

Heart of the Tiger: How FHSU's ethic of care is transforming Kansas

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - In the landscape of American higher education, the term "innovation" often conjures images of glass-walled laboratories and high-tech startups. But at Fort Hays State University (FHSU), it is also evident in the handshake between a student and a local nonprofit leader, in an alumna's decision to break the cycle of "learned helplessness," and in a university-wide commitment to the "ethic of care."

This year, that commitment received the highest level of national validation. In January, the American Council of Education (ACE) and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching awarded FHSU the Community Engagement Elective Classification. This prestigious designation recognizes a deep commitment to "partnership and reciprocity"—the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge between the university and the communities it serves.

Following the Leadership for Public Purpose Classification awarded in 2024, FHSU is now one of only 11 institutions in the world, and the only one in Kansas, to hold both Carnegie classifications. As Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, Jill Arensdorf noted, this isn't just an accolade; it is a reaffirmation that FHSU is a fully engaged partner with the people of Western Kansas. "We don't just teach," Arensdorf said. "We develop engaged, global citizen leaders who drive positive and impactful change."

At the center of this mission is the Leadership Studies program, specifically the Leadership 310 capstone course. While many business programs focus on management hierarchies, FHSU's leadership curriculum focuses on community impact.

Lori Kniffin, a key voice in the program, explains that the goal isn't just to prepare students for a specific job title. "They are trained to lead and drive positive change in the world," Kniffin says. "We built the 310 course to broaden people's perspective about where leadership can be applied." It is about recognizing challenging issues—poverty, food insecurity, lack of resources—and creatively stepping in to solve them.

This academic framework creates a bridge between the classroom and the "real world," a bridge that 2001 alumna Brandy Ridgway and current student Jessie Ruff have both crossed with remarkable results.

Brandy Ridgway's story is a testament to the "ethic of care" that defines the FHSU experience. Originally from Dodge City, Brandy grew up in a home marked by the heavy shadows of poverty, drugs, and alcohol. With a father who spent time in prison and a mother working as an assistant manager at a grocery store to keep the family afloat, college felt like a distant, impossible dream.

"When you grow up in poverty, you have two choices," Brandy says. "You can choose to accept that life as unavoidable; that's called learned helplessness. Or you can choose to move forward and keep growing. I can pinpoint the moment I made the decision to take control of my destiny."

For Brandy, FHSU was the catalyst for that growth. By combining scholarship funding with a place to stay at her aunt's house in Russell, she navigated the financial hurdles as a commuter student. It was Dr. Curt Brungardt who first steered her toward Leadership Studies. Once she began the coursework, particularly Leadership 310, her perspective shifted from survival to service.

"That course got me to acknowledge that somebody has to lead if there is going to be positive change," Brandy recalls. "If not me, then who?"

Inspired by her faith and a desire to "pay it forward," Brandy created 100 Who Care Ellis County. The concept is elegantly simple: a group of individuals meets quarterly, each bringing \$100. In one hour, they listen to presentations from local nonprofits and vote on who receives a collective gift of up to \$10,000. It is the "Heart of a Tiger" in its purest form—individual contributions pooled to create a massive community impact.

While Brandy represents the legacy of FHSU's mission, students like Jessie Ruff represent its future. An Ag Business and Business Administration dual major, Jessie grew up on a family farm in Hodgeman County and graduated from a class of only 22 people.

The choice to attend FHSU was a practical one, rooted in the university's reputation for value and its connection to the land. "I have found that leadership is more about taking action and leading by example," Jessie says. "My background in agriculture and high school sports helped me appreciate what can be done by a group of determined people."

When Jessie discovered she could earn a leadership certificate alongside her heavy course load in Ag and Business, she jumped at the chance. Her involvement in the 100 Who Care program has provided her with a professional network and a firsthand look at how "public purpose" works in practice. Jessie was recently invited to serve on the High Plains Farm Credit Student Board of Directors, a role that allows her to blend her love for the physical side of farming with the strategic side of community leadership.

In many ways, FHSU is redefining what it means to be a "regional public university." In a world that often feels increasingly disconnected, the university doubles down on relationship-building.

Brandy Ridgway often thinks of a passage from Genesis where Abraham is told he is blessed so that he might be a blessing to others. "I knew I was given so much to help get me where I am today," she says, "I won't ever be able to give back enough."

This sentiment—this refusal to succumb to learned helplessness and the drive to "bless" the community—is the true heart of the university. This is why FHSU remains a leader in community engagement and impact. It is why a student from a class of 22 can come to Hays and find herself on a student board of directors."

As FHSU continues to hold its unique place as a global leader in community engagement and public purpose, the limestone halls are filled with more than just lectures. They are filled with the sounds of people like Brandy and Jessie, figuring out how to turn their "Heart of a Tiger" into helping hand for the High Plains.

The double Carnegie classification is a trophy for the shelf, but for the people of Western Kansas, the real prize is the generation of leaders coming out of FHSU—leaders who know that the most innovative thing you can do is care.

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