

Where innovation and service flourish, partners find each other

I love how our spirit of innovation combines education with service to our communities! It is especially gratifying when community partners join us to accomplish goals of education, access, opportunity and service.

I have written previously about several of our community-based partnerships, as we are so proud of our faculty and students and how they positively contribute to Western Kansas communities. In fact, over the past couple of weeks, Dr. Tim Davis, chair of the Department of Social Work, and I have been visiting with legislators about furthering the work we are accomplishing in addressing the state's need for social workers – especially in Western Kansas. Did you know that only 11 percent of the state's Licensed Bachelor's Social Workers and Licensed Addiction Counselors live and work in Western Kansas?

One of the key aspects our faculty realized early on is that if we were going to make an impact on social worker needs in Western Kansas, we could not wait for students to come to us. Boldly, we would go to them.

So in 2006, we partnered with Garden City Community College to address a severe shortage of licensed social workers in Southwest Kansas. The solution was a partnership between the state's AccessUS program through the Kansas Board of Regents, Garden City Community College and our Department of Social Work. Students who were committed to their home communities could gain their associate degrees through Garden City Community College and then, without leaving their homes, enter into the three-year social work cohort program and gain the credentials needed to seek licensure.

A cohort is a group of students who enter the program together and stay for the three-year course of education. Classes are taught by FHSU faculty at the local community college. Dr. Davis said the model has proven successful in Southwest Kansas, noting in a recent story that, "The first three Garden City cohorts graduated 30 Bachelor of Social Work students, the majority of whom have remained in Finney County to practice. These students now make up over half of the Licensed Bachelor's Social Workers in the county."

The program later expanded to Dodge City, and Dr. Davis said the cohort scheduled to graduate there this year has 13 students. If all finish, it will double the number of LBSWs in Ford County.

Social workers perform valuable services in their communities. They work in child and family service agencies, mental health centers, hospitals and health care agencies, schools, nursing homes, social service agencies, addiction treatment centers, the courts and more. The services they provide, as it says on the FHSU Social Work website, help "people cope with complex interpersonal and social problems and assist in obtaining resources."

The program also expanded into Seward County, Dr. Davis said, because local child welfare agencies could not fill open professional positions. The eight in the cohort there will more than double the number of the county's licensed social workers.

Northwest Kansas also needs many more social workers than it has available. By Dr. Davis's count, the 26 Northwest Kansas counties that the Dane G. Hansen Foundation in Logan considers its service area – stretching from Saline County in the southeast to Cheyenne County in the northwest – have a total of 166 licensed, bachelor's level social workers, but 92 of them are in Ellis and Saline counties. Five of these counties have none, 16 have three or less.

But the AccessUS program was created by the Kansas Legislature to expand educational opportunity only in Southwest Kansas. The fund helps pay for the added costs that come with offering

an entire educational program at a distance, and not only does it pay for certain administrative costs, but it also provides for student scholarships.

Absent additional legislative funding, Dr. Davis and the department sought other partners. The Hansen Foundation stepped in. A \$95,000 grant will fund expansion of the program to Colby and Colby Community College this fall and, with the assistance of Valley Hope Inc. and the CCC outreach center, to Norton as well.

Two more communities and faculty with a vision to further serve the needs of Western Kansas – that is impact. That is evidence of a culture of thinking out of the box. We understand that our success is the community's success and the region's success. This is a great example of reshaping education and opportunity in new and creative ways to prepare students for the future and communities for success.

At Fort Hays State, we say that our personality as an institution and as people is one of innovation, hard work, dedication, and caring about others, seeking ways to help them succeed. In many ways, the same can be said about Western Kansas – the values of one reflect the other, and each is willing to invest its energy and creativity in the common goal of preparing people for successful lives and making the world better.