

## **Personal touches turn a great education into a great experience**

Have you ever thought about how online students can get the full benefit of their college student experiences? For a very long time, Fort Hays State University has done a great job engaging with our online students – from very personal advising, to interactive technology that enhances learning, to internships, and even a Virtual Student Senate!

The Virtual Student Senate continues to grow and evolve. Elections are held each fall. Students complete an intent-to-run form and attend a required online meeting before they can get on the ballot and begin campaigning. Candidates can send photos, letters, and videos to all online students – hosted on a special a campaign website.

Current officers are Secretary Taylor Pressley, Columbia, S.C., senior majoring in computer science; Public Relations Coordinator Michael Williams, Lake Charles, La., senior majoring in geosciences; and Vice President Jonathan Jett, Prattville, Ala., a graduate student seeking a Master of Professional Studies in organizational leadership.

Now in its fourth year, the Virtual Senate has five senators for each of our five colleges for a total of 25. The senate meets online by video conference once a month, September through May. Each senator posts an introductory video so that the entire FHSU community can get to know them.

SGA President Brad DeMers attends all VSS meetings and gives SGA updates to the virtual senators.

This year the VSS conducted a survey to measure the interest among online students in connecting with one another outside of their classes. It might surprise you that 78 percent of the respondents expressed interest in conversing with other FHSU online students! That certainly debunks the myth that online students are too busy to be involved in our community.

The virtual senate is also planning to get more involved with the SGA's annual Big Event in April by coordinating volunteer projects in their home cities. I love to see our institutional values in action. We care deeply about our neighbors, and for our virtual students to demonstrate the ripple effect of this value throughout the world (we have students in every state in the nation and 53 countries) is simply amazing!

The senators are also a great resource for advice, pep talks, and listening to the concerns of their online peers. They are quick to get students connected to numerous university resources and, ultimately, help each student achieve their educational goals.

This personal care that Fort Hays State is known for is making a big difference:

“Being a first-generation undergraduate student, getting the most out of my college experience was important to me. I originally thought as an online student that I would not be able to be as involved as I would like. I can't believe how incredibly wrong I was,” said Michael Williams, the VSS public relations coordinator.

“One of the accomplishments that I’m most proud of was increasing awareness to the rest of the online student body that they have representation that looks out for their interests,” he said. “Being a member of the student senate is a great way to not only make the most of your experience as a student at Fort Hays State University, but also provides an opportunity to make the experience for those after you even better!”

“I am looking forward to being a first-generation college graduate,” said senior Brian Fennessy, an information networking and telecommunications major from Rancho Cordova, Calif., who is majoring in information networking and telecommunications.

“I found a group of people who I can share my ideas and values with in the Virtual Student Senate,” he said. “Currently, our senate is working on developing a new virtual channel for all FHSU online students, where they can create their own chat rooms to converse, share notes, tutor and even upload their research for future students. The virtual channel will be unique, unlike any other online college experience.”

Of course, behind every outstanding initiative is a person who champions an idea and then works relentlessly to ensure its success. For FHSU’s Virtual Student Senate, that person is our very own Kathleen Cook. She has been advising and inspiring these students since the beginning – more than seven years ago. So a special public shout out to Kathleen for her high energy and the caring manner in which she inspires our students to be their best.

We are one of only five universities in the nation to hold the rigorous, 120-point quality certification from the United States Distance Learning Association. Our technical and professional expertise alone could have attained that credential, but the certification committee was also impressed by the initiative and dedication of our online faculty, and by the quality of the student experience relayed to them in interviews with our online students.

That experience is the result of the kind of personal connection we value so highly at Fort Hays State, the kind represented by the VSS, and it is what raises us to a higher plane.