

## **Heart of a Tiger: FHSU Online at 25 years**

The summer of 1997 was a period marked by great triumph and tragedy. In June, the world was introduced to the world of wizardry with the UK publication of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone. In July, NASA's Pathfinder rover safely landed on Mars and began sending back data and stunning images from the "Red Planet." And in August, the world learned of the tragic death of Princess Diana in Paris.

The summer of 1997 was also significant at Fort Hays State University as we took a major strategic step forward into the future of learning.

That spring and summer, now a decade into what would become more than 27 years of service as FHSU president, Dr. Edward Hammond saw an opportunity to deliver on a promise he made when he was first hired. During his interview, President Hammond told the Kansas Board of Regents-led search committee that he would transform FHSU into a "high touch-high tech" institution if given the opportunity.

Once hired, President Hammond immediately went to work building the foundation necessary to realize his goal. By the mid-1990s, he had positioned FHSU well to take advantage of the breakup of the Bell System monopoly in the 1980s that introduced competition and new opportunities to forge traditional (wired) and new (cellular) communications technology partnerships in rural Kansas.

President Hammond established several partnerships that expanded the reach of FHSU distance learning programs via fiber-wire-connected two-way video conferencing to students in Colby, Goodland, Garden City, and Dodge City. Under his leadership, FHSU became the first university in Kansas to deliver academic programs via this medium.

Then came the Internet. Created in 1960 as a way for government researchers to share information, the Internet was initially designed for the military and major research institutions to share national security-related information.

Access to the Internet didn't become available to the rest of the world until 1993. By 1997, there were 70 million users online. Today, that number exceeds 5 billion.

Sensing a fresh opportunity to leverage this emerging technology and expand the FHSU high touch-high tech model, President Hammond and Provost Rodolfo Arevalo charged Dean Tony Fernandez of the College of Health and Life Sciences with establishing a new unit tasked with transitioning FHSU distance education to online delivery. The new unit would be known as the Virtual College.

Out of the gate, the fledgling Virtual College faced several challenges. While internet access was expanding, many homes still had no way to connect to the Internet. Those who could access the new technology did not enjoy the connectivity or bandwidth to stream instructional videos. There remained a dependence on CD or DVD production and distribution in Virtual College operations.

New processes for delivering course materials through the mail needed to be developed to address these issues, and the campus bookstore was the answer. The space was renovated to include an area in the bookstore basement where boxes could be filled with books, videotapes, and DVDs for shipment to Virtual College students.

Moving away from live, two-way videoconferencing meant that faculty needed to be licensed and trained in using a learning management system. To assist with the transition, Virtual College staff developed a tool kit called “Web Course in a Box” to help faculty restructure their courses for asynchronous or on-demand delivery.

In the early 2000s, the university licensed the Blackboard learning management system that offers a wealth of virtual course planning and delivery tools. A new organization staffed by instructional technology specialists, the Center for Teaching Excellence and Learning Technologies (CTELT), was created and charged with faculty training and learning technology research.

Now known as Teaching Innovation and Learning Technologies (TILT), this group has led the effort on campus to research, test, evaluate, and adopt new technologies.

The focus on high touch-high tech learning introduced by President Hammond back in the 1980s remains the principal focus of FHSU Online (formerly the Virtual College).

From an initial enrollment of around 900 students in 1997, annual online enrollment at FHSU now exceeds 6,500 students and amounts to nearly 48% of total university enrollment.

Unlike many universities, whose transition to online instruction was a direct result of the COVID pandemic, we were already recruiting technology-savvy faculty and developing best practices in teaching and student support for online learners for nearly 25 years.

We were early adopters of services like online tutoring and professional advisors. Several years ago, we created a Virtual Student Senate to give online students a voice in major decisions that impact online students and the university. We remain one of very few universities to include online students in shared governance in this manner. FHSU is also one of six institutions to be awarded the rigorous United States Distance Learning Association quality certification.

It has been said that students learn as much or more in college out of the classroom. Part of our planning for the future will include spending more time and expertise on the development of what we call “ecosystem resources.” Simply put, we are creating expanded and more engaged learning environments that move the learning experience beyond the constraints of time, space, and the boundaries of traditional instruction.

So, even as we celebrate an amazing 25 years of online learning, we are already looking ahead to the next 25 years of FHSU Online. We know that digital resources and online learning practices have evolved over the past few years, and we are investing time and talent to ensure we continue to evolve with that change.

Last year, we created a team of campus experts to develop what we are calling a digital master plan for the university. Much like a master plan that guides the building, renovation, and removal of obsolete buildings and structures, our digital master plan will guide our future efforts to remain leaders and innovators in this space.

The remarkable 25-year history of online learning at FHSU is a testament to what an innovative, resilient, and engaged campus community can do when unbounded by real and imagined barriers. The amazing people who built FHSU Online were instrumental in transforming this university into what we call today “the best value in education anywhere.”

