

This November, Jen and I celebrated 22 years of home ownership at our house in Chanute. When we first moved in, I was asked where the new house was. I would explain the address and, if the listener was a life-long Chanute resident, they would reply, "Oh! The Barr's house!" Yes, we bought the house from the Barrs. Invariably, the next sentence would be something like, "I learned to swim in your pool!"

The house we bought in 2003 is not the same house that it is today. When we bought it, it had wooden shingle siding that we replaced with fiberboard. A giant hailstorm ultimately resulted in a new roof. The back patio was refurbished with a new shade system. Trees have died and were replaced. A small extra house on the property was demolished in favor of a bigger backyard. Recently, we replaced the old broken sidewalk with a new one that looks really good!

Over 22 years every room of the house was changed. Bathrooms renovated, paint, carpet and wood floors renewed. Sometimes several times. The den area has evolved from the Toy Room to Club Inbody, a teenage hangout and dance studio complete with a disco ball and laser light generator. It awaits its next transformation to something grandchild oriented, if I ever have some of those, that is. No pressure girls.

New plumbing, HVAC unit, updated wiring, renovated kitchen, replacement appliances, and on and on. It's all part of the joys of long-term home ownership. Other changes are being talked about for the future as well, along with those changes you don't quite plan for, like the broken branch that went through the roof this year.

That original house we bought in 2003 had four people living there--my wife and I, as well as a 3-year-old and a 1-year-old. Now, just two of us call it home. That change was a tough one, but not unexpected.

If you compare the house we bought in 2003 to the house we have now, is it the same house?

That reminds me of something I learned in philosophy class many years ago as an undergraduate--The Ship of Theseus question. It goes like this; The Ship of Theseus was a famous craft that, according to Greek myth, was used by King Theseus of Athens to rescue children from King Minos and the dreaded minotaur. The ship was so celebrated that they brought it out every year over decades to commemorate the event. Over the years, the various parts of the ship had to be replaced due to use and old age until none of the original parts of the ship remained. The philosophical question is this - After all the parts have been replaced, is it still the Ship of Theseus, or is it something new?

Our strategic plan at NCCC has become, in its own way, a ship of Theseus. And that has really paid off for the college. Here's what I mean.

Traditionally strategic plans in higher education last 5 or more years. College leadership works to pull data together from numerous sources, talk with constituencies and then, with a great deal of pageantry, releases a new five-year plan. Those plans usually have a clever name like "Outlook 2030" or "Shaping the Future" or something else that the marketing team had fun coming up with. And no plan is complete until it has a full-color slick brochure with lots of pictures of happy students in college logo clothes doing happy things.

Then the work is supposed to begin making the plan happen. Sometimes it does happen and sometimes things change.

For instance, suddenly there is a new state program that greatly incentivizes technical education, so you must change plans around to take advantage of that. Or there is a Great Recession or perhaps a pandemic that throws a wrench into almost everything. Maybe a new business comes to town, and you quickly create a new program to help get workers trained. Perhaps you have the opportunity to buy an old factory and a generous family plus some successful grant writing creates a \$6.4 million career and technical education center within just 18 months. Maybe another generous family wants to help you update your auditorium and make it wonderful.

I know, none of this could ever happen, but let's just imagine it did for the sake of this column. (That's a joke, by the way. It all happened and a lot more.)

Here's another issue; the average tenure of a community college president is around four years, not five. Let's say a college has this plan, then one or two years into it, the president leaves and a new one comes in. The new person doesn't like that old president's plan, so they start a new one. All that planning for nothing. Then another year waiting for the new plan to come out. A year goes by, and the new president gets happy feet and leaves. Then the cycle repeats. I've seen this a lot.

I work with the Higher Learning Commission from time-to-time reaffirming accreditation for other colleges and universities in a 16-state area (for the most part). It's amazing how many times when I come to their campus to check out their strategic planning, I got there right in the seam between wrapping up one five-year plan and starting the next so that they essentially have no plan at all right now. Not great from my perspective as a peer-reviewer.

When one goes back and examines if they accomplished those five-year plans, often they don't because the situation changed too fast, the president left, or they ran out of time or money.

That's why, shortly after I became president, we abandoned the traditional five-year strategic plan in favor of one that blends short, medium, and long-term goals. Some are one year, others multiple years and a few push out further than five years.

The plan updates every year with some items coming off the plan, either because they were accomplished, or because we are taking a new direction to adapt to a changing situation. We then add new items as we follow requests, adapt to workforce needs and, like my house, address space needs at the campus as funding allows. All while looking at our data on what the college has accomplished and what needs attention, then using that information to change the plan.

If you look at our plan right now, it is full of 1–5-year goals blended together. It doesn't have a fancy name or a slick brochure. But what it does have is results. (Ok, we wound up making a brochure because the accreditor's peer-reviewer wanted one. Sometimes we are a bit ahead of some folk's traditional mindsets about how something is supposed to look. If it makes them happy, then great, here's a brochure.)

We continually make progress on our goals as defined by our data and approved by the board. In fact, the plan doubles as my president's goals for the year and progress on those goals help

determine if I get hired for another year at the college or not. So, for me, there is real jeopardy tied to the plan.

With those completed items we have seen the college grow with new programs, incredible graduation rates, improved and expanded facilities, met workforce needs. increased community involvement, and happier college employees. And there are so many great things on the horizon including updating the auditorium to become the Mih Family Fine Arts Center (more on that soon!).

The plan we use now is the same format as the one we created over 15 years ago, but it is not the same plan. It is the Ship of Thesus as the various initiatives have all changed, but the plan itself remains.

Our house is still our house even though only two people live there now. The color is different, and the Toy Room is gone. But I'm as proud of my house now as I was in 2003. A lot prouder, to be honest.

The same is true with the college. Our planning and execution of that plan have moved the college from where it was 20 years ago. The college will never stop moving forward! The Ship of Theseus sails again!

If you have any questions about this column, Greek mythology, or anything else, please write me at binbody@neosho.edu.