

Education is all about investing in lives

I keep a note on my desk that begins: “It is about the people we have helped, the stewardship we have invested in, and the seeds we have planted in the lives of others” I don’t recall where I saw that phrase, but I think about those words daily as I serve this university, and they make me smile because they are truly imbedded in the culture of FHSU. We may not get everything right 100 percent of the time, but our impact, kindness, and effectiveness are remarkable.

I am so lucky to be the recipient of many messages about the profound impact our faculty and staff have had on the lives of our students. Take, for example, this letter written to a freshman seminar instructor by Logan Behr, a May 2018 graduate. I shared his story at my inauguration, but it bears repeating. He wrote:

“I just wanted to reach out to let you know that I am doing well. My life is busier and fuller than I ever could have imagined. And through it all, I have never forgotten what you did for me. During freshman seminar, we took a self-evaluation quiz. Afterwards, I met with you in your office, where we learned that the evaluation gave me a 25% chance of ever earning a college degree. I was devastated. Until I heard your response: ‘That’s a bunch of BS.’ Those words gave me motivation like you wouldn’t believe. You gave me confidence that I could actually graduate. You even gave me a graduation tassel to keep me focused on that goal. This past May, I received a Bachelor of Science degree in Geology, with a minor in Business Administration, and a certificate in Geographic Information Systems. That graduation tassel still hangs on my wall as a reminder of all the opportunities I have because you invested in me.”

Notes like this show that we walk our talk when we say that FHSU is a student-centered university, when we say that we support our students, who all come from diverse backgrounds, each an individual with unique stories, hopes, and dreams. Our faculty and staff invest in each person, taking the time to make one-to-one contact, build confidence, and nurture individual success.

At the same time that we are building the confidence of our students, we are serving our community. In an earlier column I shared a little bit about our Neuromuscular Wellness Center, which provides health-related fitness activities, functional movement, fall prevention and clinical exercise training for community members dealing with neuromuscular conditions. The people served may be stroke survivors or have been diagnosed with conditions such as Parkinson’s disease, paralysis, multiple sclerosis or a variety of similar conditions. The center in itself is a great way to serve the community and is just one of the ways in which we invest in stewardship.

Combine that example of stewardship with how our faculty use the center as a way to teach our students, and you have a powerful blend of learning and making a difference. Recently I saw a note from Schuyler Brown (’18). Schuyler is currently studying for his doctorate in physical therapy. He wrote in part:

“Anyone wishing to work with/care for patients in a therapy-based setting should be required to spend time in Dr. Charmane Kandt’s Neuromuscular Wellness Center. Looking back, my time in the Neuro Center helped me gain confidence and get comfortable with establishing a therapeutic alliance, something highly emphasized in PT school. Working with the Neuro Center also helped with establishing a sense of compassion for patients/clients. I can’t thank Charmane enough for all the things she taught me about biomechanics, gait patterns, and genuinely caring about the people you are working with.”

The seeds we have planted are clearly producing harvests in the lives of alumni. Alumna Jennifer Lapka is the founder and president of Rightfully Sewn, Kansas City, a nonprofit organization providing seamstress training to at-risk women as well as residencies for fashion designers, helping them develop business plans, form networks and connect with media opportunities and potential clients. The six women of the inaugural seamstress training group represented a wide range of demographics with four on refugee status, from Iran, Syria, Congo and Afghanistan.

Jennifer received our young alumni award this past year. Her acceptance remarks were powerful, and her impact on our world, one woman at a time, is clearly making our world a better place. Talk about putting her degree to work!

There are many, many more examples of how Fort Hays State University does more than just award degrees. We focus on the people we help, we invest in modeling and producing stewardship, and we nurture the lives of others. That is what we do every day, and it is why Tiger Nation is thriving.