

Heart of a Tiger: Pioneering Pathways Through Visionary Approaches

3/29/24

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HAYS, Kan. - In January 2023, Fort Hays State University (FHSU), North Central Kansas Technical College (NCK Tech), and Northwest Kansas Technical College (Northwest Tech) announced a new affiliation initiative to address demographic and economic challenges in rural Kansas. This initiative is focusing on developing solutions in three key areas:

- Developing academic programs and integrated student services that meet the educational and professional needs of today's and tomorrow's students.
- Aligning and optimizing inter-institutional operations to remove unnecessary bureaucratic barriers to student success.
- Creating a coalition with regional businesses, industries, and communities focused on increasing opportunities for students, expanding entrepreneurship, and meeting workforce development needs in rural Kansas.

The affiliation works in implementation teams consisting of faculty and staff from all three institutions and industry partners. One of the first teams to launch was on construction and construction management.

This team has embarked on a mission to construct bridges across educational institutions, ensuring the integration of construction and construction management disciplines. By placing the interests of students at its core, they have successfully navigated through the complexities of aligning the curriculum across three distinct educational institutions.

The challenge of maintaining harmony among different academic philosophies turned into an opportunity to build on individual strengths, as evidenced by their recent creation of a template for the FHSU/NCK second-year welding program.

The Construction Affiliation Implementation Team has identified several ambitious deliverables focused on creating seamless transitions between locations and programs. The goals are to reach 100% academic success and job placement rate for students, meet the regional workforce needs, and contribute to alleviating housing shortages.

The Applied Technology Fair of September 2023 stands as a testament to these collaborative efforts, catalyzing the first bonds among students and establishing connections with industry partners.

The visits by FHSU faculty to Beloit and Goodland campuses stirred enthusiasm among tech students and provided them a glimpse into educational pathways shaped by the Strategic Affiliation Initiative. This initiative is rapidly transforming our shared aspirations into real-world opportunities.

A notable accomplishment is the team's innovative curriculum pathway for reverse transfer, particularly the Second Year Carpentry to Associates of Applied Science degree in Construction Engineering Technology/Technician. This learning pathway allows students to smoothly transition from a one-year carpentry certificate at a technical college to a second-year

construction management program at Fort Hays State University. Then, students can transfer their construction management credits back to the technical college, culminating in an AAS degree, creating an employment exit point or transition pathway to a bachelor's degree.

This team also explored technical college credit transfer opportunities aimed at enriching FHSU's Construction Management program with specialized short courses including Heavy Equipment, Commercial Driver's License (CDL), and Survey Total Station. These courses, designed by industry experts, provide invaluable insights for students aiming for leadership roles in the construction field, filling essential gaps not typically covered in traditional four-year plans.

In their endeavor to nurture comprehensive academic tracks from various technical programs, this team has essentially charted paths from AAS degrees to BS degrees in Welding Technology, Engineering Technology (CAD), and Automotive Technology.

Peering into the future, the team envisions a landscape where more technical programs are closely aligned with existing FHSU content as part of a broader, seamless educational continuum. Alignment includes ensuring that programs exist for all technical certificates to lead to Associate, Bachelor's, and even master's degrees, making the journey through higher education less linear and more adaptable.

At FHSU, summer internships, short courses, and on-the-job training initiatives are already paving the way for our students to fast-track their path to a Bachelor of Science in Technology Studies/Construction Management. The new pathways envisioned now will allow students to move from an AAS to a BS and then to an MS degree within a remarkably compressed timeframe.

As the landscape of education continues to evolve, so does the work of the Affiliation Implementation Team on Construction. Their resolve to dismantle administrative barriers and meet industry workforce needs is unwavering. With these developments and future dreams, they are not only challenging the status quo but also redefining what's possible in construction management education.

I am so proud of and energized by the work of the affiliation teams, as exemplified here by the team on construction and construction management. Their work heralds a new era of educational synergy among three very different higher education institutions. The dedication of the FHSU faculty and their collaborators provides a solid foundation for this visionary approach, ensuring that the Structural Affiliation Initiative not only dreams big but puts those dreams into tangible action.

Stay tuned for more affiliation updates highlighting visionary approaches and a steadfast dedication to collaboration that not only streamlines pathways for students but also paves the way for innovative curriculum developments and technical transfer opportunities. In their wake, our affiliation professionals will fundamentally change the learning landscape, where educational milestones are not merely reached but surpassed, where careers are not just started but ascended, and where dreams, once distant, are brought firmly within grasp.

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