

Access to help and hope drives student success

Every time I return from meeting with other presidents, I feel renewed and reaffirmed in the mission, vision, and effectiveness of Fort Hays State University. Our team is making great progress on many important initiatives. One area in which we continue to make progress is in student persistence – continuing on from one semester, or one year, to the next. Over the past five years, FHSU has improved the freshman first-year-to-second-year rate by 5 percent and, over the same time period, online student retention has improved by 27 percent! This unusually rapid rate of improvement puts us on par with the national average.

But FHSU is not about being average. We aim higher and work harder, especially when it comes to our students. Most importantly, we recognize that behind every number is a student, a real person to whom we have an obligation to guide and encourage.

And sure, not every student who leaves FHSU early is a failure. Some may be enrolled in our pre-engineering 2+2 program specifically designed to allow our students to take the first semesters of pre-engineering classes, required by all engineering schools, and then transfer to an engineering program to finish the degree. This approach provides two years to work closely with our outstanding faculty members, in small classes, receiving personal attention and gaining a strong knowledge base.

Others may complete general education requirements and then transfer to a more expensive college with different majors as a cost-saving strategy.

But there are indeed students who are not graduating and for whom we need to find more effective ways to help. That is why we continue to adopt new strategies and evaluate and refine current practices. I am so grateful for the time and energy our faculty and staff devote to getting better at supporting our students.

An aspect I admire about FHSU is that we have the courage to be introspective and innovative. I once heard a national expert on student success call on universities to think deeply and 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 is more critical than we sometimes realize.

I was most intrigued by new research from Gallup indicating that hope is critical to student success. This makes sense when you think about it. Ever tried to lose weight and get negative feedback from the scale? Were you motivated to eat more fruits and vegetables? Did you feel like weighing in the next day? Discouragement steals hope. Encouragement fuels hope, which results in success.

When I work with my personal trainer – who 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.

I am constantly thinking about 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 persevering and refusing to accept failure. It is important to love them to success. It is a message I attempt to convey in my speeches and, more importantly, my daily interactions with students. This is how we create world-class athletes and how we should be creating world-class students.

And the best news – this quality of hope and student support – is already a characteristic alive and well at Fort Hays State University.