

## **Educating minds also means nurturing them**

I love to share stories about students who through grit and determination have traversed difficult journeys and succeeded. They inspire me every day and remind me of my purpose: making a positive impact in the lives of others.

That motivation and purpose, however, is also fueled by painful memories of students who have died, some from sickness or accident, but others from mental health illnesses and substance abuse. The memory of all those students and their families are forever in my heart and have profoundly shaped my perspective in understanding the importance of community awareness, understanding, compassion, and action.

Throughout my career I have relied upon a number of colleagues who have worked with me to help individuals and the campus through struggles and tragedies – from individual professors and staff members, to crisis intervention teams, to campus police.

The death of any student is tragic, but for those who die as a result of mental illness the tragedy is compounded by the questions that remain with their friends and loved ones: Was there something we could have done? What did we miss? How could I have helped?

Those questions also haunt those of us who worked at the universities where the students studied, and always at the center of our institutional hopes are our professional counselors – a caring and experienced group of faculty and staff who quietly help so many members of our community gain the skills and knowledge to heal and to grow. They are truly gifted, kind, and remarkable.

In addition to helping individuals, these professionals also educate and shape policy so that our university grows stronger, enhances our outreach, and strengthens the overall wellbeing of our campus community.

Recently our Department of Psychology and the Kelly Center joined together to build awareness, improve the quality of health services, protect students, and discourage harmful behaviors across our campus through a partnership with the JED Foundation, created in 2000 by Donna and Phil Satow, who lost their youngest son, Jed, to suicide in 1998. They desired to use their loss to help communities strengthen their knowledge and skills and, ultimately, save lives.

At FHSU, we have been doing a lot of exemplary work in mental health promotion, but core to who we are, we know that no matter how proficient, there is always room for improvement. So the faculty and staff of the Psychology Department and the Kelly Center set out to validate all of the good work FHSU has already done to provide mental health and substance abuse services to our students and to look for ways to enhance and improve what we were doing. They accomplished this through JED Campus – an initiative of the Jed Foundation to guide schools through a collaborative process to create and implement a strategic plan to promote mental health, prevent suicide and limit substance use on college campuses.

According to FHSU's Dr. Leo Herrman, an associate professor of psychology, the campus program framework incorporates the content of the "Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention on College and University Campuses." This is a collection of data-driven best-practices developed by JED and the Suicide Prevention Resource Center. It allowed us to anticipate and evaluate our clinical and programming needs, examine how we utilize both personnel and financial resources to address challenges, coordinate efforts across campus, and measure our effectiveness.

Fort Hays State's JED Campus Initiative was a four-year process led by Gina Smith, director of the Kelly Center, and Herrman. A campus-wide committee with diverse representation from the administration, the student body, student affairs, residential life and various academic colleges worked with JED Campus to do a comprehensive review of the university's policies, practices and resources as they relate to our students' overall adjustment to college, mental health and general wellbeing.

Our campus initiative resulting from their work focused on nine key areas. It created, implemented or modified institutional policies and practices to improve the university's environment and enhance our mental health and student adjustment services.

For instance, the committee looked for ways to identify risks and begin dealing with them early. The health form that incoming students complete for the Campus Health Center now includes questions about mental health and alcohol and drug histories. Students who self-identify as having mild or moderate mental health issues get an email outlining services available on campus, and campus care providers follow that up by helping students develop self-care plans.

We also now have a well-defined medical leave policy that can be applied consistently for mental health as well as physical issues, and we are proactive about letting new and existing students – and their families – know about it.

The initiative also addressed educating students on healthy lifestyle choices and increasing their awareness of warning signs in their own behaviors and where to seek help.

The project was comprehensive and extensive, and we have a better and safer campus with more supports and help for our students. According to Dr. Herrman, feedback from JED was positive in regards to existing programming, but work with them clearly enhanced what we were doing.

Fort Hays State was one of the first schools nationally to join the JED Campus Initiative and is still the only one in Kansas. FHSU is one of only 15 nationally to achieve Alumni Status. I am so proud of our people for caring so deeply about our community and working even harder to create a safer campus.

Every student matters. It is this ethic of care and this spirit of positive restlessness – always striving to improve – that makes Fort Hays State University so strong.