

Soon I'll be taking my family (formerly just four of us, now six with sons-in-law added) on a short vacation. Such vacations take quite a lot of planning to pull off well. Not as much as weddings mind you, but still some coordination.

There are logistic issues such as driving, airfare, parking, accommodation issues, activities to choose, packing the right clothes, sites to see, and on and on. A new planning aspect this year is the challenge of trying to find a few days on six calendars to get together. All four of the "kids" are relatively new at their jobs, so in some cases they don't have a lot of vacation days built up. It's been like trying to organize D-Day to find a date that will work with everyone. Even after planning this for about a year, one person will have to pull an all-night shift then sleep on the plane. Sorry Josh.

Despite all these issues and challenges, it has been fun to plan it all. Sometimes the best laid plans don't turn out like you hope. In our case, the family picked Las Vegas as our travel destination. The family is all over 21 now, with my wife at 35 (never hurts to score a few points with the monthly column), so all can enjoy what Vegas has to offer. We have dinner reservations in place, show tickets purchased and a great hotel right on the Strip. So it appears the plan is going to work. Except...

I don't know if you saw the news out of Las Vegas this month, but they recorded the highest temperature ever last week – 122 degrees. Yikes! They will be having a cold snap, dipping the high down to 110 degrees while we are there. Yes, I know it is a "dry heat," but come on. That's hot. It's what life is like inside your clothes dryer. So maybe Las Vegas in July (when I could get all six together) was not the best planning.

Planning is so exciting for me at the college as well. The board and I share a vision of the college and what it could become over time, and it is so exciting to see that happen. I have started my 15th year as President of NCCC, my 22nd at the college, and I have seen that vision become a reality, year by year. Some years the progress is slow, others we leap forward. But, I still remember where we were in 2003 when I got here, and where we are now. The progress has been remarkable.

We are getting ready for the 2024-2025 academic year right now! We have some exciting things planned. Soon, we will break ground on the Student Union plaza. This project, paid for by donations and by the Student Union fee assessed to students, will take care of two issues at once.

First, it solves a storm water issue for the building. Longtime readers of this column may remember that our gym floor was flooded twice in about a year's time. This planned project will put in an improved storm water management piping system and drain.

But, nobody wants an ugly giant drain on the side of the Union, so we are turning a negative into a positive by putting in an outdoor plaza complete with tables and chairs, a fire pit, and shade sails. It will be a wonderful outdoor gathering place for students, employees and community members. We should break ground in August and may be complete in November, (weather willing), just in time to try out the fire pit!

We began planning for the plaza in 2019, then 2020 happened, greatly delaying that project. But now we are moving forward! Plans often must be adjusted, and that's OK too.

We plan to open our new Automotive Technology program this academic year as well. The new lab is nearly complete at the Mitchell Career and Technology Center, and it looks great. We have a lot of interest in the new program from perspective students. Hopefully all goes as planned there as well!

We have other advancements coming up, including a new greenhouse on the Chanute campus that will be an excellent addition to the science program at NCCC. We are also making improvements to the safety of the baseball field that you may notice as you drive by the campus.

We will see some changes academically this year as we lower the graduation requirement for many associate degrees from 64 credit hours to 60. This is to be in compliance with a Kansas Board of Regents (KBOR) effort to lower the bachelor's degree to 120 credit hours in most cases. That will mean a faster path to a degree for our students and a little bit cheaper as well.

Behind the scenes we have invested in improving our technology infrastructure with more reliable Wi-Fi, and faster connections to the internet. Most importantly we have enhanced our approach to our main software system that runs nearly every aspect of the college, including the online campus, registration, accounts payable and receivable, payroll, financial aid, etc. This new hosted and managed system should increase system reliability and responsiveness.

These somewhat hidden academic and computer advancements are critical. In many ways, they are much more important to the student than the fire pit. It's just hard to see those advancements when you drive by the campus!

This is just a handful of things we will be trying to advance this year. The full list is called the Strategic Plan, and the trustees use this plan to keep the college moving forward while holding me accountable for its progress. The plan is not just a single year long, it goes out much further with 31 items to be advanced.

One huge item that is coming in the next few years is the much-needed renovation of the auditorium at the Chanute campus. That structure has not been renovated since it was built in 1968, so we got our money's worth out of it. Thanks to a wonderful lead donation from the Mih Family Trust we will be moving forward with turning that simple auditorium into a full performing arts center! We still need some help to do that, so you will hear about a capital campaign to raise funds to make it happen. It's going to be a wonderful asset to the community! Stay tuned!

Jen and I will be packing our bags and meeting up with the kids to head to Las Vegas. I am more looking forward to the time together than the experience at Vegas. I hope we make some wonderful memories and that the plan actually works, aside from the heat!

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