

“If you can not measure it, you can not improve it.” That is a quote from Lord Kelvin, also known as William Thompson, a physicist who theorized a whole new temperature scale that included absolute zero. In my former life as a television producer and later an instructor, I used the Kelvin temperature scale to measure the color of light given off by our studio lighting instruments. (3,200 degrees Kelvin is the magic number we tried to reach. That was a while ago and I still remember it.) He wasn’t talking about educational institutions or business for that matter, although Peter Drucker and others have co-opted this quote for that purpose, but the logic is undeniable. If you really want to know what needs to be improved and whatever means you are taking to get better are actually working, you need to constantly measure it.

I believe in this idea of measurement for improvement in my personal life as well as my professional endeavors. Jennifer and I are about to celebrate our 18th wedding anniversary in July. We often go out to dinner that night, as many folks do, but at that special dinner we do “contract renegotiations.” That is, we talk about what went right and what could be improved in the marriage, our parenting, our finances, etc. We make plans to address these issues, if there are any. We often have a list of items we like the other person to consider improving. Luckily, I married the Most Perfect Woman in the World, so my list for her is very short. Her list for me can be quite lengthy. At the end of the dinner we extend the marriage contract for another year. I know the proverbial happy couple says “till death do us part” but reality says marriage is a choice you make every day. With Jen, that choice is very easy. (By the way, I’m not above public flattery in order to get a better contract. Also, did I mention I have the Best Board of Trustees in the World?)

At Neosho County Community College we measure many, many things. Our Institutional Effectiveness method brings together 25 different measurements into one array that looks at how we performed on our college purposes. Each of these measurements is read and interpreted by our Executive Committee or Board of Trustees and scores are given as to how well the college performed on that measurement. Everything from federal reports, to student surveys, to self-evaluations, to outside audits are examined and placed in one matrix. That matrix has shown us that we are doing well in many aspects of the purposes of the college, but still have some room to improve in others.

One measurement we pay close attention to is the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Survey. This is a national survey that measures how well students say we are doing in 40 different areas such as quality of instruction, student services, parking, safety, advising, etc. The great thing about this tool is that it allows us to examine our student scores versus other two-year colleges in the country and the state. In 2010, when we last conducted the survey, it showed us that we had some areas to improve. We have been doing this survey for about 12 years now, and this year we had some exceptional results! Of the 40 items in the survey, NCCC scored above national average, sometimes WAY above national average, in 18 areas! We had NO score below national average. These are truly remarkable results and the best in the 12 years of conducting this survey. We have been focusing on customer service at NCCC and the survey shows that students have noticed with great results in questions like, “I seldom get the run-around” and “caring and friendly staff.” We showed significant improvement in 18 areas over the survey results in 2010. Now we need to focus on those other areas so that all of the items are above national average.

It's great when your data shows you what you are doing well and what you need to improve. It's better still when those outside your organization recognize your accomplishments. College Measures, a joint venture of the American Institutes of Research and Matrix Knowledge Group looked at 783 two-year colleges in the country and ranked those colleges by "success rate." They defined success as those full-time students at that college that either got a degree/certificate or successfully transferred on to a four-year institution after three years. NCCC ranked 30th out of the 783 colleges with a 62% success rate! Not bad at all. One could argue that this is an unfair comparison as many people go to community college just to take some classes with no intent to graduate or transfer on. Still it's nice to be at the top of that comparison! You can go to the CNN-Money website and see the full list. <http://money.cnn.com/pf/college/community-colleges/?iid=EL>

Lord Kelvin taught us the importance of measurement, but measurement alone is not good enough if you want improvement. This reminds me of another famous quote, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." (The jury is still out if this was said by Albert Einstein, Ben Franklin, or novelist Rita Mea Brown. Regardless, it's still a great quote.) You must constantly be trying new things if you want improvement, not just measuring. NCCC will always be trying to improve, and always measuring to see if we did.

And Jen, Happy Anniversary! Thank you for 18 wonderful years. I love you.