

I once knew a person that worked for the US Bureau of Engraving and Printing, the folks that print new US currency and destroys the old money as well. He told me a few stories about what it is like to work there and the incredible amount of security they go through every day to do their jobs to keep our currency supply safe. My friend worked in the money destroying department. When the currency gets too old or torn and deemed that it should be out of circulation it is replaced by new freshly-printed money. A bill only lasts about five years on the average before it is destroyed, so you can imagine that's a lot of bills coming through to be replaced.

But what happens to all of those old dollars? They shred them and recycle the material. "Paper money" as I called it as a kid, is a misnomer. It's actually made of cotton and linen, not paper. That's why when you accidentally wash money it doesn't dissolve like paper would. So they shred this fabric we call money.

But one interesting thing he told me I never forgot. The people who work in the destruction department are not allowed to call the bills "money." They have to call it, "material," "paper" or some other euphemism. Psychologically the Bureau wants the destruction workers to believe that what they are shredding has no value. It makes it easier to see billions of dollars go into the shredder and may make it less likely that one would be tempted to take some home with them (although they have lots of security in place for that – like jumpsuits with no pockets, for starters).

It's just "paper" they are destroying, nothing more. Mentally, it has no value. But why does it have value in the first place? Yes, it is backed by the "full faith and credit" of the government that issued it. But the real reason it has value is that we have all decided that it does. This got me thinking about degrees and certificates. Why does a college diploma have value? Because of the reputation of the college or university that issued the degree.

When you get a degree the college or university that issues that credential puts their stamp of approval on you. In order for your degree to have meaning, then the college that awarded you that degree has to have a good reputation for quality students. Recently there have been a rash of college closures, mostly in the private college sector, especially for-profit colleges. The folks who have degrees from those schools now have to wonder what value we, the rest of society, places on a degree from a closed college.

NCCC is one of the older community colleges in the country. Most community colleges got their start in the 1960s, but NCCC traces its history back to 1936 and Chanute Junior College. We are not the oldest in Kansas though. Just last week Fort Scott Community College celebrated 100 years! Congratulations FSCC!

The real tragedy is the students who were working on their degrees when the institutions closed. Some are reporting that their transcripts are gone forever. Next year a bill may be introduced in Congress that will create a national student data record system that will safeguard these transcripts so that the student is not left without a way to transfer their credits to another institution and complete their degree. Usually I'm not in favor of more government regulation in higher education, but after hearing about this issue, I support this one.

As I mentioned last month, colleges also need to actually graduate students to earn a good reputation. The for-profit colleges have a graduation rate of only about 35%. That's compared to the non-profit private college rate of 75% and the public college rate of 65%. No wonder many of the for-profit

institutions are going out of business. NCCC boasts the highest percentage of our career and technical education headcount earning a degree or certificate of any Kansas community college.

But longevity and graduation rate are just two ways a reputation is established and maintained. Students from that college have to go on to achieve great things for people to believe that the college did its job educating that student. NCCC has one of the highest salaries after graduation of any public institution in the state and the highest percentage employed after graduation of any community college in Kansas. Employers like our grads and pay them well! Our nursing program, for instance, has 100% placement rates and the second highest starting salary out of college among community college grads in Kansas! That's the way to establish a great reputation.

Having a sheepskin (and they really were made out of sheepskins for centuries until as recently as 1960 at some colleges) or diploma from a college or university is often a ticket to the middle class, to job prospects, and a better quality of life for you and your family. Degrees and certificates have meaning because we give it one and because of the reputation of the institution that gives it. The employees, trustees, and I will continue to work to maintain and increase the positive reputation of Neosho County Community College to make sure you can be proud of our college and all of its graduates.

If you have any questions about this column or anything else about NCCC please contact me at binbody@neosho.edu.