

There is an exciting bill working its way through the state legislature right now that has the potential to greatly benefit NCCC and all community colleges that offer technical education. Before I tell you about it and how it might help us, I need to tell you how things work today.

Imagine for a moment that you sold shoes. In your store you have everything from cheap flip-flops, to nice athletic shoes, to Prada dress shoes, to battery-operated heated snow boots. (There is a subtle hint in this list to my wife for my next birthday, and it is not the Prada dress shoes.) Now imagine that by state law you had to offer every shoe in the store at the same low price. The flip-flops, the dress shoes, and the boots were all the same price. For those flip-flops (that my students wear in the dead of winter, burr!) you might make out ok as the business owner. But for those fancy boots or those Italian dress shoes you would lose your shirt if you sold too many. You would buy the expensive shoes from the manufacturer, and have to sell them at a considerable loss every time, thanks to the state.

Believe it or not, this is the reality of the current state funding situation for community colleges in Kansas. With apologies to Gertrude Stein, to the State a credit hour is a credit hour is a credit hour. We receive the same state funding for a general education class, like history, with 30 or so in class, one instructor and maybe a few maps and videos, as we do for a nursing class with 8-10 students allowed in a clinical setting, numerous supplies, expensive equipment, multiple instructors, and required administrators. (This is a vast over-simplification of the state community college funding formula. Believe me, there is not enough space in this paper to give you a full understanding of the current formula, but, essentially, all credit hours produced are funded the same.)

To make up for the difference between what we receive from the State and what the program actually costs, we charge the students extra fees in those programs, and move whatever “profits” we make from general education courses over to the more expensive offerings. This works as long as the fees aren’t too high to keep people from enrolling, the “profits” from the less expensive courses are not needed elsewhere to pay the bills, and the expensive programs stay small enough that you don’t have a lot of loss. In other words, if you keep your overhead down, sell a lot of flip-flops and don’t sell a lot of Prada, you should be ok.

The State is calling for the community colleges to expand our technical programs to get people – those right out of high school, those who are under-employed, and those who have been laid off – retrained and certified for the new economy. The community colleges of the state are the workforce creation engines for Kansas and we welcome the State’s challenge.

However, these programs are expensive and expensive at a time when we have seen dramatic reductions in state aid and county valuations. It is not surprising then that Kansas community colleges are more than a little reluctant to expand these programs. We are asking for help to carry out the task of getting people back to work.

For the last few years the community colleges and the Technical Education Authority (TEA), a division of the Kansas Board of Regents, have been working to come up with a new funding formula that

differentiates between general education courses and technical courses. We studied everything that makes up the total expense of a course such as instructor costs, seat limitations, supplies and equipment costs – you name it. The plan we came up with places all courses taught into one of seven levels or tiers from Tier 0, where history and algebra reside, to Tier 6 for expensive courses in nursing and other similar programs. Lovingly referred to as the “Cost Model,” these tiered courses, and the enrollment a college receives for them, result in what the college needs in revenue to offer the program. The State then would pay a percentage of these costs, relying on student tuition and local support to make up the rest. At long last, we would get more money for the Prada shoe than we do for the flip-flop, so to speak. It will then be fiscally possible to expand our technical education offerings as well as properly fund the programs we currently have.

All this is covered in Senate Bill 143, a measure that would remove the old funding formula and let the Kansas Board of Regents replace it with this Cost Model system.

The passage of this bill matters a great deal to NCCC. About 40% of our courses are technical and therefore tiered. We have the highest enrollment of any two-year nursing program in the state, as well good enrollment in other tiered programs such as welding, construction, surgical technology and occupational therapy assistant, and on and on. NCCC has one of the biggest “gaps” in the state in terms of percentage between what we are currently funded and what we would be funded in future years if this new formula is put in place. The plan is to put any “new” state money beyond what community colleges received this year into the cost model formula and then funding the colleges according to who has the biggest gap first. This will set us on the path to make NCCC the premier technical education provider in Kansas.

Of course, passing SB 143 is only the first step. The tricky next step is that the State has to fund it. This year it looks unlikely that we will be funded beyond what we received in the past. But with the new formula in place and when the State continues to recover, the future of technical higher education in Kansas looks very bright indeed. The funding shoe will finally be on the other foot. Keep your fingers crossed!

And, Jennifer, don't forget about those boots for my birthday.

As always I welcome your comments about this column or anything else at binbody@neosho.edu, or give me a call.