

FHSU embraces change, faces challenges head on

I begin this column as I started the last one – focusing on the same three words that capture the personality of Fort Hays State University: Care. Innovation. Grit.

However, this time I am not pleasantly reminiscing about Dr. Zeng's plank challenge. Instead, I am ardently focused on navigating critical health and safety decisions for our beloved university – amidst a sea of constantly changing information.

Our actions, and my decisions, must be guided by care. We learned a lot when our on-campus students transitioned to remote learning this past spring.

One critical lesson was that when professors simply took the time to reach out to students to demonstrate enhanced flexibility with issues such as deadlines, it mattered. The students felt cared for. The learning still occurred. Faculty honored the fact that many students were dealing with challenging circumstances. Staying engaged with students is caring in action.

Along the same lines, people are extending grace to others. During our Facebook Tiger Live Conversations (TLC) every Thursday, I tell our guests if your children (or in my case my dog, Gracie) make noise or in some way cause a commotion, embrace the moment. Laugh. Introduce the children to, and tell stories about, other similar mishaps.

I like how Patrick Lencioni captures this: "It is time we put more emphasis on personalism and less on professionalism. By this time, we have seen our colleagues in their pajamas during Zoom calls as they negotiated the demands of bored kids, noisy pets and disheveled homes, all while trying to work from the chaos of their living room."

At Fort Hays State, with grace at the helm, such moments build community and help tear down walls between work and family life. Those moments reinforce our ethic of care – and that makes us individually and collectively better. We are a diverse and welcoming community, dedicated to sharing ideas and serving the greater good. We invest in lifelong relationships that nurture the humanity in all of us.

Our grit continues to show up across this university – here in Hays and across the world. It is indeed the "oil that greases our wheel."

I love what our athletic director, Curtis Hammeke, shared with me: "While this summer has proven to be filled with ongoing uncertainties, frustrations and various emotions surrounding the effects of COVID-19 and its impact on society, it has been a true reflection of the benefits of participating in collegiate athletics – things like overcoming adversity, dealing with change or getting knocked down and getting back up." He used words like resilience, competitiveness and work ethic, and compassion, respect and team unity.

While Curtis truly captured the essence of a successful athlete, his statement also epitomizes the spirit of this university and our roots in Western Kansas. We are resilient and determined to succeed. We never give up. We are driven by the triumph in a job well done. Challenges are our opportunities, and we are at our best when the going gets tough.

Grit is our bonding agent between caring and innovation. Since 1986, our grit has enabled our innovation, and innovation has fueled our grit with our students in the Technology and Engineering Education Collegiate Association (TEECA).

I treasure how former President Edward Hammond explains why our TEECA students are so successful in competitions with other schools across the country. Led by our quality faculty in the Department of Applied Technology, our students have won an impressive 91 regional championships, 32 national titles and numerous outstanding chapter awards in 34 years!

Dr. Hammond said that while students from other institutions have a lot of “book smarts,” a lot of our students grew up in Western Kansas, where they learned how to fix practically anything with baling wire and duct tape.

The translation: We approach problem solving from a very practical and proven perspective. We are thinkers and doers who turn ideas into action, enhancing the quality of life for those we serve. Our bold approach inspires purposeful change and adds value to the student experience.

One of the things that makes our university distinctive is how we have taken a far-sighted approach to serving Kansans – a 12 percent growth in enrollment over the past seven years. We are central to the social and economic fabric of this region, and the Hispanic College Institute is one way we are connecting with our growing Latino population – a 23 percent growth in enrollment over the past five years.

Central to all of this growth is our relentless focus on value. Just a few years ago, we were recognized as one of the top 10 most affordable universities in the nation. And we still are.

Our innovation has resulted in 19 consecutive years of growth. We are one of a select few universities (less than 10 in the nation) to earn certification from the U.S. Distance Learning Association. This certification is based on a thorough 120-point criteria administered by senior distance education leaders who volunteer their expertise to advance quality distance learning academic practices. Our online education is among the best in the nation.

The lessons we learned to earn our 19-consecutive years of growth are the same lessons that continue to inform our path forward in this pandemic crisis. The pandemic may have stripped us of hand shaking but not of the many ways we demonstrate care.

COVID-19 has strengthened our well-honed spirit of innovation and the grit and courage to deliver the best value in education to students anywhere in the world.

We are Fort Hays State – a university community serving 53 countries, every branch in the military, every state in the nation, and every county in Kansas.