

It's Thanksgiving time, a time when we all count our blessings and be grateful for what we have. For me I am very grateful for my wonderful wife and daughters and the opportunity to work in a job where we have the potential to make a difference in people's lives. In my accounting, I feel that I have been successful, especially in raising my two girls. But that has got me thinking, just how successful will my girls be? And just how will they measure their own success?

I have two girls, both right at the start of their independent lives. One graduated from college about a year ago and the other is close to finishing her degree. They are very different from each other in many ways. One is quite silly (she loves dress-up days at her work), but dare I say disorganized at times, while the other is more serious and incredibly ordered (her favorite gifts were a label maker and storage containers).

One is devoting her life to kids and making things better for them. The other wants to climb the corporate ladder and smash through some glass ceilings for women in leadership roles. So if they do, in fact, devote their working lives to these things, who will be more successful?

Clearly in the eyes of society the person who makes the most money is often considered to be the most successful. He who dies with the most toys wins. You may have heard that saying. Of course, studies in the Science of Happiness have rejected that notion, especially if you equate winning with happiness. According to the research, financial success is not correlated with happiness, meaning just because you are rich does not mean you are happier than those who are in the middle class. It just means you have more stuff.

Clearly my daughter who wants to be a CEO someday will make more money than my other daughter who works with kids. I'll bet you are aware that while we say we value our kids over everything else in our lives, what the caregivers and teachers make does not always reflect this notion. So people who work with kids, while engaged in important, meaningful work, often do not get rich doing it. However to the child who received needed help from my daughter and their family, it will be her who is very successful. Just maybe not in a societal definition of success.

Success, then, is up for debate isn't it? For years colleges had only one definition of success – enrollment. The only successful college was one that showed that enrollment was going up. We did not care so much about whether or not students completed the degrees, or were learning what they needed for a job, or that we were offering the right degrees. The only statistic that was talked about was how fast a particular college was growing. However that began to change in the last 20 years or so.

For many years the federal government used only one measurement for success for all institutions two-year and four-year colleges alike – graduation rate. For four-year colleges this makes some sense. The vast majority of people who attend a university typically are seeking a bachelor's degree. But what about community colleges? Should degree attainment be the only measurement of success?

People do come to the local community college for degrees, such as our nursing students who are getting an Associate in Applied Science in Nursing. But lots of other students are not here for a degree, at least not a degree from NCCC. Many students are just taking some general education classes at a lower cost. They will transfer to another institution before they complete a degree from us.

Still others are just picking up a class or two. Maybe they wanted to learn to weld but didn't want to get a full certificate or national credential in it. Perhaps they need to learn the basics of QuickBooks for their business, or are just looking to learn something new.

Under the federal definition of success all of these students were a "fail" to the college. According to the feds, by helping to meet all of these other goals we hurt our graduation rate, and therefore were not successful. In fact, they still measure us this way. The current national community college three-year graduation rate is only 34% up from 25% just a few years ago. (NCCC is at 38.1%. We beat the national average at least). So every community college is a failure? Not hardly.

Finally the State of Kansas came out with a new metric that we could use to judge our success. In fact, they named it the Student Success Index. Here they look at not only if a student graduated, but also if they successfully transferred to another institution, and if they are still retained at the current institution. So instead of 25% or 34% successful, NCCC's success index jumped to as high as 74.5% over the years!

Since 2008 when this new definition of success was added, NCCC has been above the state average for community college student success every year, even hitting the top 3 many times! I'm very proud of this level of success that our students have attained! And I'm very grateful to my wonderful employees who helped make this happen.

Much like beauty, success is in the eye of the beholder. It is all in how you look at it. Who will be more successful of my two daughters, the one devoted to helping children and families, or the one who helps open more doors for women to be leaders? As a dad I know it will be the one who calls more often and visits their dad the most times. Just kidding (but not really).

As Thanksgiving quickly gives way to Christmas, I'm reminded of that line from the film *It's a Wonderful Life*, "No man is a failure who has friends." If you have the capacity to love, if you have friends, if you devote yourself to causes larger than your own self-interest, typically you are happier and more successful in life than those who don't do these things. At least that's what the Science of Happiness says.

So, if it is up to each of us to come up with our own definition of success, I'll continue to measure the college's success by the lives that we touch. And I'll measure my own success by the love of my family.

Happy Thanksgiving to you and your family! If you have a question about this column or anything else email me at binbody@neosho.edu.