

At FHSU, education comes through the virtues of hard work and hope

Returning from the summer meeting for presidents of state colleges and universities, I am renewed and reaffirmed in my faith in the mission and effectiveness of Fort Hays State University. We provide accessible, quality education to Kansas, the nation and the world through an innovative community of teacher-scholars and professionals who develop engaged global citizen-leaders.

I am particularly proud of our accessibility; our 17 consecutive years of growth; and the numerous awards, rankings, accreditations and recognitions driven by dedicated and talented faculty – indicative of a high quality education.

FHSU is not, and has never been, about being average. Our grit, innovation, and caring nature have served us well. These characteristics form the essence of our institutional DNA. We aim higher and work harder – especially when it comes to our students. Most importantly, we recognize that behind every enrollment, retention, and graduation statistic is a student, a real person to whom we have an obligation to guide and encourage.

This is why we continue to invest in award-winning programs such as the Hispanic College Institute; work hard to be a vibrant, forward-thinking partner with our community and technical colleges through proactive and creative articulation agreements; “meet students where they are” by providing educational opportunities in multiple formats such as engaging distance learning and community based-education whereby we send faculty to several sites throughout Western Kansas and the world; offer high-achieving high school students the unique opportunity to live on campus, engage in research with Ph.D. faculty, and enroll in 60 credit hours of college study all while completing their junior and senior year of high school; and provide multiple pathways for student engagement from living and learning communities to internships to study abroad opportunities.

We also recognize that we still have work to do in taking more students all the way to the finish line. Not every student who leaves FHSU early is a dropout, however. Some may be enrolled in our pre-engineering program specifically designed for transfer to engineering schools around the country. Others may enroll with a specific goal to complete general education requirements and then transfer to a higher cost college with different majors as a cost saving strategy. But there are students who are not graduating and for whom we need to find more effective ways of helping. That is why we continue to adopt new strategies and evaluate and refine current practices. Our faculty and staff devote an enormous amount of time and energy to getting better at supporting our students.

At FHSU, we have the courage to be introspective and innovative. Universities are called to think deeply and to differentiate between where students fail and where the university fails students – to adopt an “it’s on us” posture rather than simply blame students for not putting forth the effort to succeed. Researcher Robert Pace has long demonstrated that what the

institution does can profoundly shape student effort and positively impact success. Even newer research by Robert Putnam indicates that students who are not as well prepared for college often do not lack in intelligence but in savvy. Our outreach and support of students is more critical than we sometimes realize. This is why our new Center for Student Success, which will become a reality in 2021 thanks in part to the generosity of Richard and the late Delores Fischli, will be a particularly exciting addition to our campus.

New research from Gallup indicates that hope is critical to college student success. This makes sense when you think about it. Ever tried to lose weight and got negative feedback from the scale? Motivated to eat more fruits and vegetables? Feel like weighing in the next day? Discouragement steals hope. Encouragement fuels hope, which results in success. I know that when my personal trainer gives me information, shows me what to do, monitors my progress, and continues to encourage me, I am hopeful, focused, excited, and successful. Each week I get stronger and can do more. My trainer reminds me not of what I cannot yet do but of the progress I have made and how much closer I am to accomplishing my fitness goals.

The conference reminded me of how important it is to tell our students every day how great they are, to encourage their hopes and dreams, to instill in them the importance of perseverance, to refuse to accept failure, and to love them to success. After all, this is how we create world class athletes, and it is how we should be creating world class students.

And the best news – this relentless focus on hope and student support – is a virtue alive and well at FHSU. I am renewed and brimming with optimism as August quickly approaches and brings with it the excitement of a new academic year.