

Heart of a Tiger: Spotighting our entrepreneurial students, and the Peter Werth Challenge

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - Fort Hays State University (FHSU) has again established itself at the forefront of entrepreneurial education, showcasing the remarkable potential of its students. In the second annual entrepreneurial competition against the University of Connecticut, FHSU celebrated its second victory. This event highlighted the exceptional talent and commitment of FHSU's students. It also underscored the invaluable support of alumnus Peter Werth, who envisioned this competition to foster entrepreneurial spirit among students.

Peter Werth, a distinguished alumnus and entrepreneur advocate, generously founded this competition as a platform for aspiring student entrepreneurs—his guiding principle— “Do good. Make a difference. Change the world”—reflects his unwavering commitment to empowering young innovators. Werth believes in investing in “the jockey, not the horse,” emphasizing students' potential as the driving force behind future enterprises. His vision aligns seamlessly with the achievements of the FHSU students who participated this year, showcasing their capacity for innovation and success.

Coached by Dr. Keith Bremer, the Director of the Graduate School, this year's team was a powerhouse of talent and diverse backgrounds. Students Diana Angarita, Noah Erichsen, Dustin Rajewski, Chelsie Rose, and Bryce Steffan brought unique experiences and insights that contributed to the team's collaborative spirit and success. Their project, “Food to Fertilizer” (F2F), centered around a solar composter—a blend of sustainability and innovation.

Dr. Bremer curated his team thoughtfully, selecting Noah and Chelsie as the foundational members based on their intelligence and motivation. Noah invited Dustin, while Chelsie welcomed Diana to join the team. Their cohesion deepened when Bryce, a participant from last year's competition, sought to return. Their diverse academic backgrounds in finance, biology, chemistry education, environmental geosciences, history, and organizational leadership, as well as their shared entrepreneurial ambition, allowed them to create a well-rounded team.

Success, however, came with its challenges. True to the nature of entrepreneurship, the team encountered obstacles, including the need to redefine their target market based on feedback. Instead of being deterred, they embraced these challenges, meeting regularly and leveraging each member's expertise to ensure their project's viability.

Chelsie reflected on the experience, stating that the competition allowed her to apply practical skills acquired from previous entrepreneurial experiences, deepening her understanding of her studies in accounting and finance. While at FHSU, she has participated in multiple entrepreneurship challenges, including the EPIC Challenge, Faulkner Challenge, and the Werth Entrepreneurship Challenge.

Bryce Steffan, a Kansas Academy of Mathematics and Science (KAMS) student, appreciated how his parents' experience in banking and business prepared him for this challenge. His participation in the competition fostered a deeper sense of connection to his teammates and the university and demonstrated the power of applied learning.

For Diana Angarita, an international student from Venezuela, this opportunity was more than just about winning; it was about building invaluable networks and gaining practical experience that transcended borders. Diana emphasized that the teamwork and collective effort in bringing the solar composter project to fruition taught her the power of collaboration—the cornerstone of all successful enterprises.

Dustin Rajewski and Noah Erichsen shared similar reflections on the enriching dynamics of teamwork. Each learned that by embracing their unique strengths—Dustin’s expertise in chemistry and Noah’s focus on environmental geoscience—they could significantly enhance their project, leading to innovations they had not initially envisioned.

As the competition drew near, the FHSU team displayed tenacity that would eventually lead to their victory. Their presentation showcased enthusiasm, meticulous preparation, and cohesive teamwork, which captured the judges' attention. David Clingan, director of recruitment and retention for Grow Hays and a judge for the competition, commended the FHSU team for their passion and preparedness.

Chelsie, inspired by her grandmother, who was an accountant, is pursuing a double major in accounting and finance, aspiring to a career in financial planning, and looks forward to applying her skills to help clients navigate their financial futures. Noah plans to become a park ranger and natural resource specialist. Reflecting on his time at FHSU, he feels immense gratitude for the academic and social opportunities that have primed him for this upcoming chapter in his life.

Diana shared that her connections with her teammates have provided a sense of belonging and camaraderie that have enriched her academic experience at FHSU. She hopes her journey will inspire other students from diverse backgrounds to pursue their passions and dreams. Dustin, a chemistry education major, aspires to significantly impact his future students like his inspiring teachers and professors.

As FHSU continues to cultivate an environment rich in academic and entrepreneurial endeavors, the successes of Diana, Chelsie, Noah, Dustin, and Bryce stand as a testament to the university’s commitment to empowering its students. In a world that increasingly values innovation and sustainable solutions, the passion demonstrated by these young entrepreneurs highlights the critical nexus between education and practical application.

In the coming years, as FHSU students strive to forge their paths in a competitive landscape, the spirit of the Werth Entrepreneurship Challenge will undoubtedly continue to inspire future generations. Under our faculty’s visionary guidance, FHSU remains a fertile ground for aspiring entrepreneurs eager to make their mark.

The Werth Challenge and other FHSU applied learning opportunities showcase that FHSU is not just a place of academic learning but a launchpad for the next wave of innovators and thoughtful leaders capable of shaping the future. As the university celebrates the accomplishments of its students, it also embraces its broader goal of nurturing a culture of entrepreneurship where dreams are not only inspired but turned into reality.