

I know a place where you can feed trash to a buffalo and he will happily accept it. And soon, some of our students will get that experience too! That place? Woolaroc Museum & Wildlife Preserve near Bartlesville, Ok.

I first visited this wildlife reserve and western history museum as a grade school kid. There are many exciting things to see there including animals from all over the world, fantastic Native American art and artifacts, and a buffalo that eats trash.

Okay, it's a fake buffalo head in the snack bar area that has a vacuum in its mouth that will suck up your lunch trash. But you have to admit, it's a pretty cool way to keep trash controlled. And it's what I remember best from the trip. Years later I took my own kids to see it, and soon a group of our NCCC students are headed to visit both the live buffalo there, as well as the famous fake one.

We all know college is about classes, tests, projects, labs, and learning. But, we also want students to have some incredible experiences as well. Recently several of our student clubs came together and journeyed to Kansas City to see an opera. I'll bet it was the first opera many of them have ever seen in their lives. Allen Murray, our music instructor, even arranged for our students to meet with one of the stars of the opera, which is pretty special. That group goes to regional theatre as well to see some wonderful plays and musicals.

One of our history classes takes a trip nearly every year to experience American history first hand. Over the years they have been all through Virginia, Washington D.C., New Orleans, Nashville, Charleston, S.C., and Savannah, GA., among others. The Upward Bound, Talent Search and STARS grants take students on a wide-range of cultural and educational adventures and experiences every year as well.

There have been trips to the World War I Museum, Wichita Treasures Museum, Crystal Bridges in Bentonville, and of course, our own excellent Safari Museum. The college has a large number of international students and we love showing them around the local area too! Branson, Missouri is a big hit with them.

But why do we spend money and time taking students around to these places? What is the return on investment?

It is simple really and somewhat ironic. Students who have these experiences, especially ones who make friends along the way, stay in college longer and complete their degrees at a much higher rate than those who don't. Conversely, students who just go to college and seemingly focus on the classes alone, without the outside experiences, drop out at a higher rate.

That seems counter-intuitive doesn't it? These kids out of class having fun at a Broadway-touring musical, or walking around civil war battlegrounds do better than the ones that went to class that day. However, the studies are conclusive. Those who fully experience what college has to offer and make friends along the way do better than those who don't. People tend to stick around a college where they are having fun learning and making connections with fellow students. My oldest daughter Abrielle went on the history class trip to Washington D.C. when she was at NCCC. She still keeps in touch with her fellow students who were on the trip with her.

At NCCC we are measured every year on something called the Student Success Index. The index looks at students who have achieved or are currently in process to achieve their educational goal vs. those who

drop out. We are also ranked by how high our success index is as compared to the other community colleges in Kansas. I'm proud to say this year we are 4th out of the 19 in student success, up two slots over last year! The No. 3 college beat us by just 0.1%. We're coming for you No.3! So, focusing on clubs and experiences works!

I remember when I first went to college as a 17-year-old from rural Oklahoma. I sang in the university choir, an optional activity. One day the instructor brought in a string quartet to accompany a small group of us while we sang. As they began to play my facial expression changed. I was stunned and moved by the sound. The instructor saw the look on my face and asked, "You've never heard string instruments played live before, have you?" I just shook my head and said, "You can hear the wood." The instructor was beaming and was moved as well. This is why he got into education, to give that kind of magical experience to someone who have never had it before.

So not only are the students getting friendships that last a lifetime, memories that they will cherish, and lessons and experiences that just can't come from books and the classroom, they are also more likely to complete their educational goals. We, the educators, get something too; a chance to see and experience these amazing things like it's the first time through their eyes and feel the moving experience of sharing it with others.

Trips and experiences are difficult to arrange, costly, time consuming, and a bit scary (ever been responsible for the health and safety of 20+ students while on the road?). But they are worth it in so many ways! If you have someone in college, encourage them to get involved, take a trip (my youngest went to Europe this summer as part of a K-State class – she loved it!), join the clubs and activities. Chances are, they won't regret it!

And they may get to feed trash to a (fake) buffalo!

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