

Count on us to be Tiger strong

What great joy it was to have in-person Fort Hays State University commencement ceremonies this spring!

Now that June has arrived, we are officially returning to pre-COVID-19 policies and practices. In general, this means that face coverings are no longer required. Classrooms will be returned to “normal” capacity. The Beach/Schmidt Performing Arts Center will retire its classroom pandemic re-assignment and re-embrace its performing arts purpose. And a myriad of opportunities to connect and grow in our relationships will proliferate. It is finally time to see smiles as we reconnect deeply and sincerely.

We celebrated this return with a campus-wide picnic on June 2, and I am excited and brimming with optimism.

As we celebrate this renewal, I am reminded of a saying: Grace grows best in the winter. For me, COVID-19 was a time of slowing down, of creating new self-care routines, and being intentional in nurturing and growing key relationships. Now, the great outdoors awaits with a flurry of promises and hope. Masks have been packed away. Dinner parties, parades, concerts, and summer holiday celebrations await.

As my summer calendar quickly fills up, I find myself pausing for a moment to reflect on what I have learned while living, surrendering, and growing through a world-wide pandemic as the Fort Hays State University president. Here are a few of my thoughts:

First, we took the time to frame our path forward by adopting guiding principles before designing strategy or policy. Those guiding principles were: prioritize the health and safety of faculty, staff, and students; protect the mission of FHSU; maintain critical operations and fiscal footing; be mindful of good governance principles; remain nimble and true to FHSU’s innovative culture; and comply with any Kansas Board of Regents directives. These guiding principles helped us stay clear during times of multiple options and especially when our decisions differed from our peers.

Second, we focused on, and drew from, our core institutional characteristics of resiliency, innovation, and care. Our grit and determination have always propelled this western Kansas university forward. From our meager beginnings to our unprecedented successful present, we did what we do best – we got to work. As we confidently “rolled up our sleeves,” we drew upon our legacy as a pioneer in quality distance education. Since 1902, we have delivered learning solutions that fit students’ circumstances – and this time of pandemic was no different. Through a lot of hard work and intelligent risks, our community borrowed best practices while forging our own path.

While the curriculum was boldly being redesigned by our faculty, our staff created care teams to check in on every student throughout the pandemic. This coalition of more than 100 faculty, staff, and student volunteers helped our students stay connected and on track with their academic plans. Our student emergency fund was ramped up. FHSU Foundation trustees wrote checks and asked, “How can I help?”

During the spring of 2020, all students who had an on-campus job were paid whether or not they worked or were unable to work due to returning home. Throughout the pandemic, not one FHSU employee lost their position due to COVID-19. Our highest-need students received an additional \$2.9 million in aid, thanks to government assistance. Our 2020-2021 academic calendar remained unchanged, and all breaks were honored so that our people could rest.

As I write about our planning and decisions, it seems so simple. But in the moment, we were leading on the edge. Our people were working harder and intentionally in ways that cannot even be described. It was intense. It was hard.

Third, throughout the process we had incredible partners. The Kansas Board of Regents facilitated information sharing while giving us the latitude to make individual and regional decisions. My colleagues, the university presidents of the other five KBOR universities, met weekly to exchange information and strategies. Though unpopular to some, the city of Hays mask mandate helped us normalize best practices, while the Ellis County Health Department assisted in reinforcing community expectations and protocols. Ellis County went a step further by helping us fund our quarantine protocol by providing hotel and food vouchers for students while our campus care team continually checked on our students. That was remarkable!

Finally, throughout this entire process, I came to understand that this would be a growing season for me. One of the ways I grew as a professional was to learn on a very deep level the difference between managing and leading. I had to figure out where my voice was needed and when my trust was needed more than my voice, when to step into discussions, and when to resist the temptation “to be in charge” so that those closer to critical issues had the space to rely on their expertise to drive solutions. Sometimes these moments were humbling. Sometimes they were nerve-racking. But mostly, I felt the deepest gratitude to be surrounded by strong, smart, humble, hardworking colleagues. As trust was tested and nurtured, I learned a lot about letting go of managing to increase my capacity to lead.

In reflecting back upon this past year and half, I realize that while there will always be challenges and changes, Tiger Nation will continue to press on and grow in spite of them. It is who we are.

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