

Strategic Affiliation Monthly Newsletter

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

Looking back on the Affiliation's remarkable first year

As we celebrate the first anniversary of the affiliation, it seemed like a good idea to provide a brief "year in review," a quick recap of the highlights of the first twelve months.

Figuring that no one can resist a listicle on the web (those clickbait lists with lurid promises that "number 4 will shock you!"), I've tried to capture the top five achievements of the Affiliation Year 1.



1. Comprehensive rebranding of technical colleges

Despite significant prior work by all three institutions, the affiliation did not formally exist until June 2024, when the Higher Learning Commission authorized the change of control. Between that time and the beginning of the 2024-25 academic year, the technical colleges did a complete rebranding. This included everything from a change in names, colors, fonts, logos, signage, and mascots to new website domains and email addresses to new athletic uniforms and local street signs—a heroic undertaking.

2. Creation of 13 Affiliation Implementation Teams and 3 Task Forces to make the affiliation operational

A key principle of the affiliation is to empower faculty and staff at every level to encourage innovation among the partners. To that end, the three institutions have created Affiliation Implementation Teams and granted them significant autonomy to address challenges and develop new initiatives. Overseen by an Affiliation Steering Committee (and ultimately, by the three presidents), the AITs meet every two weeks to fulfill an 18-month plan that is largely of their own devising. Thirteen teams and three additional task forces have met over the past year.

3. Articulation of new academic degree pathways from the technical colleges to Fort Hays State University

Even in this first year, several AITs have created pathways from the technical colleges to FHSU that provide students the opportunity to earn a more advanced degree. For example, students in two nine-month certificate programs at Fort Hays Tech | North Central, Welding and Construction Technology, can study for two additional semesters at FHSU and reverse transfer credits to earn from North Central, respectively, the AAS in Building/Construction Site Management and Welding Engineering Technology. Students with an AAS in Respiratory Therapy from Fort Hays Tech | Northwest or an AAS in Medical Assistance can get two years of credit at FHSU toward a BS in Health Studies. A program pathway for students with an AAS will soon be finalized so that students with the AAS Agriculture at Northwest and in Agricultural Equipment Technology at North Central can get a BS in Agricultural Business from FHSU. Similar programs exist in other disciplines (including a full slate of programs in Applied Technology) or are under development in IT/Computer Science and Business.

4. Evolution of collaborative relationships among faculty and staff at all three institutions

Shortly after their initial meeting, the members of each AIT have taken a tour of all three affiliate campuses and exchanged detailed information about one another's programs and resources. In addition to the teams meeting biweekly by Zoom, the chairs and vice-chairs of each AIT get together semi-annually in person at day-long "Affiliation Summits" held in rotation at Beloit, Goodland, and Hays. A consequence of this frequent contact is the growth of new professional relationships across institutions – relationships that many faculty and staff, especially those in small programs or isolated roles, describe as extremely gratifying.

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These relationships, in turn, have given rise to collaborations that serve students. For instance, students at the technical colleges have been invited to career fairs in Applied Technology, Informatics, Agriculture, and Nursing and Allied Health at FHSU; the student success teams at each of the affiliates are coordinating their orientation programs and collaboratively reviewed their new student seminars; and the Institutional Research staff at the three partners are creating new protocols to track students as they move among the affiliated institutions. Furthermore, the collaborations have encouraged innovation. To cite just one example, the Agriculture AIT is contemplating a new series of summer courses based on the expertise of each affiliate.

5. Reduction of “friction” for students taking courses at, or transferring among, multiple affiliate institutions

Improving the experience of students, as well as supporting regional communities and businesses, is the “north star” of the affiliation, and many early affiliation initiatives serve that end. For instance, the technical colleges will be transitioning to the Blackboard LMS (available at no cost through FHSU) so that students who study at more than one affiliate institution will not have to master a new learning management system. Similarly, students who have completed a course at one of the affiliates will no longer have to pay an application fee to study at any of the others. To further encourage cost savings, and to facilitate exchange among the affiliates, one of the AITs recently completed a guide called “Fast Track to FHSU” to show high school students in the tech colleges’ service areas how they can complete most of their Fort Hays State University general education requirements through concurrent enrollment courses at the technical colleges.

Regional economic development initiative teams gather at FHSU for advanced training

Earlier this spring, the Professional and Continuing Education (PCE) group at Fort Hays State University launched an innovative pilot educational program designed to equip business, government, economic development, and higher education leaders with the knowledge, skills, and tools needed to lead economic and workforce development-focused task forces in their local communities. This program is intended to challenge, engage, and guide participants in the practical application of business retention and expansion principles. The pilot program was commissioned by FHSU President Tisa Mason, Fort Hays Tech | North Central President Eric Burks, and Fort Hays Tech | Northwest President Ben



Schears as a way to focus the work of the three strategic affiliation partnering institutions and generate momentum and interest in coordinated economic/community growth and development in rural Kansas.

“The rural areas of Kansas that our three institutions serve continue to face an exodus of skilled talent, economic decline, and a resulting drop in the quality of life enjoyed by Kansans,” Mason said. “This pilot program demonstrates our commitment to what we call the ‘True North’ of this affiliation - our commitment to support businesses, communities, and learners in rural Kansas.”

The BRE pilot course is built around three community-based cohorts of approximately 10 members each who will progress through six program modules as a team. The delivery methods used in this training vary between independent study, remote online learning delivered via Zoom, and on-site at the FHSU campus. Additionally, as requested, Dr. Andrea Luoma, certified BRE professional and course facilitator, will offer one-on-one coaching sessions for each cohort and the individual learners.

“When designing this program, we wanted to balance self-study, remote, and in-person learning, which offers flexibility, accessibility, and engagement to support diverse learning styles,” said Interim Director of Professional & Continuing Education Kaley Klaus. “Dr. Luoma’s professional coaching also adds a unique, personalized element with immediate real-world application for our participants.”

