

This week I saw a great report. If you have been reading my article for a while you know that I am adamant about the “best” way to get a bachelor’s degree – starting at your local community college and then transferring on to university. It is cheaper for the student and the taxpayer and students who transfer on from one of our Kansas Community Colleges have a higher JUNIOR level GPA than the students who started at the university.

This new report from the National Student Clearinghouse shows that Kansas leads the nation in the percentage of students that start at community colleges and then go on to university to complete a degree - 26%. The national average is only 10%. Wow! This is great news! Kansans are really taking advantage of their local community colleges like nowhere else!

This report also shows that fulltime students who are involved with concurrent enrollment, or taking college classes while still in high school, graduate at a much higher level – 85% - than the overall national average – 56% - Wow! That’s a difference! Is it because of the concurrent classes themselves or that motivated students are the ones that take concurrent and it is the motivation that is the key? It is hard to say, but it is working!

Getting a degree or certificate matters so much more now than it ever has before. Once a student gains their sheepskin they are much more likely to remain employed throughout their lives. They are much less likely to be in poverty. Their children are more likely to be college educated and not live in poverty themselves. Study after study shows that educated people live healthier lives as well. Completing that degree or technical certificate is just so important to a person’s quality of life.

And it is important to business and industry. Studies have estimated that about 60% of the Kansas workforce will need a degree or certificate in the next decade in order for businesses to have the people they need to operate. That is why the Kansas Board of Regents have created Foresight 2020, a plan that sets a goal that 60% of Kansans will have completed a degree or certificate by the year 2020. It is a daunting task, but the goal has really got the state moving in the right direction. Here’s what’s happening to move the needle and get more graduates. It all focuses on removing barriers.

First, the State continues to work on the transfer of credits between institutions. Just a few years ago it was quite frustrating and a bit of a mystery to see if your credits from an accredited Kansas public institution would transfer to another accredited Kansas public institution. It seemed random and capricious at times. Often we would find that one of our NCCC students would have a particular course blocked, while another, taking that same course, would have it transferred into a university without incident. A phone call would resolve the issue, but that’s only if the student talked to us about it. Sometimes years after the fact we would find out about it. Now most of the general education courses transfer from college to university and back again as needed. More work needs to be done, but it is going well. I’m on the statewide committee that is working on this. And believe me, there are some places where the faculty of the state DO NOT agree on what should be covered in a class or especially, how that course should be taught. But for the most part we are making great progress. Once the general education classes are done, we will move on to program classes, those that are part of a specific

major. Katy bar the door – that’s when the real work will begin to get institutions to accept the other’s credits. It could get ugly.

The State is also working on guidelines for a process called Prior Learning Assessment (PLA). Should a preacher who comes back to college to work on a degree have to take speech class? Or a welder with 10 years’ experience who never got his certificate have to take Welding I? Right now, the answer is often yes. But soon a process will be in place so that a college or university can assess someone’s knowledge and/or skills and give them credit toward a degree or certificate without having them take the class that they don’t really need.

Still another barrier that is coming down is reverse transfer. This is a method by which a student will have his credits automatically transferred back to the first institution to see if he has met the requirements for a degree. Here’s an example. A student leaves NCCC after finishing say 30 hours of a 60 hour degree and transfers on to PSU. Once the student takes more than 30 hours at PSU, that transcript is sent back to NCCC for analysis. If the student has now met the requirements of the Associate’s Degree, we send it to him. It will be automatic! No fee, no forms to fill out – just good communication between the institutions. Imagine one day a diploma from NCCC arrives in the mail when you finished that 60th credit hour at PSU. So if a student stops out and can’t finish the Bachelor’s Degree, he still has a degree to show for his effort.

Another area where we lose students along the way towards graduation is developmental education, or classes that are below college level that help a student be ready for college-level work. I’m on a statewide task force there as well charged with improving the effectiveness of these programs. This summer we will release a report on what could be done to help our least prepared students excel in college. There a lot of great ideas being discussed and I am hopeful that colleges turn their full attention to this important area.

I have touted SB 155 before, the state initiative that pays for the tuition of any high school student who wants college technical education while they are getting their diploma. We have more than doubled the amount of technical education going on in the high schools thanks to this bill. Students are working on their nursing assistant certifications, construction skills, and welding abilities like never before in Kansas history. And this equals more graduates!

There is a new bill working its way through the legislature right now that will provide funds to a college which helps GED students get their technical certificate as well. It is not exactly like SB 155, but it will help if it passes. It is SB 429 and I testified on its behalf last week. GED students are those who never graduated from high school. They are often in poverty and have little or no skills to offer businesses. SB 429 provides incentives to colleges to find these students, help them get their GED and get a technical certificate at the same time! It has the potential to help get people off assistance and into the workplace with a marketable skill – to go from a tax consumer to a taxpayer. I don’t care what your political stripes are – you have to like that!

All over the state barriers are coming down. Will KBOR makes its goal of 60% of Kansas with post-secondary credential by 2020? I don't know. But I know that Neosho County Community College and its partners will do all it can to make it happen!

As always if you have a question or a comment, please email me personally at binbody@neosho.edu.