

Here is the true parable of the Empty Flag Pole and the Dry Fountain. When I was much younger, with a full head of hair, I might add, I worked as the broadcasting instructor at community college in another state. This college was great at many things, including its academic programs, its athletics, and its student achievement. But on campus it had two very noticeable things that really bothered me – an empty flag pole and a dry fountain.

NCCC has a flag pole and we proudly fly the US Flag as well as the Kansas State Flag every day. If we are ever late putting it up in the morning we often get a phone call about that, so we know what is expected.

Also at NCCC we have a fountain. It's a very popular item on the Chanute Campus with folks taking walks by it, sitting on the park benches that surround it, taking selfies near it, etc. A few students liked it too much and kept trying to "ride" the panther on the top of the fountain. We had to add cameras and some barriers but since then the panther has been left untouched.

One of the first reactions I got about the fountain was about the fact that we were turning it off at midnight. The caller wanted to know if we could keep it on all night, so we have some insomniacs and late-night visitors can enjoy it at any hour. We do drain the fountain every winter to keep the cold weather from damaging it. However, come spring, we fill it back up again and enjoy it for months.

But at my past college of employment the flag pole remained empty no matter what time of day and the fountain in the center of campus was bone dry, no matter the season. When a new president arrived at this campus he wondered the same thing I did.

"Why is the flag pole always empty?" he asked. The head of maintenance explained (and remember this is a true story), "Well, sir, when you put up the flags the wind here can be pretty rough on them. They get damaged and soon, you have to spend money on buying a new flag."

"I see," said the President.

"Not only that," the head of maintenance continued, "we would have to have someone go out each day and raise the flag. Plus they have to find out if it is a Half-Staff day or a normal day. Then at the end of the day they have to take it down and all that takes time."

"I understand. What about the dry fountain?" inquired the President. "Oh, that broke years ago, and you know, it's going to take money to fix it. Plus you have to drain it each winter and fill it back up so that takes time too," the head of maintenance told him.

Needless to say, the new president was not happy with this response. While it was cheaper and easier to have an empty flag pole and a dry fountain, it was a symbol of a couple of troubling things, being poor stewards of what they were given, and being fully unaware of what image you are portraying. A dead fountain in the center of campus says we don't care about what we have and we are going to let it deteriorate. The empty flag pole said we are lazy and maybe even unpatriotic.

Not surprisingly the new president found these arguments unconvincing. By the end of the day, the flags were back up on the flag poles and an engineering firm had been hired to come see what needed to happen to fix the fountain.

Within a few months a grand computer controlled fountain was working complete with lights that did really cool shows every few minutes. It became very popular. So much so that I pointed a live camera at it and broadcast "Fountain Cam" over the college's cable TV channel when we not airing other programming (I was the broadcasting instructor). I know of several couples that got engaged in front of that fountain (and recorded it on cable TV to have a record of it.)

If the college couldn't afford to fix the fountain it should have been torn down. If the staff was so busy they couldn't raise a flag, schedules should have been rearranged. And if the college really couldn't afford a flag, then you have bigger problems to solve.

At NCCC when I arrived in 2003 we had a problem with the grounds being overgrown. The new President who hired me, Dr. Vicky Smith, made it a priority to have the grounds looking sharp every day. She knew the truth, image matters and an overgrown lawn sent the wrong image.

Taking care of what we have and making it better is something that this President and the board believe in. While upkeep of college facilities is always a work in progress we continue to try to be a good steward of what we have been given by the taxpayers and donors.

Over my tenure as President we have added a new campus at Ottawa, replaced an aging softball field, built a baseball clubhouse, renovated the science labs, added a simulation hospital to the Chanute campus, renovated and expanded dining space to the Student Union, and on and on.

Recently, you may have seen that we are replacing the artificial turf on the baseball field and adding turf to the softball field. We are fixing up the old factory we bought at Ross Lane to be the Mitchell Career and Technology Center. We are adding a greenhouse to the Chanute Campus and a sonography lab to the Ottawa campus.

The Board of Trustees believes in maintaining our facilities so much so that they passed a specific board policy that forces administration to spend significant dollars each year to fix what needs fixed. But beyond the general fund, the college also relies on donations and grants to move things forward as well as student fees. For instance, the bond payment on the Ottawa campus is entirely paid by student fees. No general fund money or local tax money goes for that bond. The new greenhouse as well as almost all of the \$3.6 million Mitchell Career and Technology Center, will be paid for by generous donations and grants.

Like the new president who took over my old college, I understand what an awesome responsibility it is to take care of this college. I have learned moral of Parable of the Empty Flag Pole and the Dry Fountain. I understand the charge to maintain and advance all aspects of the college.

If you walk through the buildings I'm sure you will see some ceiling tiles that need replaced, or a wall or two that could use a fresh coat of paint. Believe me, I see them too, and we are working on it. Each day we are moving forward with the resources and time that we have. In the meantime, with weather like we have been having, I'm looking forward to turning the fountain on once again!

If you have any questions about this column, or anything else about the college, please contact me at binbody@neosho.edu.