

I was going to get to sleep in! The college was closed on January 3rd and Jen still had work so she was up and out that morning while I was still sleeping. It was glorious, until... My security system alarm went off full blast! I shot out of bed wondering why Jen armed the system as she left!?! As it turned out, it was not a burglar.

My carbon monoxide alarm had gone off in part of the house. Carbon monoxide is a colorless and odorless poisonous gas that kills at least 430 people each year in the United States. Frankly, I had forgotten that my smoke detector, which is tied into my alarm system, included a carbon monoxide detector too. When I installed it, I thought that was a great feature, although I have never experienced that particular alarm in my life. The smoke detector however goes off plenty, especially when Jen makes her famous Melted Potatoes.

The alarm company calls the fire department automatically for carbon monoxide and it wasn't very long before there was a knock on my door. The firefighters traced it back to my furnace, which, it turns out, was leaking the poisonous gas. I should not have been too surprised. That furnace for the family room (which we dubbed Club Inbody) was OLD. The brand name was "The Weather King," which I have to say is a great name for a furnace. However, cool name aside, they stopped making Weather Kings in 1986. So the King was Dead, and he tried to take us all with him on his way out by gassing us.

I was very glad that my smoke detector had a carbon monoxide detector, but to be honest, I didn't buy it for that reason. I just wanted the smoke detector. It was a good thing it did though.

Setting up automatic sensors and detectors is a good thing. It allows you to move through your day, and lets the system keep you informed of when things need your attention.

At the college we have a number of these automatic sensors for things like HVAC and internet. But beyond that we are constantly checking other areas too to see where problems lie and get them fixed before they get dangerous to the effort of effectively carrying out our mission.

The college has four main purposes – student learning, student success, accountability to stakeholders and meeting community needs. NCCC does a yearly check of these four main purposes of the college in a process called the Institutional Effectiveness Dashboard. Unlike the carbon monoxide detector that you install and change the battery every six months or so, our dashboard requires a good deal of effort, but it is worth it.

We gather 300 data items from various sources to measure how we are doing on those four purposes. We conduct surveys of our students, employees and the community. We complete state and federal reports and pull items from those. We maintain and advance our national and program-level accreditations and use items from those reports. We satisfy grant requirements, measure hours spent by students and employees helping the community, and invite in outside auditors and regulators.

Each one of those 300 data items is brought before our Executive Committee to be discussed and rated. Problem areas are identified as well as successes celebrated. It takes hours to go through it all, but it's worth it to find the areas that need work, to head off issues before they grow and to see what is working well. Steve Dowell, our Dean for Assessment and Institutional Effectiveness heads up this effort and does an amazing job.

The final product is revealed to the Board at a public meeting every January and to the college as a whole at the spring in-service. The data is used to shape our strategic planning process and look for efforts that can improve the scores.

So how did we do on those scores? Really well in many areas! I was happy to see that our student learning indicators went up this last year, even with COVID looming over everything we tried to do. Our learning assessments on critical thinking were much improved and that helped bring the score up.

However, COVID played a huge role in lowering our scores on meeting community needs. We were not able to get out in the community much and we limited invitations to outside groups on campus, especially in the early days of COVID. Now that we have slowly reopened the college to outside groups and allowed more volunteerism, I expect those numbers to go up in future years.

I rest a little easier at night now knowing that the carbon monoxide detector is there silently protecting my family from a danger that I cannot detect otherwise. It gives me a little peace of mind knowing it is there doing its job.

Likewise, while the Institutional Effectiveness Dashboard is a lot of work and sometimes gives me bad news, it is important that we constantly review what we are doing to improve our college to make it as good as it can be. Ignorance of a problem is not bliss. It can be very dangerous.

My suggestion, get a carbon monoxide detector. You'll sleep easier. And if you see the fire department at my house in the future you can guess that Melted Potatoes are on the menu.

If you have any question about this column or anything else, please email me at binbody@neoshu.edu.