

## Strategic Affiliation Monthly Newsletter

May 2025

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

### No lights. No cameras. Plenty of action

#### The importance of the Affiliation work happening behind the scenes

There are two kinds of moviegoers in

the world: those who leave the theater as the lights come up and those who stay planted in their seats for the credits. I

belong to the second group. I want to know who played "waitress number two" and who worked as the lead actor's executive assistant; I like to read the names of the key grip, sound designer, and catering company



as they roll past on the screen. Partly, it's for the unexpected moments of delight (wow -- everyone in the director's family got a walk-on?), and partly, it's to remind myself how much more goes into creating a film than anyone would have imagined. But more than anything, it's to show respect for the efforts of everyone who made the movie possible. The cameras might focus on the stars at the Oscars, but the location scout, the foley artist, and the title designer were just as critical to that movie's production.

The affiliation bears some distinct resemblances to a feature film. It's an intricate process involving hundreds of people; it's designed to satisfy a diverse audience, and the goal is a finished product that belies the complexity of its production. We often use the word "frictionless" to describe the ideal experience of students with respect to the affiliation. We want their encounters with each and all of the partners to be easy. But easy takes effort, and there are AITs and task forces – many behind the scenes and uncelebrated - working hard to make that possible.

One of these is AIT 10, the Registrars. One recent innovation of the affiliation has been to make the exchange of transcripts among the partners available at no cost to

students. That's thanks to the work of the registrar's who are also working to make sure academic pathway programs from the technical colleges to FHSU are entered into Workday.

Another group working behind the scenes is AIT 17, Institutional Research. As we anticipate more students moving from one partner to another, we want to be able to track them, both for reporting purposes and to improve the quality of their experience. This is particularly challenging because each affiliate uses a different Student Information System. Over the last six months, AIT 17 has been refining the categories of student participants in the affiliation and collaborating with other AITs to discern what kinds of data it needs to collect from each of the affiliates.

A third group that could go unremarked upon, but that is crucial to our collective success, is the Student Accounts Task Force. Recently constituted, this team is examining various questions related to billing, the timing of tuition and scholarship notification, and protocols for distributing financial aid. Each partner currently has its own policies and practices, and these must be reconciled for students to have a seamless experience as they move from one affiliate to another. The Student Accounts Task Force is taking on that task.

Yet a fourth team working quietly to ensure the quality of students' experience is the Advising Working Group. Also recently constituted, this team is planning a training session for advisors from all the partners to share resources, learn about the points of contact for academic questions at each of the campuses, and become fully informed about the new opportunities the affiliation creates.

A fifth team, still in its earliest stages, is the Procurement Working Group. Each of the affiliates spends thousands of dollars a year purchasing goods and services. This group is exploring opportunities for savings either through economies of scale or through the extension to the

(continued)

technical colleges of negotiated agreements FHSU enjoys with many of its vendors.

And then there is the team at each of the affiliates working to effect the transition to Blackboard at the technical colleges. While the staff at Fort Hays State | Northwest and Fort Hays State | North Central are experiencing the most significant shift, colleagues at the university have been incredibly supportive, meeting at least weekly to lend their expertise and resources as their partners get oriented to a new learning management system.

The affiliation is shaping up to be an amazing production – a blockbuster in cinematic terms. Our students are very properly its stars, but we do right to recognize the extraordinary and dedicated work of faculty and staff at all three partners. Let the credits roll.

## **Q&A with Fort Hays Tech | Northwest President and first FHSU Vice President for Economic and Workforce Development, Ben Schears**

### 1. Why did you decide to pursue the opportunity to serve as FHSU's VP for Economic and Workforce Development?

Simply put, I'm passionate about driving meaningful change, and this role offers a unique opportunity to make a lasting impact across an entire region of our state. While some may say that rural America is in decline, I believe quite the opposite—the story of rural communities, particularly in Western Kansas, has incredible and inspirational chapters yet to be written. I'm rural by choice, and I've seen firsthand what can happen when communities come together with a shared vision and a willingness to roll up their sleeves. When this position was created, it spoke to everything I care deeply about—especially the chance to help Fort Hays State University serve as a regional catalyst for economic growth and workforce development.



The university's commitment to looking beyond individual community needs and investing in efforts that benefit all of Western Kansas drew me to the position. That kind of effort is rare—and it's one of the things our region needs to thrive.

### 2. How will your work advance the affiliation?

It's my heart's desire to amplify the incredible work already happening across all three affiliated institutions while creating stronger bridges between the students, businesses, and communities we all serve. Collaboration will be key—by working together, we can better position our institutions to secure critical funding, launch joint initiatives, and expand our reach and impact.

In practical terms, working alongside faculty and staff at each institution to help secure grant funding to move strategic initiatives forward will be beneficial. Identifying areas where we can connect two or three partners on joint grant applications will be particularly exciting, allowing us to do more together than we could accomplish alone.

There is advocacy work to continue in Topeka and Washington, D.C., where we will work to strengthen the position of the university and technical colleges. I have long believed that for Western Kansas institutions, in particular, we have two choices: we are either at lunch or we are lunch. I know which one I prefer, which requires high engagement with legislators, lobbyists, and other colleagues.

The heart of what we'll be doing is working with economic, workforce, and community development professionals across Western Kansas to support their work. This work is about creating a real, lasting impact. That means helping connect graduates with meaningful career and business opportunities right here in Kansas. As publicly funded institutions, we have a responsibility—and an incredible opportunity—to invest in the future of our rural Kansas communities by connecting them with the next generation of leaders, innovators, and entrepreneurs.

And throughout it all, I aim to be a resource across the affiliation – someone who listens, learns, and helps turn ideas into outcomes.

### 3. How do you plan to spend your first 100 days in this new role?

I've been fortunate to have a significant runway to get started since the position announcement was made. Many folks within the affiliation and surrounding communities have reached out to connect. Having spent nine great years at Fort Hays Tech Northwest has given me a deep understanding of regional industry needs and has connected me to some truly incredible folks. With these tools in my toolbox, I'll spend the first 100 days connecting with as many people as possible. I want to better understand the resources, talents, and ideas already in place—and how we can support and leverage them in new ways.

Above all, I plan to listen. While I bring my own insights and experiences, they don't mean much if they're not supported by - and reflected in - the very people we aim to serve. I genuinely believe the best success stories are waiting to be written all across Western Kansas, and each of us has a role to play in how those stories come to life.