

In higher education, as with many professions, we have a lot of jargon, acronyms, and “education-speak.” While we who work in the industry understand very well, it is important for us to remember that the folks we are communicating with may not share our common vocabulary. A recent story my wife told me brought this to mind.

It’s sometimes hard to understand the context of questions you are being asked and information you are given when you have no experience in that area. It can make you feel dumb, and well, you might inadvertently say rather funny things.

Here’s the story from Jen and a few teachers at the middle school. Every year students in the sixth through tenth grade fill out the Kansas Communities That Care (KCTC – acronym!) survey from the State of Kansas on various demographic information and behaviors, sometimes concerning and even illegal behaviors for children, like smoking, alcohol and drug use, carrying a concealed handgun, gambling, etc.. Most high school students understand the questions and what the anonymous survey is asking. This is not true for many of the 11-year-old sixth graders, with rather comical results. Here are some of the questions they asked the teachers who proctored the survey:

“I’m a boy so should I pick female?”

“My dad gave me a Tylenol, is that a methamphetamine? Is that bad?”

“Should I click Hispanic, because I think I am, but I live in the USA.”

“Is Chanute a city/town or a farm?”

Question: Do you speak more than one language? Student: “Well I want to learn to speak Spanish, so does that count?”

Question: Do you feel safe at school? Student: “Is that a trick question?”

And my favorite...

“Oh no! I played ‘Pass the Trash’ at Grandma’s! Is that gambling?”

It is nice to know that there is still some innocence left in the world, right here in our own middle school.

Without the context and understanding that comes with experience and learning we all say things that might be a bit funny to those who are wised up. And you might feel a little awkward, like you don’t belong.

I remember when I was heading off to enroll in college as a 17 year old who was the first person from my family to go to college. In higher education we call this a First Generation student (your first piece of Higher Ed jargon defined!). This special group has a difficult time understanding all of the language of college and often low success rates. The college application asked me how many credit hours I was going to attempt each semester. I did not know what a credit hour was, much less how many to take each year. I didn’t even know that classes only lasted one semester and that I would have to get a new schedule for the spring when fall was over. I felt like I didn’t belong there. I felt like quitting.

Eventually I was assigned an advisor who rushed me through the line (it was a big state university) enrolled me very quickly with only a few questions. The advisor put me in a 7:30am class! UGH! That course did not go well. It was a year before I had an advisor who took the time to listen to me and let

me know how things worked – and who kept me out of classes that started before 9:00am. I’m a night owl, or at least I used to be.

At NCCC we try to translate all of that jargon and all of those acronyms into something students can understand. We have a class that we require freshmen to take known as First Year Seminar that attempts to teach students how to navigate higher education, to understand our rules and what it takes to complete a degree or certificate.

We advise one-on-one for the most part with advisors who take time to listen to the student, explain the system, and get to the heart of what they want to study, where they plan to transfer after NCCC, how they prefer to learn (online, face-to-face, or hybrid – a combination of online and face-to-face – more jargon!), and what time of day would be best for them. It is a slow process sometimes, but so worth it to make sure students understand what they are signing up for and to give them the best chance to be successful.

We even offer certification classes, created by the Coordinator of the Ottawa Teaching and Learning Center, Kyle Burris, for our advisors so they can keep up on the proper procedures and learn some best practices for helping the student achieve their educational goals. With so many options at NCCC and so many different degree paths at so many transfer institutions it can be an arduous task to steer the student into the right courses, but our advisors do a great job at it. Our students agree. In the most recent survey on student satisfaction with advising, NCCC scored well above national average.

Having teachers in the room at the middle school to help proctor the school survey was essential to answer the kids’ questions in order to get good data for the study. Having a great advisor who cares enough to listen to the student, explain how things work, and help them enroll in classes that give them the best chance to be successful is vital. NCCC is proud of the work that our Director of Academic Advising and Counseling, Andrew Haworth, is doing leading faculty and staff advisors to create an awesome system of support for our students – a system that cuts through the jargon and makes every students, especially First Generation students like me, feel welcome.

Now I feel like playing a game of Pass the Trash. I hope I don’t lose my shirt gambling.

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