

Let me start this column by saying I love my Mother-in-Law, Judy, very much. For those of you who have followed my writing for a while, you know that Judy has been the inspiration for many columns. From the cat she accidentally kidnapped, to leaving a shoe behind in the driveway on the way to the restaurant, to her snake-protection system at her house, and many other tall but true tales, she provides a lot of great material for me just by being herself.

Of her often over-the-top traits that I enjoy, chief among them has to be her opinions about everything. Judy has very strong opinions on almost every subject. Just ask her, she'll tell you. If she sees something that bothers her, she has no qualms with letting the powers that be know exactly how she feels about it. She is a purveyor of the lost art of the letter. And no one is exempt from a Judy Letter of Dissatisfaction.

Once she wrote the author of a book she read to let him know that she loved the book except for the ending and that he should consider republishing the story with a new ending. She did not enjoy the new "grind" of her loose tea, so she had to let Lipton know that. Of course, every politician - local, state, and national, - has gotten a letter from my Mother-in-Law on a variety of subjects, as you can imagine.

I think my favorite letter she wrote was to the folks at the Disney Channel. Right after she got satellite TV at her house she noticed on the electronic guide that the movie "Honey, I Shrunk the Kids" was on the Disney Channel often. Too often in her opinion. So she wrote the CEO of Disney to let him know that they should quit playing that movie so much. Keep in mind, she never watched the Disney Channel in the first place, she just thought they needed her opinion on this important topic of kid shrinking. She got a nice letter back that it was not the movie she was seeing on the schedule, but rather a TV series with the same name with multiple episodes. Crisis solved.

Community colleges get their fair share of criticisms as well, some deserved some not so much. Chief among these concerns is that community colleges don't adequately prepare students for university, and that we don't graduate a high percentage of students. And much like my Mother-in-Law may not have fully understood what the Disney Channel was showing, the data discounts these concerns.

Let's look at that first complaint that community college students who transfer are not as prepared as students who start at university straight from high school and therefore don't graduate. That complaint makes sense in a way. To get into most universities a high school student needs to be on a difficult curriculum track, graduate near the top of the class and/or have a good standardized test score on the ACT or SAT to get into those institutions. To get into a community college, one just has to have "the ability to benefit." That's why we are referred to as, "open door institutions." It's easy to come to the conclusion that the cream of the crop from high school will graduate at a higher rate than students who got into college without high GPAs or test results. But you would be wrong.

What happens when our community college students transfer on to university and mix with those of the best and brightest from high school? They out-perform them. A recent study by the Jack Kemp Cooke Foundation showed that community college students graduated at a slightly higher rate (75%) than students who started at university as freshmen (73%).

At NCCC, our local data backs up this national study. For NCCC students, we have found that those who transfer on to Kansas public institutions have a junior-level grade point average at or above the students

who started there as freshmen. So they are performing at the same level or sometimes a little higher at junior-level courses than the “native” students who have been at the university for two years already.

The second criticism of community colleges is that our graduation rate is too low. That comment has some basis in fact. Since the 1980s when colleges had to report on graduation rates to the US Government they had only one measuring stick – of those who started, what was the percentage that got a degree. Not surprisingly, that number was shockingly low at community colleges, usually hovering around 25%. The public university rate is about 58%.

However, many of our students do not come to community college to get an associate’s degree. They often come to “take their basics” before transferring on to university. And why not. The general education classes transfer easily to university, cost about a third of what they cost at most universities, and are taught in small classes with a fulltime experienced instructor with multiple degrees, not in an auditorium or by a graduate assistant.

The US Department of Education now recognizes that community college students often don’t come for a degree. The department has changed its definition of student success at community college to expand beyond just getting a degree to now include those who successfully transfer on to university. So if a student leaves a community college one semester and immediately enrolls in a university the next semester, then that is a successful community college student.

Once this is taken into account, the success rate (graduates and successful transfers) for community colleges goes up to 60%. That’s higher than the public university graduation rate of 58%. And WAY higher than the for-profit university graduation rate of 23%.

At NCCC our success rate is 61.6%, so we are a bit above the national rate of 60%, and I’m very proud of that.

There is no doubt that there are many things we need to do as a college to improve. And we look forward to hearing suggestions as to how we can get better. We have many steps left on our journey to becoming the premier community college in Kansas (which is part of our Board’s Vision for NCCC), but we are on the right path.

And Judy, keep those letters coming. Your opinions matter. All of them.

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