

Strategic Affiliation Monthly Newsletter

March 2025

FROM THE DIRECTOR OF STRATEGIC AFFILIATION - Peter Laipson, Ph.D.

In previous columns, I've highlighted our collective progress on various affiliation initiatives aimed at enhancing the student experience. These efforts include:

- Aligned program pathways with the technical colleges, allowing students to transition to a four-year degree at FHSU seamlessly.
- Career fairs in multiple fields are open to students from all three partner institutions.
- The "Fast Track to FHSU" guide outlines how secondary students taking concurrent enrollment classes at tech colleges can accelerate their university degree.
- Shared technology, including Blackboard, to create a more integrated academic experience.



Additionally, I've written about the collaboration among registrars and institutional researchers working to streamline the transfer process and track student movement across affiliates. I've also covered the efforts of student success teams to enhance engagement and the marketing and recruitment teams striving to communicate the benefits of the affiliation to prospective students.

However, what I haven't yet addressed—and the focus of this column—is our shared commitment to improving the experience of regional businesses and communities. Along with students, these groups are central to our affiliation's mission and success.

Strengthening Community and Industry Ties

Along with students, the success of regional businesses and communities is the "north star" of the affiliation, so

meeting the needs of communities and industries has been a key priority. In both planning and action, we've kept these groups in mind. For example:

- Each academic AIT—spanning Nursing/Allied Health, Agriculture, Construction, Business, and IT/Computer Science—includes industry representatives who provide critical insights on workforce demands, program development, and job opportunities for students and graduates.
- The Affiliation Implementation Teams (AITs) for Secondary Partnerships and General Education have developed a comprehensive list of concurrent enrollment courses, including online options, available to secondary students across the region.

I'm very pleased to share that, with state support, our engagement with businesses and communities is expanding. Last June, the affiliates received a FORGE (Forging Opportunities for Research, Growth, and Entrepreneurship) grant from the Kansas Department of Commerce. This grant funds three projects that enhance our ability to serve as a resource for western and central Kansas:

1. **Consortium on Community and Economic Development**

With support from the FORGE grant, the three partners have developed a Consortium on Community and Economic Development with regional representation. Many organizations do outstanding work in workforce and community development, but their efforts are often siloed. The Consortium aims to foster collaboration by bringing these groups together and exploring how our institutions can support their work. To date, Presidents Mason, Burks, and Shears have convened

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three meetings, where participants have shared regional challenges, discussed solutions, and identified ways the university and technical colleges can contribute.

2. *New Affiliation Website*

The FORGE grant is also supporting the creation of a new website. Unlike the partners' existing websites, which primarily serve students, this new platform will cater to businesses and communities, including those considering relocation to the region. It will showcase available resources, provide direct points of contact at all three institutions, and serve as the "front door" to the overall affiliation initiative and each partner.

3. *Micro Credential in Business Retention and Expansion (BRE)*

Finally, the FORGE grant is supporting the creation of a new micro credential in Business Retention and Expansion (BRE). Developed by FHSU's Division of Professional and Continuing Education, this program offers a strategic approach to economic development by supporting local business growth. Participants, working as a cohort, will engage in structured interviews, data analysis, and problem-solving to identify and address issues (such as business succession planning and workforce development) that might inhibit businesses from thriving. The first BRE training cohort is scheduled to begin this summer, with participants who complete the program receiving an advanced digital badge from FHSU.

These initiatives underscore the affiliation's commitment to strengthening regional partnerships, addressing workforce needs, and fostering economic growth. Just as we strive to enhance the experience of students at all the partner schools, the affiliation is equally dedicated to supporting the businesses and communities that sustain our region.



FHSU students at work in the Center for Applied Technology.



Fort Hays Tech | Northwest Precision Ag students are working on installing a Raven Auto-Boom system, working in partnership with one of our area producers who is also program alumni.

Fort Hays Tech | North Central students from the Hays Construction Technology class had the opportunity to visit Paul Wertenberger Construction (PWC) and tour the new commercial construction site of a Community Center just north of Hays Med.

