

## **Filling vital roles in rural Kansas**

At Fort Hays State University, we believe tomorrow is made by thinkers and doers who turn ideas into action. We turn challenges into opportunities, and we are at our best when the going gets tough. This past year was no exception.

During these pandemic-challenged months, we kept the lights on and the doors open, responsibly managed our finances without furloughing or terminating employees, and experienced a record year for students graduating.

We work to responsibly respond to the economic concerns of the state – and especially, the rural communities of our region.

Our roots are in teacher education. We embrace this important calling and continue to partner with school districts with creative solutions such as transition-to-teaching and para-pathways. Just last month, we worked with our local school district to have our teaching interns become licensed emergency substitute teachers.

As social unrest plagued our country, our criminal justice faculty and university police department went to work providing solutions. Supported by a \$1.25 million grant from the U.S. Department of Justice, we established a regional de-escalation center to teach law enforcement officers techniques to help resolve potentially dangerous confrontations.

Nursing faculty understand the challenges nurses face in rural communities and prepare our students to meet those needs. That is why our program places special emphasis on rural preceptorships and simulations – creating over 40 unique rural care simulations. Starting this fall, our nurse practitioners will log 25% of clinical hours in rural communities with less than 5,000 people.

We are focused on the future for Kansas families and businesses. Our Transfer & Military Center, for example, encourages degree completion through programs like our Kansas Community College Guarantee – complete an associate of arts or science at a Kansas community college, and you have fulfilled our general education requirements. We have earned “Military Friendly School” honors for 15 straight years. Our partnership with the Kansas Army National Guard provides a pathway to a tuition-free degree.

We have built a Kansas computing talent pipeline with seven certificate programs, eight graduate programs, and undergraduate majors with eight different concentrations. We currently are serving over 400 traditional students as well as many mid-career professionals looking to grow their computing skills.

Near and dear to my heart, the key to our success at FHSU is affordability. FHSU has the most affordable tuition among our peers, and our online program is equally cost-effective. Using metrics provided by the Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity, we recently reviewed our return on investment (ROI), finding a positive return for every FHSU category.

We are seeing positive numbers in high-demand positions. Seventy-two percent of our nursing graduates stay in Kansas, and 90% of our APRNs work in rural or underserved areas. Our social work program has grown from 100 in 2015 to more than 300 today. Thanks to our new master’s of social work online program, social workers wanting to advance their careers can

stay in place in the rural communities they serve while pursuing this academic credential. Jobs in the technology industry are in high demand. Ninety-seven percent in technology fields report employment after graduation, with an average starting salary of \$65,000 to \$70,000.

The foundation of our success rests squarely on the shoulders of our talented faculty, who combine their love of teaching in a smaller, regional university with innovation and forward thinking to best serve students and the people of Kansas. For example, I am very proud that Dr. Andrew Feldstein, associate provost for Teaching Innovation and Learning Technologies, was just recognized as one of Ingram Magazine's 2022 Icons of Education.

We are always seeking ways to fill the talent pipeline in Kansas. Two key tools in this endeavor are our Small Business Development Center Network (SBDC) and our Docking Institute of Public Affairs.

Federally funded and overseen by FHSU, the SBDC is a network of 12 centers across the state which work with small businesses to achieve success in today's marketplace. Every dollar invested in the network generates \$45 in the funding partner's ROI.

The Docking Institute facilitates public policy among governmental and non-profit entities, providing the research needed for economic development. Among their services are labor availability studies for economic development, economic impact analyses, and housing availability for recruitment/retention of workers.

As my colleague Marion Terenzio recently wrote in an article for Inside Higher Ed, universities such as Fort Hays State must "absorb the essence and distinct characteristics of its surrounding communities – both to enrich those communities and to be enriched by them."

I couldn't agree more. I know how conscientiously we work for the people of western Kansas in particular and the state in general. To Marion's point, our truth is how our diligence is fueled by our students, colleagues, neighbors, and communities.

Simply put, together we are better.

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