

Heart of a Tiger: Retrospective – My First Five Years As President

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. – December 18, 2017, was my first day as president of Fort Hays State University. Five years. Wow. As the fifth-year anniversary date approached, I took time to reflect on this wonderful journey of mission, community, setbacks, and incredible success. I've built this reflection around five key themes that I think best describe my first five years as president.

Theme one: first steps. My first days were filled with awe. A homecoming, reuniting with the faculty and staff I cared deeply about and for whom I believed with unwavering faith in their talents and dedication to serve our mission and students.

The inauguration was both a wonderful and humbling experience. I remember the difficulty I felt in adequately expressing my deep gratitude. I continue to feel extremely blessed to serve this university and community.

One thing that was very important to me was to do my very best to ensure that the inauguration was a celebration for all of us. We needed an inauguration that celebrated not one person but one that celebrated our institution. It was our opportunity to pause and reflect on the things that make Fort Hays State University so special: Our spirit of hard work. Our remarkable community. Our enduring legacy of innovation. And in the center of it all, our magnetic north: our students. That sentiment continues to motivate me to show up, work hard, and do my best every day.

The theme of the inauguration, *Unlocking Untapped Potential*, served as the focal point for launching our strategic plan. During the past five years, we have invested more than \$2.5 million in driving our goals of academic excellence, student success, strategic growth, resources and infrastructure, and community and global engagement. My heart is abundantly grateful for the impactful work our campus is leading.

Theme two: a remarkable record of “firsts and greatestests.” Throughout its 120-year history, Fort Hays State University has been blessed with a community that consistently rallied its support around her, a committed faculty and staff, engaged students, and a strong legacy of leadership.

All of these elements come together to create extraordinary results, which I have the fortune of sharing. Here are just a few: 19 consecutive years of enrollment growth; our first Barry Goldwater Scholar Brynn Wooten; the first NCAA school in Kansas and in the Mid-America Intercollegiate Athletics Association (MIAA) to offer women's wrestling as a varsity program in intercollegiate athletics; the first campus digital master plan; one of only six in the world and the only Kansas university to earn the United States Distance Learning Associations certification; the successful completion the Journey Campaign – the largest capital campaign in school history and the largest single gift in university history. Truly amazing.

Theme three: a unique national championship legacy. From financial planning competitions to athletics to technology and engineering education, our students reinforce the power of our brand when they compete. I love talking about our current student body president, Ryan Stanley, who not only continues to lead our students with integrity, he also excels in the classroom, earning

two bachelor's degrees this past year. A remarkable student-athlete, Ryan also won the national title in the pole vault after clearing a school-record 17-2.75 not once, but twice!

This year our Technology and Engineering Education students won three of the five nationally recognized individual events to claim co-championship all-around honors with Purdue University. With that performance, Fort Hays State became the ITEEA's first three-peat national champion. Meanwhile, our shotgun team claimed its 8th national championship.

Football claimed the MIAA championships in 2017 and 2018; men's soccer the MIAA Champions in 2017 and 2018, GAC/MIAA regular season champions in 2019, GAC/MIAA Tournament champions in 2021, and NCAA Tournament Super Region champions in 2018; while Lady Tiger basketball secured the MIAA regular season champions in 2019, 2021, and 2022. Incredible!

Theme Four: Investing in the quality of the FHSU experience. If there are two constants in my five years – it would be commencement and ribbon cuttings. Both bring me immense joy and gratitude.

I have had the distinct privilege, thanks to the heart of philanthropy that flows to this university, to preside at the ceremonial openings of the Schmidt Foundation Art and Design Hall, the Fischli-Wills Center for Student Success, the Fleharty Family Field (softball), the FHSU Transfer Center at Garden City Community College, the National Guard Office located in the Memorial Union, the Nursing Simulation Lab, the Sternberg Paleo Lab, and the Tailored for Tigers closet. It is with great anticipation that I eagerly await the ribbon-cutting ceremonies for the Wilmer and Lorena Kellogg Training Center (shotgun team facility), Schmidt-Bickle Athletic Complex, the Forsyth Library renovation, and of course, celebrating the addition of air conditioning to the Gross Memorial Coliseum!

Theme five: fulfilling our roles as stewards of place. Core to who we are as a regional comprehensive university is our investment in our community. We are called to serve as a steward of place by forging deep connections with the communities we serve, being responsive, and seeking relationships with community leaders that enhance mutual beneficence that results in community well-being.

Our focus on serving our community is often delivered through a combination of applied learning (students helping to build the downtown pavilion, leadership service projects, accounting students helping with tax preparations, community hearing screenings by our communication science disorder students) and outreach focused on helping businesses and communities thrive through several initiatives such as the Docking Institute of Public Affairs, Center for Civic Leadership, Management Development Center, the Kansas Small Business Development Center, and a multitude of other centers and initiatives.

I am very excited about our new Cybersecurity Institute and Technology Incubator. Funded by the 2022 Kansas Legislature, the cybersecurity institute will leverage student and faculty expertise to improve the cybersecurity posture for small and medium-sized businesses through student micro internships, capstone projects, and faculty consulting. Our students will gain excellent hands-on learning while businesses will be helped in areas such as website security evaluation, security vulnerability assessment, assistance with deploying data privacy and security controls, software testing, data cleanup, and more.

Our technology incubator will focus on tech and/or cybersecurity venture creation through an in-residence business incubator. These initiatives will leverage the strengths of FHSU to advance the Kansas economy through asset preservation and venture.

These past five years have been incredible. I end this column as I ended my inauguration remarks: Today is our opportunity to pause and reflect on the things that make Fort Hays State University so special – Our spirit of hard work. Our remarkable community. And our enduring legacy of innovation. Together we thrive.

My deepest gratitude to everyone who has been a part of our legacy story, our journey this past five years, and especially for those of you joining me as we head into our bright future to continue to write this transformative story together.

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