

Tiger freshman seizes opportunity at FHSU

Let me introduce you to one of our new students: Hannah Dechant from Goodland. Her mom, Koren, recently messaged me to express gratitude: "Hannah's experience has been amazing thus far, even in this crazy COVID world!"

Here is Hannah's story: She shared that as long as she can remember, she has wanted to become a teacher with special education credentials. When she was 3 years old, her parents learned that she was legally blind in her left eye from a disorder called Amblyopia.

"In elementary school, my parents were my biggest advocates," Hannah said. "In junior high and high school – and now in college – everything became much harder. I had to become my biggest advocate. Although I never needed special education services, I did access a few accommodations. This has meant I have to work that much harder to meet my goals. I believe my experiences, including constantly having to battle for myself, will be a big advantage as I pursue my dream."

She said that when it was time for her to start looking for a university, she knew that FHSU was the right fit for her, "not just because it was close to home or because of the reasonable tuition, but because of the atmosphere. I came to the FHSU Leadership shadow day, took part in a class, and that is when I really knew FHSU was for me," Hannah said.

One of Hannah's favorite experiences so far is being a part of a Learning Community and being able to have friends and other classmates who have the same passion and drive that she does.

A Learning Community is a group of first-year students who share common interests, take classes together, live on the same floor, and participate in activities together throughout the year. It is a place for students to connect with one another, become engaged in all that Fort Hays State University has to offer, and belong to a supporting community.

"I really enjoy being in my Learning Community. We take classes together, study, and hang out while having fun – all while learning about becoming the best educator I can be," Hannah said.

Hannah is a member of the Opportunity through Education Learning Community, designed especially for students interested in early childhood, elementary, or secondary teacher education. Learning Community students tend to have higher average GPAs than students who do not participate in a learning community. Additionally, students in Learning Communities also state that they feel greater satisfaction with student-faculty interaction and a greater sense of campus support. So, in my opinion, one of Hannah's early college decisions was strategic and smart.

Each Learning Community is led by a faculty mentor. The faculty mentor for Opportunity through Education is Dr. Elodie Jones. Dr. Jones has been working with Learning Communities for several years now and is a strong proponent of the program. In fact, her daughter, Avery, a freshman at FHSU, is also enjoying a Learning Community experience.

Dr. Jones is a thoughtful educator. This semester, she is facilitating courses in both online and face-to-face settings, striving to truly make genuine and impactful connections with her students. She is a lifelong educator who said she realizes the most important factor regarding student learning and "making it stick" begins with building solid and meaningful relationships.

When I asked how her fall semester is going, she said she has been fortunate enough to teach a hybrid undergraduate course that has allowed her to fully connect with her freshman Learning Community. She redesigned her face-to-face course by splitting the class in half and then holding two 40-minute sessions versus one large session. When students are not in a class, they are reading articles, watching videos, engaging in discussions, or developing projects surrounding the course content.

Dr. Jones believes that face-to-face contact is the most powerful aspect of teaching to solidify students' experience as incoming freshmen.

"The in-person sessions give me time to build relationships and make human connections in a time when I think students are seeking a physical presence," she said. "I have found that my learning community students are eager because they just want to be at FHSU, be a part of something incredible, plus establish a bit of normality. They are seeking the true college experience regardless of how different it might be from what we consider 'traditional.' "

Dr. Jones shared that her undergraduate students are very resilient and empathic young adults who have lived through unprecedented experiences over the last several months. From a missed ending to their senior year in high school, rescheduled summer graduations, and a transition into a new residence hall life, she believes these students are a force to be reckoned with. They will do astounding things with such deep understanding for challenging constructs such as change, opposition, being flexible, and living in the moment.

"This generation is filled with open and honest students who are not afraid to express themselves," she noted. "I could not be more excited to work with such a bright, kind, and compassionate group of students."

I couldn't agree more. These Tigers are embracing education with great enthusiasm. They are demonstrating their resilience and determination. Indeed, this is what makes them Tigers.

At FHSU, our resolve to outlast and achieve is as firm and steady as our century-old limestone buildings. Nowhere else will you find a staff and faculty as dedicated and willing to give 150 percent effort to the FHSU mission and reinvest assets in what matters most: our students.

Inevitably there are changes and challenges, but we continue to press on and grow in spite of them. In fact, we're stronger than ever.

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