

Heart of a Tiger: Looking back on a successful 2025 at FHSU

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - In 2025, Fort Hays State University experienced a remarkable convergence of leadership, generosity, innovation, and partnership that reinforced its role as a driver of opportunity for students and communities across Kansas. From expanding guaranteed pathways to high-demand careers and celebrating philanthropic support to strengthening workforce pipelines and honoring service, these twelve stories capture the heart of what it means to be a Tiger.

January

FHSU and Kansas Community Colleges announce guaranteed admission program in psychology

The year began with a landmark agreement expanding access to higher education across the state. I was joined by Kansas Association of Community Colleges Director Heather Morgan and leaders from all 19 Kansas community colleges to sign a Memorandum of Understanding establishing a guaranteed admission pathway into FHSU's clinical and school psychology programs.

Students completing an associate degree at a Kansas community college can now transition seamlessly into FHSU bachelor's programs—and, uniquely, the guarantee extends through the master's degree level for both clinical and school psychology, provided GPA requirements are met. The initiative directly addresses workforce shortages in mental health and education while removing barriers for students seeking advanced degrees in critical service professions.

February

Applied Technology achieves 100 percent graduate job placement

FHSU's Department of Applied Technology has reached a milestone that speaks volumes about its hands-on approach to education: a 100 percent graduate job placement rate. Department Chair Kim Stewart credited the achievement to long-standing partnerships with industry and a robust internship requirement embedded in the curriculum.

With nine credit hours of internships, roughly equivalent to two summers of professional experience, students graduate not only with degrees but with practical skills, employer connections, and real-world readiness. For a department that has consistently hovered near a 98 percent placement rate, the milestone reinforced FHSU's reputation as a workforce-driven institution.

March

Ben Schears named Vice President for Economic and Workforce Development

Leadership for economic growth took a major step forward when Ben Schears, president of Fort Hays Tech | Northwest, was named FHSU's Vice President for Economic and Workforce Development. In this role, Schears leads efforts to align education, innovation, and workforce needs across the region.

In the opening months that Schears has served in this role, he has worked with Strategic Affiliation partner Fort Hays Tech | North Central to assist High Plains Mental Health and Fort Hays Tech | North Central in addressing the workforce needs associated with their expanding operations. Now in the works is a new associate's degree program at Fort Hays Tech | North Central that will help High Plains Mental Health staff entry-level positions. The goal of this partnership is to create seamless educational pathways that enable students to earn and learn as they advance in their careers.

Under his leadership, FHSU was selected to serve as one of six entities in the Heartland Rural Innovators Initiative hosted by the Center on Rural Innovation (CORI). Sponsored by the Patterson Family Foundation, the initiative aims to create local efforts that focus on closing the growing gap in tech sector jobs in rural America. The effort will consolidate existing assets across Ellis County to create a robust entrepreneurial ecosystem that supports tech sector jobs.

April

Grace McCord Selected as a Finalist in Truman Scholar Competition

Fort Hays State University Political Science major Grace McCord was selected as one of just 200 finalists in the national competition for the Truman Scholarship, selected from 800 highly accomplished applicants nominated by their universities. Truman Scholars are college juniors chosen for their commitment to pursuing a career in public service. Truman Scholars receive a scholarship for graduate study funded by the Truman Foundation, which was created to honor the values of President Harry S. Truman.

Grace served her community through a number of service projects, including work with Jana's Campaign and the Celebration Community Church Quilting Ministry, among other activities. In her career at FHSU, she has led the American Democracy Project and served as a senator in the Student Government Association, where she currently serves as the Legislative Affairs Director, as well as holding leadership roles in the Pi Sigma Alpha Political Science Honor Society and her sorority, Alpha Gamma Delta.

May

Dr. Lisa Goddard McGuirk named athletic director

Dr. Lisa Goddard McGuirk joined FHSU as its new Athletic Director, bringing with her a national reputation for excellence in Division II athletics. Previously serving as athletic director at Gannon University, she was named NCAA Division II Athletic Director of the Year in 2024.

Under her leadership, Gannon achieved top national rankings in the Learfield Directors' Cup, a benchmark of athletic and academic success. At FHSU, Goddard McGuirk's arrival marked a new chapter for Tiger Athletics, one focused on competitive excellence, student-athlete success, and national visibility.

June

Business Retention and Expansion Program launches regional pilot

Professional and Continuing Education at FHSU launched an innovative pilot program designed to strengthen local economies through business retention and expansion strategies. This initiative was led by representatives from FHSU, Fort Hays Tech | North Central, and Fort Hays Tech |Northwest. Class cohorts were formed in Beloit, Goodland, and Hays, and participants included leaders from business, government, education, and economic development. The program curriculum focused on applying practical tools to support community growth. This initiative highlighted the power of regional collaboration and FHSU's leadership role in rural economic development.

July

Corey Isbell named president of Fort Hays Tech | Northwest

Corey Isbell, Ed.D., was named president of Fort Hays Tech | Northwest, succeeding Ben Schears. With more than 25 years of experience in technical education across rural Kansas, Isbell brought a deep understanding of workforce training, student success, and community engagement.

His appointment ensured continuity and momentum within the Fort Hays State system, reinforcing strong partnerships between FHSU and technical education institutions across the region.

August

FHSU Stroup Hall breaks ground to expand nursing program

On August 21, Fort Hays State University broke ground on a \$15.4 million project to expand Stroup Hall. The project will add 30,000 additional square feet and unite the Departments of Nursing and Allied Health under one roof. This expansion will allow the two departments to collaborate more closely in training the next generation of students. Funded by the Kansas Legislature, the new Stroup Hall will include simulation labs, updated classrooms, and hands-on training opportunities, with completion expected in December 2026.

U.S. Senator Jerry Moran helped secure an additional \$400,000 in U.S. Department of Education funding that will be used to provide advanced technology and essential simulation systems.

FHSU is currently serving 425 allied health students and slightly more than 725 nursing students. The University expects the expansion to enable enrollment in nursing programs to increase by more than 65% and in medical diagnostic imaging programs by 40%. Fall 2025

enrollment numbers anticipate expected growth in both disciplines with allied health experiencing a 22% increase in students this fall and nursing seeing a 9% increase.

September

Seven-Figure gift announced for campus library

Homecoming weekend brought a new reason to celebrate: a seven-figure gift from Stephen and Tatiana Tebo and their family to support the renovation of the campus library, now named the Tebo Library.

The gift marked one of the most significant philanthropic investments in campus infrastructure. The renovated library will serve as a hub for learning, collaboration, and discovery for generations to come.

October

Kansas SBDC Network earns renewed accreditation

The Kansas Small Business Development Center Network, headquartered at FHSU, achieved renewed national accreditation through 2029. The rigorous process affirmed the network's commitment to high-quality advising and education for Kansas entrepreneurs.

Serving six regional centers statewide, the Kansas SBDC plays a critical role in strengthening small businesses and local economies - another example of FHSU's statewide impact beyond campus boundaries.

November

Department chair honored with Patriot Award

Service and support took center stage when Dr. Richard Lisichenko, chair of the Geosciences Department, received the Patriot Award from the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve. The honor recognized his exceptional support of Dr. Jonathan Sumrall during Sumrall's deployment to Kuwait.

Lisichenko's consistent communication and inclusion of Sumrall's family exemplified FHSU's culture of care, earning national recognition and reinforcing the university's commitment to military-affiliated faculty and staff.

December

FHSU celebrates first Officer Candidate School graduate

The year concluded with a historic milestone as Jackson Piper became FHSU's first Officer Candidate School graduate to walk across the commencement stage. Piper, a Kansas City native and Kansas Army National Guard member, joined the OCS program shortly after its launch in 2022.

His achievement symbolized perseverance and service, and highlighted the growing opportunities FHSU provides for students pursuing military and leadership pathways.

Take a Deeper Dive into *Heart of a Tiger*

In January 2018, I wrote the first *Heart of a Tiger* column to celebrate the people and culture that make Fort Hays State University special. More than 150 columns later, these stories continue to highlight the compassion, innovation, and determination that define Tiger Nation.

Every *Heart of a Tiger* column is available at fhsu.edu/president/heart-of-a-tiger/.
