

Heart of a Tiger: Elle Hutchinson's journey from high school to FHSU honors graduate

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By Tisa Mason

What inspires me, as the president of Fort Hays State University, is the impact of our students, faculty, and staff. What I love about Elle Hutchinson's story is how it embodies the essential traits we relish at FHSU. Elle is a determined contender, an inspired innovator, and a caring individual. Elle's journey in higher education has been nothing short of remarkable.

Elle shared that Fort Hays State University (FHSU) was the perfect fit for her when choosing a university. Growing up near Hays and engaging with FHSU alumni allowed her to appreciate the institution's value. Elle shared with me that the decision was ultimately grounded in affordability, the transferability of her credits from Barton Community College (BCC), and her desire to remain close to family.

Elle graduated with her associate's degree from BCC, graduating with highest honors, just a week before she walked across the stage at Great Bend High School, a unique achievement that pushed the boundaries of what she thought was possible.

Like FHSU, BCC is very student-focused. When the leadership at BCC learned about Elle pursuing her high school diploma and her associate's degree simultaneously, they worked with Elle to create and promote a program designed to facilitate an academic pathway for other high school students. That spirit of innovation, of always blazing a new path, is precisely what FHSU is all about.

The challenge of pursuing two degrees simultaneously truly motivated Elle. She wanted to challenge herself, push beyond conventional boundaries, and set an exemplary trajectory for her educational experience. Hearing how other high school students benefited from the initiative Elle helped establish strengthened her resolve and motivated her to keep moving forward.

Managing coursework from two institutions (Great Bend High School and BCC) came with several obstacles. "I encountered skepticism from peers and guidance counselors who doubted my ability to succeed. However, this motivated me to seek assistance from those who believed in my potential. I found that surrounding myself with encouraging support systems was crucial."

Maintaining balance among the demands of work, academics, and personal life is another skill Elle developed. Balancing her commitments meant focusing weekdays primarily on work and studies. This sometimes involved finding creative ways to integrate schoolwork into her social time, ensuring she could enjoy life while fulfilling her responsibilities. Through it all, Elle's priority was always to remain close to family and friends.

Elle carried that philosophy with her to FHSU, where she served on the Student Government Association, holding several leadership roles, and as a student assistant in the Office of Student Fiscal Services. While at FHSU, she majored in Business Education – Corporate Communications. She chose this major for its versatility in the real world, plus its helpfulness in pursuing a legal career.

“Law has long been a field I aspired to enter, primarily due to its versatility and my passion for helping others. An attorney can do almost anything; they are not confined to just practicing law. Additionally, there is a lot of variety within the practice of law,” Elle shared

Elle is interested in agricultural law. Last summer, she interned at Bauer & Pike Law Firm in Great Bend, which solidified her interest in the legal field and introduced her to the complexity and balance built into our legal system. She also benefited greatly from this real-world learning experience and from the dedicated mentorship she received.

Another pivotal experience for Elle was her employment as a student worker in the Student Fiscal Services office at FHSU. “I engaged with a team that shared professional guidance, and we became lifelong friends.” Working in Student Fiscal Services opened Ellie’s eyes to the available financial resources available to help keep the Fort Hays State experience affordable. She learned about many different scholarships that helped reduce the cost of tuition for her at FHSU. She also gained a heightened awareness of the financial resources that exist to make the next step in her academic career, law school, more affordable.

Staying focused on her academic and career goals often required establishing a balance in the demands for her time to ensure she still maintained a social life, which always remained important to her. “I believe that healthy interaction with friends can enhance productivity. Though I prioritized homework, I ensured that I scheduled social activities to maintain my mental health. This kept me motivated. There were many times when I had to make a tough decision to stay in and study rather than go out. You have to be willing to make sacrifices.”

Elle credits her achievements to her family. “They supported me through the good, the bad, and the ugly. I cannot imagine trying to do all of this without such amazing parents, support systems, and role models.”

Elle credits her remarkable success to her father, Shawn Hutchinson; her mother, Jamie Hutchinson; her BCC advisor, Karen Kratzer; the student fiscal services staff; and Dr. Wendy Rohleder-Sook, FHSU chairman of the department of communication studies, law, and political science. She is also grateful for the mentorship of Judge Charles Pike (Great Bend Municipal judge) and Julie Carroll, attorneys at the Bauer and Pike Law firm, where she interned last summer.

With her current studies completed, including a FHSU bachelor's degree earned with honors, she is taking a gap year before pursuing law school. In the interim, she is working in her family-owned small business, Satellite Pros & Central Plains Security, and has recently accepted a position as a media consultant for Barton County.

As we celebrate Elle’s achievements, let us also recognize the spirit of those who support our students, from faculty to family. Together, we forge paths for the future, inspired by stories like Elle’s that remind us of the impact we can have in our communities. Here’s to Elle and all our students who strive for greatness, shaped by their experiences and determination, while driven to serve the greater good!