kalawao, Hawaii; McPherson, Neb.; San Juan, Colo.; and Logan, Neb.



## 7

**BACON AND EGGS**

Iowa—the nation's leading pork and egg producer—is the first state to make it a crime to lie on a job application to get into a livestock operation to videotape animal abuse. Supporters felt it was necessary to protect legitimate farming operations. Animal welfare advocates argued against the measure, saying it would stifle efforts to publicize the poor treatment animals receive in certain farming practices. "I feel we did something that was needed," says Senator Joe Seng (D), sponsor of the bill. "It more than anything sends a message." At least seven other states have considered similar legislation, according to NCSL.



## 8

**LIBRARIES' LINK**

Residents of Hawaii now can visit their local library to watch the Legislature at work in the state capitol via streaming video. Library patrons can plug in their own headphones and watch legislative hearings, meetings and testimony live, through designated computers. The public library system worked with the state government for a year to be able to offer this service statewide. The Hawaii Legislature meets annually for 60 days, starting in mid-January.



## 9

**PRE-EXISTING EXPENSE**

High-risk insurance plans offered under the Affordable Care Act for people with pre-existing conditions have attracted far fewer participants than expected—50,000 instead of 375,000—according to a new report from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Claims costs for each patient are averaging \$29,000—more than twice the \$13,000 average for those enrolled in traditional state high-risk pools. Why? The report suggests that, since patients in the new program have not had health coverage for at least six months, they tend to have critical needs for immediate, expensive treatments. The state plans, previously established in all but 15 states, generally have higher premiums and require insurance industry contributions. Twenty-seven states operate their own high-risk programs, often in conjunction with previously established state pools; 23 states and Washington, D.C., have a federally run program. At least nine states have asked the federal government for more money to ensure their new high-risk pools don't run dry before 2014. That's the year insurers will be prohibited from denying coverage to anyone with a pre-existing condition.

## 10

**PLEDGE PASS**

Utah lawmakers have passed legislation requiring public middle and high school students to recite the Pledge of Allegiance once a week. State law already required elementary school students to make a daily pledge. Students will be allowed to opt out for religious or other reasons. It passed the Senate unanimously and the House 48-25. According to Fox News, the bill drew impassioned speeches from legislators.