

Recently my family and I were re-watching the movie My Big Fat Greek Wedding. It is quite a cute film with some very funny parts. If you haven't seen it, I recommend it highly. My girls love the idea that Windex cures everything. Of course, my favorite scene is where the main character decides to break the pattern of her life and improve it through taking some courses at her local community college.

The community college has certainly risen to new prominence in the last few years. I remember not long ago making jokes about community college students was a weekly event on The Tonight Show with Jay Leno. Now, perhaps because of the economy, people are turning to their local community college more and more. I have often spoken about our many vocational programs and their ability to get people trained for jobs that are open now, but a new report reminded me of the importance NCCC and other Kansas community colleges play in helping people get that four-year degree.

There is a new statistic I have seen recently that is very interesting. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC), of those who graduated with a bachelor's degree in the 2010-2011 academic year 45% had attended a community college on their way to completing the degree. Of that group 75% had gone to a community college for more than two terms.

In Kansas, that number is much higher. 65% of the 2010-2011 Kansas bachelor's degree graduates attended a community college on their way to completion. Kansas is tied for third in the nation with California and behind only Texas and Wyoming in the percent of students who went to community college while completing their four-year degree. Wow! Completion is the primary goal and 65% of those who completed in Kansas last year have not only their university to thank, but their local community college as well.

And why shouldn't this be true? Kansas has invested in community colleges across the state making it very easy to attend anywhere. The lower cost two-year colleges help families still attain the American Dream of a better life for their children despite the economic downturn. Active concurrent enrollment programs at nearly every high school in the state offered through the two-year college mean that students can start their degrees while enriching the junior and senior year. Educationally, the universities will tell you that community college transfer students have a higher GPA in junior level courses than their own "native" students. It's a great education at a great value.

And speaking of value, the statistics are revealing on the value of an education. While the current average unemployment rate for the U.S. is 7.6%, the rate for those who have a high school diploma and no college is a whopping 9.4%. For those who have attained a bachelor's degree unemployment is at 4.9%. That is quite a decrease.

The average salary in Kansas for those without any college training is \$25,267, with an associate's degree it's \$37,991, and with a bachelor's degree it jumps to \$57,461. The advantage of a bachelor's degree is clear.

Borrowing tens of thousands to get a four-year degree in order to make \$57,000 may not be the best economic decision, but if you attend your local community college first and earn an associate's degree you can cut that expense by half. Now it makes sense.

Last year 60% of the nearly 50,000 credit hours the 4,000 NCCC students earned were in transfer education classes. Our vocational programs like nursing and occupational therapy are extremely important to getting people back to work, but the lion's share of our students are on their way to a four-year degree.

As I said above, completion is the primary goal. We conducted our own student survey at NCCC and discovered that about 600 people had been on a track to finish their associate's degree in recent years and never finished. Most have transferred on to a university but never completed the two-year degree. Some students stop out and never finish that bachelor's degree, but would have the associate's degree if they would just transfer those credits back to us.

To reach these stop out students NCCC created a new initiative called the "No Hassle Tassel." The NCCC Board of Trustees has changed the transfer policy to make it easier for students to transfer in hours from other accredited institutions back to us to use toward completion. We got rid of the graduation fee as well.

NCCC is going to contact all of these past panther students and request a transcript from their college(s) or university. We'll verify the requirements for the No Hassle Tassel, which includes at least 18 credit hours from NCCC, and then we'll award them an associate's degree. There is no cost to the student from NCCC. We'll just send them the diploma in the mail. That's the No Hassle Tassel!

The importance of the community college in the American higher education system is rising. We help so many accomplish their educational goals with lower costs, convenient locations, excellent instruction, and great student service. NCCC is proud to be a part of this movement toward the American community college. Take that Jay Leno!