

Heart of a Tiger: Celebrating success, part 3

8/29/24

By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan - Fort Hays State University is a regional public university with a global reach. In the academic year 2023, our enrollment served 16,922 students, including 11,715 students from the United States, with 8,000 of these U.S. students hailing from Kansas. This means that more than 68% of our U.S.-based students are Kansans. The 8,000 Kansans served include more than 5,000 students from western Kansas and more than 2,000 from Ellis County.

Among those we served are 4,022 on-campus students, 7,693 online students, and 5,207 students who study at our partner campuses in Bolivia, Brazil, Cambodia, China, and Senegal.

The diverse mix of students we serve aligns with our mission: Fort Hays State University provides accessible quality education to Kansas, the nation, and the world through an innovative community of teacher-scholars and professionals to develop engaged global citizen-leaders.

In the ever-changing landscape of higher education, universities must continuously adapt and evolve to meet the needs of their students and communities. With our relentless focus on providing accessible, affordable tuition, we recognized the importance of strategic growth to ensure our continued success and relevance in the education sector. We embedded strategic growth to expand the university's reach and impact through thoughtful planning and implementation of initiatives as goal three of our strategic plan.

Dr. Dennis King, Associate VP for Student Affairs/Enrollment Management, was crucial in leading this goal. His expertise in enrollment management and collaboration with various stakeholders across campus were instrumental in the success of Goal 3. Reflecting on his experience, Dr. King acknowledged the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted historical data and planning. Despite these challenges, we implemented critical initiatives such as reimagining an office of university marketing and implementing new technology to enhance communication with students. The pandemic also prompted changes to the scholarship program, demonstrating FHSU's adaptability and commitment to supporting students during uncertain times.

A selection of Goal 3 successes were the growth of strategic enrollment plans in areas such as social work, history, clinical psychology, and medical diagnostic imaging majors. We signed the first state-wide community college articulation agreement guaranteeing nursing program admission to all community college-trained registered nurses. Additionally, the construction of the Wilmer and Lorena Kellogg Training Center for the Shotgun Team showcased FHSU's commitment to supporting co-curricular activities and enhancing the student experience. Women's wrestling created a new opportunity for thousands of women high school wrestlers across Kansas.

Dr. King emphasized that the strategic growth initiative has positively impacted university culture, fostering a desire for better data and refined ROI models. By implementing new tools

and processes, FHSU aims to continue improving the university community and providing all students (on campus, online, and globally) with the support they need to succeed.

Dr. King expressed confidence that the 2019-2024 strategic enrollment work will serve as a foundation for ongoing efforts to enhance the university's enrollment during the next iteration of our strategic plan. Recognizing the dedication and collaboration of everyone involved in the process, Dr. King expressed pride in the achievements of Goal 3 and the impact it has had on FHSU's campus community.

Dr. Joey Linn, VP for Student Affairs and co-chair for Goal 3, emphasized the significance of enrollment stabilization in the post-pandemic era of higher education. Dr. Linn highlighted the importance of experimentation and innovation in enrollment strategies, noting that 44 plans were created and reviewed over the five years, 31 were selected and funded, and five were discontinued. "Discontinuance is essential, as the role of experimentation is to create a proof-of-concept opportunity," Dr. Linn said. "We learn from those experiments that work and those that do not."

One of the key strategies under Goal 3 was the development of a financial aid leveraging plan to support university growth and enhance student retention. By re-evaluating the scholarship program and implementing new models of data collection and needs-based funding, FHSU improved persistence (the percentage of all degree-seeking students moving through the university) and graduation rates. The success of the financial aid leveraging plan was evident in the proactive transition to new scholarship programs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which allowed for a wider disbursement of scholarship funds.

Goal 3 also emphasized attracting and retaining diverse faculty and staff to support institutional growth. This initiative, led by Dr. Grady Dixon, Dean of the Werth College of Science, Technology, and Mathematics, highlighted the progress made in closing faculty representation gaps among women and minorities to increase a sense of belonging among all members of Tiger Nation.

By leveraging the success of past initiatives and embracing new opportunities for stability and growth, FHSU aims to enhance the student experience and prepare students for success in an ever-changing world. As FHSU continues to evolve and adapt to the demands of higher education, Goal 3 will continue to serve as a guiding framework for future strategic planning, relentlessly focusing on our mission to provide a quality, affordable option for our citizens.

We strive every day to deliver the best value in education anywhere. The Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity (FREEOPP.org) used data from the U.S. Department's College Scorecard on the earnings of students receiving federal financial aid from over 30,000 bachelor's degree programs at U.S. colleges and universities. Looking across the 27 programs evaluated at FHSU, the cumulative lifetime ROI of FHSU programs provided an economic impact of more than \$1.1 billion from the students who graduated during the study period.
(<https://www.fhsu.edu/president/heart-of-a-tiger/final-heart-of-a-tiger-for-aug-31.pdf>)

Through the dedication and collaboration of key stakeholders, FHSU has adapted to challenges and seized opportunities in critical areas such as enrollment, scholarship programs, and faculty diversity. The success of Goal 3 reflects FHSU's commitment to excellence and innovation in higher education, positioning the university for continued success and impact in the years to come. By building upon the achievements of Goal 3 and embracing new challenges and opportunities, FHSU will remain a leader in higher education and a beacon of growth and opportunity for its students, faculty, and community.