

Strategic Affiliation Monthly Newsletter

May 2024



FHSU hosts rural workforce development “think tank” gathering

Higher education, civic, and economic development leaders from Western Kansas gathered on the campus of Fort Hays State University on May 1 for a wide-ranging discussion that explored potential opportunities for strengthening relationships between higher education and workforce development in Western Kansas. Fort Hays State University and strategic affiliation initiative partners North Central Kansas Technical College and Northwest Kansas Technical College hosted the event.

FHSU President Tisa Mason initiated the discussion by expressing gratitude to all attendees for their commitment to spurring economic growth in Western Kansas. She emphasized the session's focus on pioneering inventive solutions through the Strategic Affiliation's "True North" focus on communities, businesses, and students. She asked for the group's help in developing a gateway for businesses and their employees to access emerging and market-smart learning opportunities.

Think Tank meeting moderator Dr. Brett Zollinger of FHSU's Docking Institute of Public Affairs facilitated the discussion. Early in the discussion, several participants spoke about the necessity of embracing a culture of nimbleness and initiative if higher education institutions

want to become more successful in moving partnerships with businesses toward impactful outcomes.

Several participants shared examples from their outreach efforts which taught them that potential education and training solution partners tend to be fully engaged in what is immediately necessary to ensure their businesses make it to the next business day and the next payroll. A clear takeaway was that higher education must drive these important partnerships by establishing trust, demonstrating a commitment to an enduring and mutually beneficial relationship, and clearly communicating the potential value of a partnership.

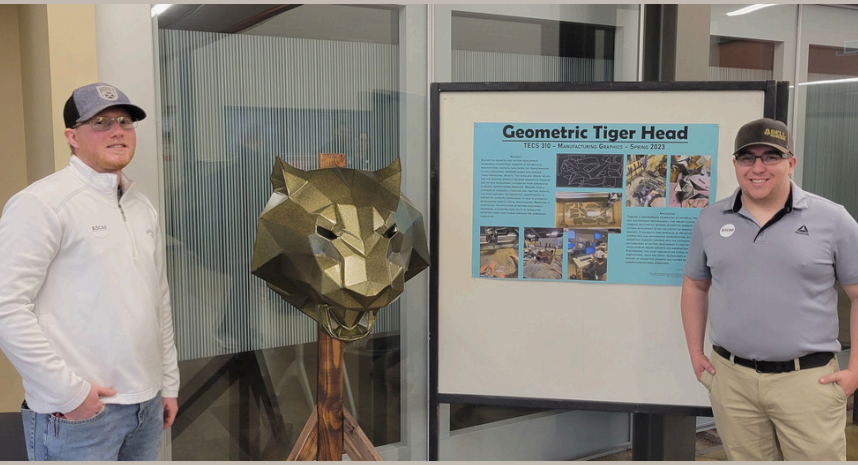
Another area of discussion centered around how successful businesses in rural Kansas invest early in their future workforce through direct outreach to high school students and offers of scholarships and employment guarantees for those who complete specific education and training programs. Members of the technical college delegation added that the learning solutions which businesses and younger workers are often looking for today include accelerated credentialing and robust internship and apprenticeship programs.

The discussion then shifted to ways a coalition might be built to facilitate breakthrough partnerships between rural businesses and higher education. Innovation Center President and CEO Scott Sproul and Western Kansas Rural Economic Development Association Alliance (WKREDA) Vice President Mike Parsons introduced the concept of creating a joint “one-stop-shop” with the sole focus of incubating workforce development solutions. Sproul, Parsons, and several representatives from Grow Hays shared their willingness to leverage their expertise and extensive professional networks across a 51-county service area in Western Kansas to the creation of a one-stop-shop workforce development coalition.

By the end of the session, it was clear that a potential model for the new “front door” for workforce development was beginning to take shape, and a commitment from essential champions necessary to drive this innovative future coalition was in place.

A major and immediate next step in the FHSU, North Central Kansas Technical College, and Northwest Kansas Technical College Strategic Affiliation initiative, bolstered by the day’s think tank discussion with regional economic development partners, will be crafting a response to an invitation from the Kansas Department of Commerce to submit a FORGE grant proposal. The Kansas Fostering Opportunities for Research, Growth, and Entrepreneurship (FORGE) program supports and accelerates innovation activities within state universities to create new economic activity in Kansas. The three higher education institutions’ response will propose a project to enhance workforce development initiatives and help regional partners retain employees and expand their businesses.

Affiliated Story



The FHSU, North Central Kansas Technical College, and Northwest Kansas Technical College affiliation is already making a difference for Kansas students. Prime examples of the affiliation ideals can be seen in students Nolan Roth and Noland Vahle. Both began in the Welding certificate program at NCK Tech in Beloit in the fall of 2021. Upon program completion, they both took advantage of the seamless transfer process to complete courses at Fort Hays State, which allowed them to achieve their Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degree.

At any point in this process, students may choose to continue their education or take their skills and pursue employment opportunities. Nolan and Noland both decided to take the next step and, in the fall of 2023, began working toward their bachelor’s degree in Manufacturing Technology. This spring, the two completed a project of their own design and displayed their work at the 19th annual John Heinrichs Scholarly and Creative Activity Days (SACAD). The massive metal tiger head, weighing over 55 pounds, will eventually find a permanent home on campus. In the near future, both students are looking forward to their upcoming internships. Nolan will be working at Don Dye in Kingman, KS, while Noland goes to Kansas City to complete his internship experience at Icon Machine Tool. Both students are planning to graduate in the spring of 2025.

Strategic Affiliation Initiative Timeline

