

Heart of a Tiger: The three C's

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - Much of what we do at Fort Hays State University can be summed up as the three C's: connections, meaningful conversations, and compassion. That's what I see when I look at our dedicated team of professional advisors who help our students along their journey every day.

Although advisors are very engaged with curriculum and scheduling discussions, advising involves much more than registration. It is the personal connections that advisors build every day that genuinely impact student experiences.

Nikki Brown, Assistant Director of Academic Advising and Career Exploration and advisor of exploratory students, views advising as a long-term investment in student success.

"Relationship building is critical. It is the relationship that brings the student back to the advisor when they need assistance. This connection can make the difference in a student's ability to persist through challenges and find personalized strategies to help them reach graduation," Nikki said.

It's easy to see that Nikki is passionate about her role as an integral part of the FHSU experience. Her office is an inviting space decorated with photos of family, friends, and inspirational art. Her voice is filled with emotion when speaking of her advisees. She enjoys engaging in meaningful conversations with her advisees as they discover and clarify their educational and personal goals.

"Until a student sits in front of you, you don't know what's going to happen," Nikki said. "What you wanted to discuss might not matter. Instead, you listen as the student works their plan out in front of your eyes."

"Professional advisors have the opportunity to support their students by listening to them and helping them create plans and options to achieve their goals. Ultimately, advising is teaching, and that is the work that professional advisors do."

"Advising is teaching" is central to how Nikki and other FHSU professional advisors view their role in students' lives.

"Advising is about everything students don't learn in the classroom," Nikki said. "It is learning how to be an effective and efficient adult. How to manage time, gather information, make educated decisions, and, most importantly, be accountable for their success. Helping students learn how to make meaning in their college experience is important."

The move to college-based professional advisors to serve undergraduate students began in 2021. Currently, FHSU employs 23 undergraduate advisors and four graduate advisors. Each student has an assigned professional advisor, and we have started assigning faculty mentors.

"This built-in support system for students is a huge value and shows that student success is at the heart of decisions made at FHSU," Nikki said.

Career exploration is another aspect of advising that can ensure students prepare for a career field that suits them. Nikki pointed out that students often arrive at a career choice with misconceptions about its requirements. Advisors can help students identify information gaps and find resources to lessen major changes. In addition, advisors encourage students to engage with faculty members to build relationships that may result in new opportunities to enrich their educational experience.

"Academic advisors help students figure out how to make meaning of their experiences, challenge their decision-making and use university resources to help them be successful," Nikki said. "We don't put it together for them, but we help guide the process and make the referrals for them to make the connections."

As far as compassion, you can see that in abundance when it comes to FHSU's professional advisors.

"Compassion is something you will consistently find across the board with all our advisors," Nikki said. "They all have that drive to want to see their students do well. They want to support their advisees however they can to help them get across the finish line."

"Students want to know somebody cares. Advisors can often be the person who shows you're not just a number. They can help students feel like Fort Hays is truly invested in them and supporting them to do big things."