

Heart of a Tiger-The inspiring work of engaged student leaders

3/20/23

By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. – I think my favorite two words are “engaged students.” One of the highlights for me this year was the enthusiasm of our students when they returned to campus this past fall. Enthused and engaged students are the lifeblood of a college campus. I have loved watching as our freshmen Student Government Association senators, Grace McCord and Madison Albers, meticulously researched, wrote a case for support, and then worked through several approval processes to gain support for moving a polling place on campus.

Recently, I was delighted to learn that 80 percent (29 out of 36) of our residential life community assistants (CAs) applied to return to serve on the 2023-2024 staff. That is a remarkable return rate. Forty-five additional students applied for those coveted leadership roles. Our 2023-24 resident hall contracts are up – a lot. I have to believe there is a direct correlation between the experience our staff is creating and the surge of interest in the position as well as living on campus.

Community Assistants play a key role on the residential life leadership team. They are responsible for a floor or wing of students in the residence halls, tasked with developing a positive and inclusive community within their hall, event planning, administrative activities at the front desk, serving as a campus resource and reference, participating in on-campus activities, serving as first responders to crisis and emergency situations, ensuring safety and security of the residents, and assisting residents as they find their place at FHSU.

According to residence life director R.J. Schnack, the CA’s are the “face” of the resident life staff. He attributes the high interest in the position to an ethic of care – a key characteristic of the environment we seek to develop daily throughout our university.

While the CAs focus on residents, R.J. and the professional residence life staff intentionally support and care for our CAs. “We are there to listen to our CAs and to help them grow into the profession they want to obtain when they graduate,” R.J. said.

Saige Heizer agrees. She reapplied because she likes the culture she found in Residential Life. “My supervisors have always been very helpful and welcoming, and I really love the camaraderie of the CA staff.”

The CA role exemplifies how we drive our mission to create engaged citizen leaders. Students often reflect on the critical skills they learn through these positions. For example, Saige shared serving as a CA has taught her how to take ownership of her mistakes and shortcomings while working to improve in those areas. Additionally, it has taught her how to address awkward situations without letting them become personal.

The CAs are, by design, involved in other aspects of campus life. Tearney McGivney, a sophomore from Abilene, is a member of the Tiger Media Network, where she films games and takes photos at events. In her free time, she enjoys being with her friends or volunteering around the community. “I love painting and crafting and making new things,” she said. Tearney is definitely modeling the way of an engaged citizen, finding joy in being a part of many communities and making a difference in the lives of others. In fact, she shared, “I would say my

greatest accomplishment as a CA is building a community and friendships among my residents.”

Tearney also easily identifies critical skills developed on the job that will facilitate post-college success.

“I have learned many life lessons, including time management, how to say no when I cannot commit to an event/activity, and how to handle stressful situations,” she said.. “I have also learned how to go out of my comfort zone and talk to people I do not know. My biggest fear about college was not being able to make friends because I was scared to talk to people I did not know. Serving as a CA has helped me overcome that fear. Now I go up to people who might be struggling as I did and start a conversation with them.”

Our programming is extensive. As Javyn Contreras, a CA, and member of our high-performing cross country and track team, shares, “when I became a CA, I did not realize how many opportunities there are for students to get involved. As a “regular student” I heard about a few events here and there. I recommend students get involved as much as possible because there are events/clubs for anyone here at FHSU.”

Programming for the CAs can be instructional, such as making stress balls before finals, to healing and somewhat light-hearted, such as attending a fish funeral. “As odd as this sounds, our fish funeral was a memorable moment with my residents that I will cherish,” shared CA Lauren Huynh.

I find our students to be so interesting. Lauren, for example, a graphic design major from Wichita, started working as a freelance photographer six years ago. She loves to skateboard, rock climb, and cheer for FHSU. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that Lauren worked with Netflix to film a documentary about her life – incredible!

I also love when students articulate the experience we work so intentionally to create: “FHSU was the best choice for me,” Tearney said. .” The small class sizes allow for personal connections with my professors. I am getting a great education.”

“I am not just a number at FHSU. My professors care about me as a person and work with me if I have any questions. I love my college experience and am so glad I chose FHSU.”

These stories of student engagement, leadership lessons, and our mission in action fuel my energy throughout the year. This is why I am so lucky to serve as president of FHSU.

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