

The 21st Century Student

We all have an image in our minds about what college students look like - the young 19-year-old with a backpack flung over one shoulder, wearing a college sweatshirt, tapping on a cell phone, and still searching for the right major. This is still fairly true for many of our students. Only now occasionally they wear pajamas to class. Ugh! Don't get me started about their apparel choices. I'm just happy they are going to class. Choose your battles and all that.

In the "old days" when residence halls were called "Dorms" with "Dorm Moms" college was very much the place where 19-24 year old full-time students dominated. Students went to one college for their whole career and where men greatly outnumbered women. But things have been changing.

It might surprise you that the average age of college student at NCCC is 26 and in some of our programs it's above 30! Our college population is 67% female. The current student body is 63% part-time students. Many students will attend several colleges to complete their bachelor's degree, including several community colleges. This is called a "patchwork quilt degree." It is a smart move to complete part of your degree at one or more regional community colleges where tuition is at a lower cost before transferring to a university.

We used to divide students into two groups, traditional students, those between the ages of 18-24, and non-traditional students, those 25 or older. The differences between them go beyond just their age. The younger students sometimes ask, "What is the minimum I have to do for a C in the class?" While the older students feel like a failure if they make a B on an assignment. It is amazing how our priorities change over time, isn't it?

There used to be a few non-trads mixed in with the general population taking night classes. Now these non-traditional students make up about 35% of the student body at NCCC. So is it "non-traditional" if so many people fall in a certain category? Sounds like a new tradition to me.

This is an idea put forth by the Lumina Foundation, a non-profit group founded in 2000, who has been trying to get more people to earn a college degree. They say we need to update our vocabulary a bit and are suggesting we change from "traditional and non-traditional" to "The 21st Century Student." This 21st Century Student may have started college but left and did not complete and now are coming back to finish what they started. In fact more than 25% of Kansans aged 25-65 have begun a degree or certificate and have not completed it. That percentage is similar for the population of NCCC's service area of Neosho, Franklin and parts of Anderson Counties as well. Many of these folks lack just a few credits to complete a certificate or degree.

Many people are choosing to come back to college and complete their degree as evidenced by our rising average age. Sometimes they return to college so they can get a promotion or better job. Some have retired from one career and now want to start a new one. Other times they tell us that they want to be a good role model for their kids or grandkids. Still others feel that it was something left uncompleted in their lives and they want to see it through. The NCCC graduation stage has seen 65-year-old nurses

turning their tassels, and parents and their kids both wearing caps and gowns on the same night. This is what I love about the community college.

NCCC is doing whatever it can to clear the pathway for folks to return. The college has academic forgiveness policies for those returning to learn after a, well, let's just say not-so-successful GPA 10 years ago when they were younger and had different priorities than going to class.

We have accepted partially completed transcripts from as far back as the 1940s and shown these 21st Century students that they are only a few credits away from a degree.

Our schedule includes on-line, night and weekend classes so that folks that are working full-time can still take classes. We have found that the most popular time that our students log into the on-line classes is 9pm. Why? That is bedtime for the kids. Mom and Dad get the kids down for the night and then work on their degrees.

I personally know how hard it is to finish a degree while working full time. It took me three years to complete my doctorate while I was working as an instructor. It was a lot of nights and weekends of studying and reading when I would rather have been doing something (anything) else. I also personally know how difficult it is to support someone while they are getting their degree. My wife got her masters while we both were working, so I had many nights of taking care of the kids while she was away at class or studying in the next room.

In the end it was worth it for Jen and for me. Things that are worthwhile typically do take more time and energy than you want them to, but I am so glad I did. You can do it too.

Your college stands ready to help. On our website at www.neosho.edu you can click on the "Finish the Education You Started" button at the bottom of the page (next to the picture of a devastatingly handsome guy) and we will help you take the next steps to completing your degree.

I welcome your comments and questions at binbody@neosho.edu.