

Maryville Daily Forum column
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Dr. John Jasinski, Northwest Missouri State University President

If you follow Northwest Missouri State closely, you may have noted a number of accolades and events – that I hope you attended – in recent weeks of which we are proud.

Last week, Northwest theater students staged a wonderfully entertaining six-night run of the Neil Simon classic “Barefoot in the Park,” directed by Professor of Theater Theo Ross, and some of that play’s cast members were among the top students competing at the recent Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival.

Our forensics team, known as the Speaking Bearcats and coached by Instructor of Communication Brian Swafford, is the best college forensics team in the state after claiming the 2013 Missouri Association of Forensic Activities championship last month. And our mock trial team, coached by Daniel Smith, an assistant professor of political science, completed its season last month by earning the Spirit of the American Mock Trial Association Award at its regional competition. Later this month, some of Northwest’s agriculture students, based on their top finishes at the regional contest last fall, will compete at the national Postsecondary Ag Student conference, under the advisement of agricultural sciences instructor Rod Barr.

These types of accolades don’t just happen. They are results of the teaching that is occurring in Northwest classrooms every day. Students are applying the skills they are learning in the classroom to the student organizations they are leading as well as at internships and in preparation for the careers they seek upon their graduation from Northwest.

Northwest is preparing students for interactions with future employers and professionals, too. Our Career Services office, led by Joan Schneider, last week hosted its spring mock interview sessions, which placed students in front of any one of 39 participating employer representatives to test students’ interview skills. Hundreds of students participated and also received resume critiques. Next week, Northwest students will again put their people and networking skills into action, interacting with the 100 or so employers slated to appear at our annual spring Career Day. In another example of classroom connected to real-world experiences, about 50 student-teachers interacted last week with area educators during a teacher education seminar at Northwest.

In this space last month, I made the argument that higher education continues to be a sound investment. Through difficult but strategic decisions at Northwest, along with an unwavering focus on what’s best for our students, we have created a sustained path of success.

There’s more to that. Additionally, we are addressing academic program changes to ensure students remain ahead of the pack and are properly prepared to face challenges not just in their chosen career, but in other arenas, upon graduating from Northwest. We are ensuring students are not just advancing down the job mill path, but focusing on retention and graduation with retained quality standards. Our programs are tied to professional standards, and Northwest is listening to employers and graduate schools as part of its refinement processes.

For example, our general education curriculum is designed to provide foundational learning opportunities related to critical thinking, writing and analytical skills. These skills support attributes that employers say they want in job candidates. Northwest aims to make sure these skill areas are built upon in major and minor discipline areas. Our general education curriculum encourages students to acquire and use intellectual tools, knowledge and creative capabilities necessary to study the world as it is and as it might be imagined.

According to The National Association of Colleges and Employers' Job Outlook 2012, employers place the most emphasis on job candidates' ability to work in a team, leadership attributes, written and verbal communication skills, problem-solving skills and, of course, a strong work ethic. They are expected to make decisions, process information, analyze data, and organize and prioritize their workloads.

At Northwest, academic departments, when considering a new program, consult with professional advisory groups, consisting of experts in the field, including Northwest alumni, who are potential employers of our students. They provide feedback on the quality of Northwest students they have hired, identify strengths of our academic programs and suggest opportunities to improve. They also identify their industry's changing needs so that Northwest can adapt.

All of this links back to the curriculum and hands-on opportunities we offer at Northwest, and it plays into Northwest's high job placement rates, which show 95 percent of our students report finding work or continuing their education within six months of graduating.

Students also tell us in surveys that they are highly satisfied with their education and they have more frequent interactions with faculty than students from our peer institutions. In a recent national student engagement survey, 90 percent of first-year students at Northwest rated their experience as "good" or "excellent," and 87 percent of seniors said they would choose Northwest again if they could start over their college career.

Northwest is successful in achieving high-quality programs that produce lifelong learners capable of succeeding in a diverse global economy and society.

Dr. John Jasinski is the 10th president of Northwest Missouri State University. For news and events at Northwest visit www.nwmissouri.edu.