

Heart of a Tiger: The student-athlete experience fuels success in college and in life

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - We welcomed 473 student-athletes, including 17 women wrestlers (our newest sport), to campus this year. These numbers are important for two reasons. First, student-athletes comprise roughly 12% of our total on-campus student population. The second is that college athletics are important drivers of student success and our mission to develop engaged global citizen leaders.

College and athletics are also excellent vehicles to promote generational wealth, critical to our vision to be accessible to those who seek higher education, unlocking potential aligned with the democratic, economic, and social needs of our communities, our region, and our world.

Many believe college athletics is a revenue stream. For most division two universities, it is not. It is an expense, or more accurately, an investment in our mission. It is an intentional strategy to drive student success and produce outstanding graduates who will become leaders in business and industry and engaged in community and professional associations.

Each year at our Athletic Hall of Fame celebration, I share my firm belief that our athletic program is core to who we are as an institution. We look to student-athletes to help us tell our story by how they practice and play, their character on and off the field, and their success in the classroom, the community, and the board room.

When you think about it, as a society, when we need inspiration, by and large, we turn to athletes because their stories depict grit and determination, perseverance, and triumph over adversity, qualities and characteristics also attributed to Fort Hays State University.

In a FutureU podcast (May 30, 2023), co-hosts Jeff Selingo and Michael Horn discuss how athletes make great employees: known for their deep work ethic, executive function skills, desire to do well and win, and a sense of fairness and competition.

In a LinkedIn post, Chris Valletta cites a study published by Atlantic indicating that athletes earn 5% to 15% more than their non-athlete peers. He also quotes a Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies study that athletes are more self-confident and possess better leadership skills than students who opt for other extra-curricular activities.

Valletta identifies reasons why one should hire an athlete. First, they are passionate about their work. Being an athlete is indicative of the drive for which employers are searching. He also specifies that for the same reason, employers also prefer musicians, writers, and anyone who spends a lot of time mastering a skill. Also on Chris' list are characteristics such as being detail-oriented, goal-oriented, emotionally strong, developing exceptional time management skills, leadership skills, and being a good team player.

These are among the reasons Fort Hays State continues to make a continued investment in college athletics. I am grateful for our many philanthropic donors who also invest in our athletic programs, driving our mission while enhancing the athlete experience through scholarships, equipment, and facilities that make the athletes' efforts worthwhile.

Our coaches and staff are critical to the athletic student success strategy and understand their central role in developing the character and skill set required to create engaged citizen leaders. I am grateful for the hearts and focus of our athletics staff.

Our emphasis on student success is part of our strategic plan and critical to our promise of driving access and affordability. We have many strategies to drive student success from scholarships, targeted first-generation college student programs, comprehensive student and academic support services, and several best practices, including care teams, an award-winning orientation program (40 Days at the Fort), learning communities, professional advising, and numerous student engagement practices in and out of the classroom.

Ultimately, how we measure our progress on student success is through measures of persistence (do students stay in college) and graduation rates. Similar to studies indicating that athletes often outperform non-athletes on the job, the success rates of our college athletes (remaining in college and graduating) are consistently higher than the overall college student population. In our most recent NCAA report, the graduation of our student-athletes was 7% higher than our overall student body.

This college athlete success reflects that this past academic year, ten Tiger athletes earned Academic All-American honors (*Heart of a Tiger* July 20, 2023 column). Ten Academic All-Americans was the most in the Mid-America Intercollegiate Athletic Conference and by far the most in FHSU's history. The Academic All-America program recognizes student-athletes who excel in the classroom and athletic competition. To qualify for consideration, a student-athlete must be a starter or important reserve with at least a 3.30 cumulative grade point average (on a 4.0 scale). Fort Hays State has produced 68 Academic All-America selections since our first selection in 1975.

Investing in college athletics has several benefits, including increased visibility and brand recognition that drive student enrollment and community and alumni engagement. Most importantly, our athletics program effectively increases student graduation rates, develops outstanding employees and entrepreneurs, enhances generational wealth, and is core to our mission to create engaged citizen leaders.

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