

There is an old story I like to use before announcing something new or different at the college that represents a departure from past practice. It goes like this.

A mother was preparing a roast to cook for dinner when her young daughter walked in. The mother pulled out a large pan then cut the two ends off of the roast and put the meat in the pan. The girl asked her mom, "Why did you cut the meat that way?" The mother thought a moment and replied, "That's how my mom made roast, so I guess I just copied her." But the question got her thinking.

So the mother grabbed her phone and called her mother and asked the question, "Mom, why do we cut the ends off a roast before we cook it?" The older mother thought a moment and said, "You know, I'm not really sure. Let me call your grandmother and ask her."

So the call was placed and the grandmother replied, "Oh, I had a very small pan and the only way it would fit was to cut roast into pieces."

So grandmother had a good reason, the smaller pan. The others had larger pans and didn't need to cut their meat. So the reason why the roast was cut was lost over the next generations. They just did it because that's how we always do it. It took the little girl asking the simple question of, "Why?"

"Because we always do it that way." Ugh. It's my least favorite answer to the, "Why?" question, especially when it is time to look at ways of making things better at the college.

Now we are trying something new, something that is big departure of what we have done in the past, something that could help students in many ways. We are piloting a better way to place students in some classes.

NCCC is an open access institution meaning that we don't require much to get into college. We have no list of required ACT scores or specific classes in high school to get in. As a result, some students are very prepared for college-level courses and others may need more help before they attempt English Composition and College Algebra.

In the past we would give the students a standardized test in English and math known as the COMPASS test. COMPASS was offered through ACT who specializes in standardized tests for college preparation. Once that test score was determined we would use that, and that alone, to place a student in the appropriate math or English class. Those classes could be the college level or developmental classes.

Don't get me wrong, developmental classes can be great in their purpose, helping students get up to college level over time. But they cost money and time for the student and studies have shown that once someone tests into developmental classes their odds of completing a college degree fall sharply.

And this is how we have always done placement in these classes. The standardized test was the first, last and only decider of where the student was placed. Thus it was and thus it shall ever be. Until that question of, "Why?" was finally asked. And the source of that question was quite remarkable.

ACT announced to the higher education world that it was taking the COMPASS test off the market. Not because it wasn't a great money maker for the company, it was. No, their own research showed that it didn't work. It was not a good tool for placement. It could not accurately predict who would pass college-level courses and who would not.

You have got to hand it to ACT. They were making good money off that test, and to come out and admit it wasn't working well was a great piece of corporate responsibility.

But now what do we do? That test was the center of placement and it turns out it was not a good method of placement at all. There is another company that offers these tests still.

However, if a standardized test from the leader in the industry can't place students accurately, what, if anything, can? The answer may be in a piece of data we already collect from most every student.

Anyone who has ever passed a class in either high school or college can tell you that it is not just about knowing the material and repeating it back on a test, or the ability to do the process or skill the teacher is trying to impart to you. Yes, that is very important, but equally important is sticking with the class, turning things in on time, showing up for that test, not giving up when you fail an assignment, following directions, and on and on. In other words, determination to succeed or grit is as important, if not more so, than perfect memorization or skill development.

We all have stories of that really smart kid who wound up dropping out, not because he didn't know his stuff, but that he wouldn't turn it in or show up for the test. Likewise, you or someone you know may have greatly struggled in a particular class but you had grit and you stuck with it to the end doing everything the teacher asked of you along the way. You may not have earned an A but you worked your backside off for a C and were quite proud of that, and should have been! (That was me and statistics in college, I am still proud of that C.)

Student success has been studied for decades. Why do some students drop out while others from a similar background, with similar college preparation and with similar standardized test scores make it? The answer was simple. Grit.

But we don't measure grit. It's a hard thing to capture and even harder thing to improve in students. But what we have seen in the data is that grit is as much a part of passing high school as it is passing college, that there is a strong correlation between high school GPA and success in college-level courses.

NCCC looked at three years' worth of data and saw that if a recent high school graduate earned over a 3.25 high school GPA they were 82% likely to successfully complete College Algebra and 92% likely to successfully complete English Composition. Wow! The answer was right in our own data.

So NCCC launched an optional pilot program to eliminate the standardized test for any recent high school student who has earned over a 3.25 GPA. They can go straight into the college-level courses. If they have under 3.25 they have to take a test (called ACCUPLACER), but the score on the test is not all we consider in the pilot. We factor in their high school GPA, what classes they took in high school, and how long it has been since they graduated. Their test score can be adjusted up or down depending on these multiple measures. The score alone is no longer the only determining factor for these students.

NCCC is the first public college in the state to try this method, but others have taken notice and are very interested in seeing the results of our study. We are watching these students closely and are meeting regularly with the instructors to see how it is going. So far so good.

So now we know that cutting the roast isn't necessary, that there may be a better, faster, easier and more accurate way to place students so that they will be successful without wasting the students' time

or tuition dollars. We are hopeful that other colleges who have always done placement by test score alone stop and ask, "Why?"

If you have a comment or question about this or anything else about the college, please email me at [binbody@neosho.edu](mailto:binbody@neosho.edu).