

FHSU passes test in commitment to students

Care. Innovation. Grit. These three words capture the personality of Fort Hays State University, and have for nearly 120 years.

Those words show up in our culture – independently and collectively. And as in any good story, they show up in the legendary tales told and retold by our students, faculty, and staff.

One particular story, recently told to me by a former student and now alumnus, Craig Garvert, really made me smile. Craig, a 2020 graduate, shared that during his sophomore year, he “planked” against a professor after a test in a computer science class.

Planking is an isometric core strengthening exercise that involves maintaining a position similar to a push-up for the maximum time possible.

That professor, Dr. Hong Biao Zeng, had started sharing in class his methods for staying in shape and eating healthy. He would update the students every week on his new feats. The class of about a dozen computer science majors was definitely enjoying these tangents. But, according to Craig, the students had doubts about some of their professor’s claims.

Dr. Zeng mentioned that he could plank for six to seven minutes. (According to *Men’s Health*, a healthy, fit person should be able to hold a plank for two minutes. The writer, Lou Schuler, shared that his longest plank was “three miserable minutes.”) The average person sets one minute as a personal goal.

Given those statistics, one cannot blame the students for questioning Dr. Zeng’s claim, right?

So, the students asked Dr. Zeng to prove it. They had no idea what they were asking.

The innovative and wise Dr. Zeng embraced the dare and presented the students with their own challenge. Following the next test in his class, Dr. Zeng said he would give extra credit to any student who could plank longer than him.

“We thought we had it in the bag,” Craig said.

As Craig tells the story, on test day, Dr. Zeng walked in with a yoga mat and his usual button-up shirt and khaki dress pants. A few of the students were dressed for gym class.

After the test, Dr. Zeng unrolled the mat and got in planking position. One by one, each student challenger dropped before he did. As each student conceded, Dr. Zeng would resume proper form for the next challenger almost immediately. Craig estimated that Dr. Zeng held a plank for 10 minutes off and on during a 15-minute span.

There was no extra credit awarded to students that day.

“We were all defeated by our middle-aged professor in business-casual attire,” Craig shared. “I gave up after a minute.”

I found the story totally amusing and very endearing. Curious, I contacted Dr. Zeng and asked him about the challenge.

Dr. Zeng said the reason he challenged his students that day is because most computer science majors (and later professionals) sit in front of the computers for a very long time – too long – every day. This, Dr. Zeng said, is not good for the students' health or their careers.

He believes that a good teacher not only passes on his or her professional knowledge to students but also guides students to establish healthy ways to handle their studies. Developing habits and thoughts that will both sustain and nourish the students on their journeys also can set the tone for their professional careers.

Dr. Zeng tells his students that even though they really “don't have time” to exercise, learning to do exercises, such as a plank, when they have been sitting in front of the computer for a couple hours, will help them be more successful.

Craig, now a software specialist at Adams, Brown, Beran and Ball Financial Services in Hays, has fond memories not only of that challenge, but his experience at Fort Hays State as a whole.

“It goes to show the relationship the professors have with students,” Craig said. “I saw a lot of positives from just that instance. We as a class were all working together.”

It's a great story. But even more importantly, this tale serves as one of many soon-to-be legendary accounts that demonstrate the Tiger culture of grit, innovation, and care.

Clearly, planking against each student took grit for the professor. Plank-challenging the students for extra credit was great out-of-the-box thinking.

Creating this challenge based on Dr. Zeng's conviction that self-care and wellbeing is essential to both student and professional success, illustrates the caring spirit for which Fort Hays State University is known – and always has been.