**FHSU’s work to enhance the first-generation student experience**

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - On November 8th of each year, college campuses nationwide celebrate the resilience and determination of first-generation college students. The First-Generation College Celebration marks the anniversary of the signing of the 1965 Higher Education Act, which has helped millions of first-generation students fulfill their dream of earning a college education. Many first-generation students are trailblazers in their families, and one key characteristic of this group of students is the persistence they bring to overcoming challenges, creating their own pathways to knowledge, and seizing control of their destiny.

This year, at Fort Hays State University (FHSU), on November 7th, from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., we hosted a come-and-go event to celebrate our first-generation students, faculty, and staff. Those who stopped received a complimentary FHSU First Gen t-shirt. In addition to snacks, activities included a photo booth, first-gen trivia, and first-gen word search.

Key first-gen recruitment and retention strategies at FHSU center on critical investments, including the Access to Academic Opportunity Grant (AAOG) and the First-to-Finish Living and Learning Community. The AAOG grant aims to navigate the financial barriers that many of these students face. However, the grant is not only about funding; it also emphasizes mentorship. The idea is to create a robust support system where seasoned upper-level students and alumni guide newcomers, sharing insights that could ease their transition to higher education. Stories from last year indicate a rising tide of peer support networks that continue to form within FHSU and the growing sense of community among first-generation students.

First-to-Finish Living and Learning Community (LLC) students live together in Victor E. Village and take classes together. Fall semester classes include a student success class and a leadership class titled Discovering Leadership. The LLC focuses on helping the students grow in their leadership capacity by focusing on the CORE (confidence, optimism, resilience, and engagement) leadership model. The class helps students learn about the knowledge, skills, and attitudes associated with their leadership development.

“It has been amazing to watch these students flourish at FHSU. From the welcome weekend until now, you can tell they have the confidence to ask for help when needed, find their stride, and grow in the FHSU pride. I believe this success is due to many faculty and staff at the university supporting these students and helping them find the resources they need to be successful,” shared Jaden Rahe, director of student engagement.

Ashton Dawley is an excellent example of how our first-generation students are making the most of their college experience. He has taken advantage of opportunities in the ceramics department, enabling him to work with renowned artists and practice ceramic techniques that are highly complex. Ashton is exceptionally talented. Given his experience at FHSU thus far, Ashton has decided to become a college professor. He is focused on being the first in his family to earn a bachelor’s degree and then a master’s and doctorate.

Our student affairs professionals are committed to driving institutional transformation by enhancing academic and co-curricular opportunities for first-generation students. Our team participates in several state and national events dedicated to advancing the first-generation college student experience.

In the spring, First-to-Finish and first-generation FHSU students get to attend the annual Ad Astra First Generation Conference on a Kansas college campus. This conference brings first-generation students from universities and high schools across Kansas together for a shared experience with the desired outcome of improved persistence to graduation and a better-prepared Kansas workforce.

Another cornerstone element of FHSU’s first-generation college student initiative involves collaborating with NASPA’s FirstGen Forward program. This is a nationwide network dedicated to championing first-generation students. The FirstGen Forward Network features best practices and insights that can help institutions like FHSU better serve their first-gen populations.

The term “first-generation” often sparks conversations about privilege and access, touching on the shifting demographics of students entering higher education. As tuition costs continue to rise and the demand for a skilled workforce grows, the implications of supporting first-generation students have never been more significant. As a regional public university, Fort Hays State University has always focused on access and has a long history of supporting a wide demographic of first-generation students.

Stories from these students reveal a nuanced landscape of aspirations, anxieties, and resilience. These students may not have access to the kind of college guidance many peers take for granted. Yet, they enter the halls of academia with dreams that often depend not just on their success in college but also on the prosperity of their families and communities.

The data surrounding first-generation college success is telling. Research has shown that first-gen students often experience higher dropout rates than their peers. While numerous barriers exist – financial stressors, lack of familial support in navigating college life, and unfamiliarity with the academic culture – universities like FHSU focus on structural changes to improve these metrics. With the launch of the FirstGen Forward initiatives, institutions are equipped to analyze and implement strategies that truly enhance the first-generation college experience, embracing and leveraging the struggles and strengths of these students.

In a world that often emphasizes individual success, the narrative of first-generation college students serves as a powerful reminder of the strength found in community and collective perseverance. Each story unravels a tapestry of hope, determination, and shared dreams, culminating on this special day of recognition on November 8. FHSU students like Ashton and countless others embody the spirit of being first-generation: they challenge the status quo and redefine success for themselves and their families.

Ultimately, the real success of FHSU's endeavors will be seen in our enrollment and job placement numbers, familial pride, and stories we tell about the bright futures that await students like Ashton. Each degree conferred will be more than an institutional data point; it will be a testament to the sacrifices and barriers overcome. As FHSU and similar institutions continue to invest in first-generation initiatives, the vision is clear: create a future where today's first-generation student inspires the next generation of leaders, dreamers, and pioneers to follow their paths to the promise of higher education and a brighter tomorrow.

This commitment to first-generation students is not just about celebrating a demographic but crafting a narrative of success, empowerment, and unwavering support. It’s about the community that rallies around these students, inspiring hope and igniting dreams that extend far beyond the classroom walls. Together, through targeted first-generation strategies, universities like Fort Hays State are laying the groundwork for an inclusive educational landscape—where every student can thrive and succeed, regardless of their background.

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