

Frequent readers of my column know that I'm a fan of movies. I have a degree in radio, television, and film and I taught film history for nine years in a previous life, so my interest in film goes beyond just Netflix and the occasional trip to the theater. Recently due to lockdown I was re-watching the Lord of the Rings series. I have read the books from JRR Tolkien as well. There is so much wisdom in that series that took Professor Tolkien seventeen years to create.

Recently as we were creating plans to reopen in the fall, an exchange between Frodo, the small Hobbit, and Gandalf, the wizard, came to mind. For those of you unfamiliar with the work, Frodo has been tasked with destroying a magical ring, and if he fails evil takes over the world. He was feeling overwhelmed by the events happening around him which led to this exchange.

"I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo. "So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

If you told me this time last year that we would be preparing to open the fall semester during a pandemic I would not have believed you. I certainly wish this was not happening during my time, but it is, and we as a college have decisions to make with the time given us.

We have decided to open for face-to-face classes in the fall, as well as online and hybrid courses. The in-class experience might look quite different than it was before COVID-19, but we are planning for it to happen.

To help increase the safety of our students, visitors and employees we are taking many, many steps. We are installing air purification systems known as ionizers on all classroom buildings and residence hall rooms. These devices remove high percentages of many contagions from the air including COVID-19.

We have placed hand sanitizing stations at all outside doors to encourage people to clean their hands upon entry. We have installed and will be installing more Plexiglas barriers between office and instructor teaching areas and visitors/students. The college will be requiring face coverings for everyone within buildings and even outdoors if social distancing is impossible.

The College is ending face-to-face classes at Thanksgiving Break and switching to remote instruction for the last two weeks of class and finals week. To facilitate this we are augmenting all of our remote teaching software and live video transmission capabilities.

For residence hall students we will be COVID-19 testing all of them on their respective move-in days. And in the weeks ahead we will be doing random testing of resident students to see if community spread is happening there. Neosho Memorial Regional Medical Center has been fantastic to work with to establish this capability, as have the county health departments. We have set aside our stand-alone house on Lafayette Street to house any resident students who is determined to be COVID-19 positive while they quarantine for two full weeks and wait for a COVID-negative test result.

The dining hall will be limited to students only and will require all athletic teams to eat together as individual groups. Those groups will be socially distanced from each other. Teams already have their masks off during practice and it is hard to wrestle someone while staying socially distanced. That is why we are allowing the individual teams to have their masks off together while they eat. However, the teams will be separated from each other.

Great Western will be serving the food on disposable plates, no buffets or salad bars, with lots of Plexiglas barriers in place. Visitors won't be allowed in the dining hall this year as that space can get quite crowded in a normal year, with everyone not wearing masks so they can eat. There is not enough space to socially distance everyone. Even our employees will be allowed "grab and go" dining only and not allowed to eat in that room. Not allowing visitors for lunch is one of the most difficult decisions we made. For years we have hosted a low cost lunch for senior citizens on Thursdays. I love going around and visiting with them and seeing what is going on in their lives. I know that meal will be greatly missed this year by our guests and by our staff.

More aspects of the plan will be coming in the days and weeks ahead. I have to say that during this process I discovered that I have amazing powers to move both state and national policy. What am I talking about? In three different instances within one day, or sometimes within just a few hours of announcing a particular plan of action at the college related to COVID-19, the state or federal government will release new set requirements that negates all or part of the plan we JUST RELEASED. Ugh! So, if you don't like a particular thing that either the state or the feds are doing, just let me know. I'll release a plan and that apparently will cause them to change things within 24 hours.

That's a joke of course, but it speaks to the constantly changing policy landscape that we are dealing with as the situation is changing with it. There is a website I monitor from the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) which attempts to make projections as to the number of positive cases Kansas will have in the coming months, if hospital capacity will be challenged, and, unfortunately, the number of projected deaths. I have watched those projections change over the summer from very few cases in the fall, to significantly more now that things are spiking again. As the situation changes, so will the plan. And every day brings a new change to adapt to.

It is my hope that Kansans will all do their part to slow the spread of the disease, which will then allow the college to change its plan once again this time to lower the restrictions so we get back to life as we know it before COVID.

We have lived to see such times. It was not for us to decide, but we can decide what to do with the time given to us. NCCC has decided to move forward, to make hard choices, to improve health and safety, and to accomplish our mission, despite these times. I appreciate your adaptability and understanding as we move through this crisis together.

If you have questions about this or any other items at the college please feel free to contact me at binbody@neosho.edu.