

Fort Hays State's international partnerships are a force for good

I just returned from my second trip to China. My first trip was in 2013 when I served as the vice president for student affairs. As president, I had the honor this time of awarding degrees at our two largest international university partners – 618 cross-border graduates at Sias International University and 350 at Shenyang Normal University, as well as building upon the strong relationships we have. Both trips were exciting, exhausting and inspirational, and reaffirmed for me both the importance of our presence there and the reasons we are successful.

Fort Hays State University encourages and supports the development and delivery of programs abroad under partnerships with other universities, colleges, governmental agencies and special organizations. These partnerships are increasingly important in defining the university's mission as a "regional university with a global outlook" and its "Forward thinking. World ready." qualities.

Our international partnerships are delivered through several modalities: cross border, study abroad, student exchange, faculty exchange and online. We currently have signed agreements with approximately 75 universities in more than 25 countries. Each agreement is carefully constructed to ensure our signature, high-quality programs remain supervised by our academic department chairs and deans in Hays. Nothing is more important than the consistent, high-quality delivery of any course offered under the name of Fort Hays State University.

In addition to advancing our educational mission, President Edward H. Hammond often used these trips as opportunities to promote Kansas business in China. Past FHSU delegations have included aviation officials, agricultural business representatives, oil executives and other business leaders. From 2013, I recall a University of Kansas professor of medicine joining our delegation briefly to explore the role of traditional Chinese medicine in today's world – fascinating!

President Hammond was asked on a number of occasions to host special trips for the governor or for the Department of Commerce. This is important because a significant role of higher education is to be a positive force in economic development. I look forward to creating opportunities to stimulate international prospects for Kansas business.

It is hard to believe we are approaching 20 years of effectively delivering cross-border education to China, which requires strong, mutual relationships with our partners. It involves our faculty living in overseas university communities while teaching classes at partner campuses. We currently have approximately 50 faculty and their families living in China serving about 3,500 of our students at these two universities.

Each May, the FHSU president's delegation travels to Sias and Shenyang – our largest international partners – to award degrees, meet our new alumni, spend time with our host institution leaders and thank our faculty and their families for making such a strong impact in our world.

As much as I enjoyed shaking the hand of each student walking across the commencement stage, it was the time with the faculty I will cherish the most. They are courageous, committed, excellent educators – true difference makers. I listened intently as they talked about the unique challenges they face and how they navigate their daily personal and professional lives.

Our faculty in China are a force for good in the lives of our students, and they are a positive influence in their communities. There are too many stories to tell here, but some of my favorites include the leadership studies faculty who connect students to nonprofit organizations in China for service learning; an English professor who helped students improve their writing skills by sharing their cuisine and culture through essays and recipes (showcased on a website and published afterward as a cookbook!); international faculty who, on their own, formed a welcoming committee to help incoming international faculty and their families navigate their new home; and the members of our faculty who volunteer in local orphanages.

I also met two FHSU alumni who have opened a school in Hangzhou teaching English to more than 800 children. What an inspiration!

Visiting the U.S. embassy, we learned more about how it supports our faculty and students. Our delegation was met everywhere with graciousness and outstanding hospitality. Our international partnerships are built on many years of friendship and trust and as I met each president, we greeted one another and acknowledged that we share a journey together – continuing the work of those who came before us. We also share a deep sense of responsibility to shape the world's leaders through the delivery of strong international education programs.

I returned to Hays reaffirmed in my conviction that Fort Hays State University has a vital supporting role to play on the international stage.