

This is a big year for Jen and me. This summer will mark our 30<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Only about 26% of marriages make it 30+ years, so we have beaten the odds! And that's even more amazing when you consider Jen is only 39 years old (as I have been contractually obligated to say in any public forum).

It's been an amazing 30 years. As we look back at our lives together, we have raised two kids, achieved success in our working lives, created a home for our family, and grew older together. Well, I grew older anyway.

At each one of these anniversaries, Jen and I do a look back at the year that was to mark the occasion and look for ways to improve our relationship. During our anniversary dinner we talk about our relationship both good and bad and ways to improve it through a process we lovingly refer to as "contract negotiations."

Yearly negotiations are changing though. In the first few years it was easy to talk about things we could improve on. However, now it is getting harder and harder to find suggestions to give my wife on ways to improve as she nears perfection. She seems to have a much easier time coming up with ways I can get better as a husband.

It is healthy to examine your marriage from time to time to see what needs to be improved, what needs to be changed, and what should be celebrated.

Likewise at the college we spend time looking back at the year that was to see what we need to fix, but also what we should celebrate and this year we have a lot to celebrate! It was an amazing year at Neosho County Community College!

This year saw NCCC start three new programs at the Mitchell Career and Technology Center, Plumbing, Electrical, and HVAC. We have never launched three programs at the same time before this year. Two of the three programs opened completely full! Usually, you have to wait a few years for a program to build in size, but not for these programs!

We also grew significantly in enrollment! The college was up about 8.5% over the previous year in credit hour production. We were up nearly across the board in Ottawa, Chanute, online, hybrid and at our off-campus locations. In fact, according to the fall enrollment data, NCCC had the highest percentage growth in headcount of any of the 19 community colleges.

And in terms of fall credit hours, for the first time ever, NCCC was the largest community college in Southeast Kansas! Back in 2003 when I arrived as Vice President, NCCC was fifth out of six community colleges in the area. Now we are No. 1! It only took 20+ years.

We received the largest single donation in the college's 88-year history from a wonderful family. That donation is going to be used for a planned renovation and expansion of our auditorium into a performing arts center! You'll be hearing more about that in the coming months.

Our athletic programs did an amazing job this year! Both men's and women's soccer were co-champions of the Jayhawk conference with the men winning the NJCAA Region VI Championship as well. Head Coach Elliot Chadderton won Coach of the Year honors for both the men and women's teams!

Softball had an excellent season as well, finishing 39-16, being named the No. 2 seed at the regional tournament and garnering a nationally ranking. Head Coach Kim Alexander won Coach of the Year honors in the conference as well!

Volleyball ended the season ranked No. 15 nationally with an all-American student-athlete. Track and Cross Country had numerous all-Americans, was nationally ranked, and had one of the best seasons in program history. Women's basketball hosted the first regional playoff game in their history. NCCC Spirit program won the Region VI championship in their division!

The student-athletes did all this while also putting in thousands of hours of community service, and earning a departmental GPA of 3.26 for the year! Wow!

This year we had a group of economists conduct an economic impact study for all Kansas community colleges and NCCC specifically. It showed that for every dollar the state and county taxpayers invest in NCCC they get back \$2.80 in area economic impact due to the jobs created in our service area. That's an amazing return on investment! It's even better for our students. For every dollar a student at Neosho invests in their education, they get back \$9.70 in improved wages! That's a tremendous return on investment! Who says higher education doesn't pay? Try investing in a career and technical education program at NCCC instead!

One of the hardest things we accomplished this year had to do with our accreditation. Every ten years the college is visited by its accreditor, the Higher Learning Commission, as part of the reaffirmation process. Every aspect of the college is scrutinized according to the five criteria of accreditation. Five peer-reviewers review an 84-page assurance argument we wrote with thousands of linked pages of evidence. They then spend three days on campus inspecting everything and interviewing people. It has taken years to prepare for this visit, both in working according to the criteria, but also in writing this assurance argument and documenting all the great things we have done. At the end of the day, we received full reaffirmation of our accreditation with no follow-up required! That is a rare occurrence!

I am so very proud of these and many other accomplishments that the college, its employees and students achieved in this last year. They have done AMAZING work, and it should be celebrated. Great job to everyone!

Soon year 89 will start at the college, my 22<sup>nd</sup> at NCCC, and my 15<sup>th</sup> as President. There are some awesome things on the agenda for next year that I'll preview in an upcoming column (sneak peek – new automotive program, enrollment up again for summer and looking up for fall, new outdoor plaza at Chanute!) I'm as excited about the future as I am about the present moment, and our incredible past.

Jen and I are headed to a fancy restaurant this weekend to conduct our yearly contract negotiations to see what needs to be improved and celebrated in our marriage so that we can start our 31<sup>st</sup> year as a couple. I need to work on putting my phone down during dinner. She needs to stop falsely accusing me of hiding her keys and jewelry. (The jewelry she forgot she moved to a new location, and the keys were actually found in her pocket. I got an apology in the form of fresh cookies for those false accusations.) I'll bet we decide to renew the marriage contract for another year,

because there are cookies involved. Oh yeah, and love, too. But also cookies. Happy anniversary, Jen!

If you have any questions about the college, making a marriage last 30 years, Jennifer's Monster Cookie recipe, or how one can be perpetually 39 years old, please contact me at [binbody@neosho.edu](mailto:binbody@neosho.edu).