

FHSU Top 10 List for 2020

David Letterman probably did much to instill the notion of “Top 10 Lists” in our popular culture. But decades before the late-night host did his thing, newspapers were culling past editions to create year-end round-ups of their top stories.

Ten is a good number; after all, it’s what we can count on our two hands, so in keeping with tradition, here’s a list of the top 10 news items at Fort Hays State University this year. The list, roughly in chronological order, is certainly not all-encompassing – there are great stories and good news every day at FHSU – but it does provide a means of looking back and recounting some of the many blessings we enjoyed in 2020.

In January, the Pathway to Help, Hope and Success initiative received its first installment of the Garrett Lee Smith Campus Suicide Prevention Grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association. The Kelly Center provided a record-breaking 4,084 personal counseling sessions last year and continues to find ways to positively impact our students’ mental health and academic success.

In March, a baker’s dozen of organizations that evaluate online higher education programs ranked 40 online degrees and programs at Fort Hays State University among the best in the nation for 2020. The rankings include seven national No. 1 rankings and one statewide No. 1 rating. A total of 25 Fort Hays State online programs were among the top 10 in the nation in the various rankings, and all but two placed FHSU among the top 20 in the nation. In all 40 rankings, Fort Hays State was rated the best in Kansas.

In April, Fort Hays State’s chapter of the Technology and Engineering Education Collegiate Association won five individual national championships and the all-around national title in nine competitive events at the 82nd annual International Technology and Engineering Educators Association conference in Baltimore.

In early June, our decision we made to forgo an in-person commencement ceremony broke my heart. But we were still able to mail close to 1,800 “commencement-in-a-box” kits to graduating students. These kits included the traditional cap and gown, along with the appropriate accessories that represent the degrees and accolades earned by each student. One of my favorite commencement stories involved Patrick and Andrew McGinnis, a father and son who graduated together. I smiled and was reminded of the dual FHSU graduation of Nola Ochs (the oldest person at age 95 to graduate from college) and her granddaughter from several years ago. I love those special moments.

Social work is one of the fastest-growing careers in the country, and Fort Hays State University continues to find ways to reach students studying at both the bachelor’s and master’s degree levels. FHSU started classes in the summer of 2020 for its Master of Social Work (MSW) online program. The university’s Department of Social Work also received official accreditation approval from the Council on Social Work Education for its online bachelor’s degree. Fort Hays State is one of only a handful of universities in the United States – and the only one in Kansas – to offer the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) online. FHSU also is the only university in the state to offer the MSW online.

In August, the Fort Hays State Department of Criminal Justice and University Police Department signed an agreement to join an expanding network of regional de-escalation training centers that teach law enforcement officers techniques that help officers peacefully resolve potentially dangerous confrontations. This move places FHSU at the forefront of this important law enforcement training initiative.

Although we missed cheering on our Tiger athletes for cross country, football, golf, soccer, tennis and volleyball, November brought the opportunity for us to be social-distancing, mask-wearing, hand-washing Tiger fans for winter sports. We even had the opportunity to listen to our outstanding pep band and watch our cheer and dance teams perform. Amazing!

Who can forget the night of Dec. 8, when our mighty Tiger men's basketball team upset the Big 12's Kansas State University, 81-68, on the Wildcats' home floor? It was the first Tiger win in this series since 1938. What a great moment of pure joy and excitement in 2020.

I am happy to report that Dec. 18 was the first day of our intersession classes, and we ended 2020 with record enrollment, celebrating a 20 percent increase in students as compared to intercession 2019.

Finally, I must say that during this year of challenges and opportunities, I am very grateful that in 2020, FHSU continued to focus on caring for our people. We refunded pro-rated room and board fees to our residential students who were asked to vacate their rooms last March and distributed CARES Act financial aid to students. All student employees remained on payroll from March until the end of the semester – regardless of whether they were able to work – and the FHSU Foundation stepped up to fundraise for the student emergency fund and other strategic initiatives. And as always, our philanthropists continued to fuel our success. We also accommodated faculty and staff in moving to remote work schedules. In 2020, no employee was furloughed and no employee lost a job due to a COVID-driven reduction in force. We are a strong, nimble university, thanks to our current people and those who came before us.

So, I end 2020 and begin 2021 by expressing my deepest gratitude to our faculty and staff for their resilience and innovation while navigating a semester of uncertainty, never losing sight of our enduring commitment to caring for our students. Simply put, the faculty and staff rose to the challenge in 2020 and continued to deliver robust support services and outstanding teaching and learning experiences in thoughtful, impactful and personal ways. I also thank our students for having faith in Fort Hays State University and working together to create an environment of respect and kindness through these challenging times. I am equally grateful for the support and guidance given to us by our city and county commissioners; our county health administrator, Jason Kennedy; and CEO Eddie Herrman and Medical Director Dr. Heather Harris at Hays Medical Center.

Happy New Year to you and yours, and to FHSU!