Better Call IT
How can states lower the cost of providing public services while making them easier for constituents and businesses to use? Magic won’t help, but technology might. In a new report, the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation highlights the cost savings and efficiency gains some states already have achieved by, for example, replacing routine government employee tasks with self-service tools on the internet, mobile devices and kiosks. All told, states could save up to $11 billion combined over the next five years, the foundation says.

Disability Gap
America has more gaps than just the one between the 1 percent and everyone else. Another is the disparity in the employment rates between people with disabilities and those without. Nationally, 34.4 percent of people with disabilities ages 18 to 64 were employed in 2014, compared with 75.4 percent of people in that age group without disabilities, according to the 2015 Disability Statistics Annual Report published by the University of New Hampshire. Employment rates vary widely by state, with South Dakota in the top spot: 50.1 percent of its working-age residents with disabilities have jobs. Rounding out the top five are North Dakota, Iowa, Nebraska and Wyoming.

Future Broadway Stars?
Senator Jim Dabakis (D) and Representative Ken Ivory (R) are about as opposed as two people can be when it comes to the federal lands transfer movement—but they’re in harmony on “Hamilton,” the wildly popular hip-hop musical about the life of Founding Father Alexander Hamilton. Dressed in costume—Dabakis as England’s King George III, Ivory as Hamilton—the two hit the Senate floor with their best rhymes to urge colleagues to pass a resolution honoring the show’s composer, Lin-Manuel Miranda. Their showstopping style hit the mark: The resolution, which states that “Hamilton” has “revolutionized” Broadway and inspired students to learn their history, was passed in March. The show also received the Pulitzer Prize for drama.

Funds for Farmers
Like people starting careers everywhere, many young farmers are saddled with tens of thousands of dollars in student loan debt (the average was $28,950 per borrower in 2014), making it difficult to get financing to begin their own operations. Last year, a new program in New York let farmers who have graduated in the last two years apply for loan-forgiveness payouts. Total spending for the program is capped at $150,000 this year. Wisconsin lawmakers are considering a program that would forgive up to $30,000 for every participant who agrees to farm for five years.

Split Decision
In presidential contests, two of Nebraska’s five electoral votes go to the top overall vote-getter; the remaining three are awarded based on who wins in each of the state’s three congressional districts. The state votes overwhelmingly Republican, but there’s always a chance the electoral votes will be split, with one vote going to a Democrat, as happened in 2008 after Barack Obama won in the more urban district that includes Omaha. In April, Republicans were one vote short of advancing their plan to adopt a winner-take-all system. The Cornhusker State and Maine are the only split-vote holdouts.
House Poor
The nation’s residential hot spots—San Diego, Silicon Valley and some District of Columbia suburbs—appear to be cooling, while locations with a lower cost of living—Las Vegas, Phoenix and parts of Florida—are attracting new residents. The biggest factor behind the moves, for millennials and retirees alike, is the cost of housing, which can swallow 30 to 50 percent of household income, according to The Pew Charitable Trusts. Consider: The median home price in Santa Clara County, in Silicon Valley, is $950,000; in Las Vegas, it’s $216,800. Santa Clara’s 2014 median household income was $93,500, the highest in the nation; Las Vegas’ was $51,214.

Sharing Is Good
A new Florida law repeals the state’s 148-year-old ban on unmarried couples living together. Although the old ban was rarely enforced, a conviction was hardly pain-free: Cohabitation was a second-degree misdemeanor punishable by up to 60 days in jail or a $500 fine. Because of its wording, the old law did not apply to same-sex couples. Supporters of the repeal argued that the ban posed a threat not only to marriage-averse young singles but also to penny-pinching unwed seniors. Michigan and Mississippi are now the only states with cohabitation bans still on the books.

Common Ground
Under a new law in Washington, lottery sales, rather than the state’s general fund, will be used to pay for charter schools. The state Supreme Court found a law adopted by voters in 2012 to be unconstitutional because the schools’ unelected boards were making decisions about how to spend public money. In the new law, the Legislature redefined charter schools—they are no longer “common schools” like the state’s traditional public schools—and changed the funding source. Governor Jay Inslee (D), who said in a statement he still has reservations about charter schools’ management, let the bill become law without his signature. Another lawsuit is expected.

Tipple Tax
Those concerned by the social costs of excessive drinking—88,000 deaths a year being one of them—will find Maryland’s recent experience encouraging. In the 18 months after the state’s sales tax on alcohol went from 6 to 9 percent in 2011, alcohol sales fell by 4 percent, according to a recent report from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Liquor sales were down by 5.1 percent, beer sales by 3.2 percent and wine sales by 2.5 percent. Because sales reflect consumption, the findings suggest, though they don’t prove, that higher alcohol sales taxes reduce drinking, the university said.