

It is Brian's favorite time of year, the holidays! If you have driven by my house at 8th and Evergreen, you know that is the case. My wife and I are not too subtle with our outdoor Christmas decorations. Jen and I look forward to it all year. She starts watching the Hallmark/Lifetime Christmas movies the night of Halloween and I start researching the family gift list and start checking those gifts off pretty early.

I had a bit of a Freudian slip the other day when my daughter Alayna was giving me their travel plans for the month. She said, "We plan to come home on the 21st." I replied, "The 21st of Christmas?" "You mean December, Dad?" my daughter jokingly asked. That got a chuckle out of my soon-to-be son-in-law Chandler. He calls us "The Christmas Cult." I have news for you Chandler. You just joined the cult. Get your ugly Christmas sweater on, grab some eggnog, and sing along with the carols!

Of course, the best part of the holidays for me isn't the presents, the music, the food, or the decorations. It's family-a great excuse to gather the people you love, give them thoughtful gifts, and celebrate as a group. When you rate what is truly important in life, I'll bet your family is near the top of the list.

To their credit, the Kansas Board of Regents has added consideration for families as part of its long-term planning. While they are interested in a wide range of things like workforce development and moving Kansas forward, they are also interested in what impact the 32 public institutions are having on Kansas families. They look if institutions are doing their best to keep the costs of higher education affordable while making sure the education is of quality and students are successful, both while they are students and when they leave the institutions.

Neosho County Community College is committed to advancing the family pillar of the KBOR strategic plan, not only for our students but for our employees as well. NCCC has a good deal of evidence to support that we do just that.

According to our latest National Community College Benchmark Project (NCCBP) report, NCCC's cost per credit hour (\$123 an hour) ranks in the top 25% of the nation for affordable tuition, well below the national community college median of \$146 an hour. We also keep our cost per Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) below the national median as well, \$5,644 per FTE as opposed to the national community college median of \$6,659. That translates into a lower net price of attendance than the national average according to the IPEDs comparison study. Our Ruffalo Noel Levitz Student Satisfaction report shows students feel that "Tuition paid is a worthwhile investment" at NCCC. This data is also well above national average when compared to other community colleges in the nation.

Keeping our tuition low and quality high is translating into better access for students who historically might not have attended college. Again, according to the NCCBP, NCCC ranks in the top 13% in the US in attracting first generation students, and in the top 3% in college minority student population relative to our service area demographics. The college also has a higher percentage of students on Federal grants than the average community college, meaning we are reaching a higher group of students who need financial help to attend, this according to IPEDs data.

Tuition costs are lower for families, but that doesn't mean that the students are less satisfied with their education or less successful.

According to the NCCBP, NCCC is in the top 3% in the nation in percent of students who receive a passing grade, in the top 6% in the nation for first-time full-time students that complete and transfer in two years, and in the top 8% in the nation for students who earned a degree or certificate.

Our students are graduating and making good money, about \$4,000 more per year than the Kansas state average for community college graduates. Currently NCCC is fourth in the state in the Student Success Index, with 61% of our 3-year cohort either graduating or successfully transferring to another institution.

We believe in valuing the families of our employees as well. Besides the normal array of dependent and family scholarships, NCCC offers a 36-hour work week for employees (but pay for 40 hours) by closing at noon on Fridays to give our employees a better work-life balance. This initiative, while improving morale and satisfaction, has also lowered employee resignation rate by 16% in one year.

On a personal note, I appreciate this focus on the family at KBOR. This month Alayna will graduate from Kansas State University with a degree in business administration with emphasis in supply chain management. She will graduate magna cum laude, meaning she finished with a wonderful grade point average there. Then, later this spring she will start her new job at the Target Distribution Center in Topeka. Her successful education and internship helped her get this great job. For our family at least, the investment in a KBOR institution paid off for our daughter in a wonderful way, especially if you consider that she went to NCCC for her first years, cutting the costs in half. She took full advantage of her opportunities while at K-State and it shows. So, this is a public thank you to Kansas State University for all you did for her, and to NCCC where she earned two associates degrees before transferring. But it's also a public congratulations to Alayna for all her hard work and determination to create that level of success. Mom and Dad are very proud of you!

Family matters. When education is complete, when jobs end, when life knocks you down, its family that will still be there for you. NCCC is proud of what it does to help families and for the student success that we help foster. Now it's time to celebrate a special Christmas – one that includes a graduation party! Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays to you and your family!

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