

Tiger innovation, persistence and ethic of care on display

The halls of Fort Hays State University have been quiet for more than a week. The flurry of activity that should have filled the days prior to our annual spring break was replaced with a somber stillness across campus. The COVID-19 health crisis has turned our world upside down. FHSU students in China and our online students were the first to face daunting challenges to their health and livelihoods. With heavy hearts, we were forced to send our beloved Tiger students, faculty, and staff home at the end of last week.

As we navigate these uncertain times, all of us have spent sleepless nights reviewing the federal, state and local guidance on how to navigate this crisis and planning for the endless “what if” scenarios that continue to arise. Through it all, we have been guided by our values and our faith in one another. We will not cancel the important work of our university.

Fort Hays State’s response to the corona virus began in China, where our Teaching Innovation and Learning Technologies team successfully transitioned more than 4,000 students from a traditional classroom environment to mobile phone-based instruction. Remarkable! The TILT team’s efforts on this project formed the launchpad for the transition we are making from in-person to online instruction here in Hays.

Throughout our community, Tigers have risen to meet the evolving obstacles we face every day. We have put the health and well-being of our fellow Tigers at the forefront of our efforts, and the creativity and resourcefulness of our people continue to inspire me. Faculty, staff, and students have stepped up to bring classes online and to stay connected despite the practice of social-distancing. They’ve spent countless hours helping each other adapt to this new reality. A few examples of these inspiring and dedicated Tigers:

Dr. C.D. Clark has worked to transition the Department of Physics online by preparing videos for his fellow faculty to help deliver complex content in an engaging and relatable way. C.D.’s innovation blows away preconceived restraints on science education, and his efforts will help students in this challenging discipline stay on track for graduation.

Sara Stroup and her staff in Tiger Tots are collaborating with Early Childhood Connections to bring together educational resources and free digital learning media and activities that parents can access to help meet the needs of young children who are now engaged in at-home learning. And Sarah Broman Miller of the university’s Virtual Literacy Center is delivering free read-aloud stories to children who are learning from home because of the COVID-19-driven closures of Kansas schools.

Stacey Lang, study abroad coordinator, and the staff in the office of International Student Services intervened to bring Grecia Ruano-Corona and Cassidy Locke home when foreign travel options suddenly became very limited. This commitment to leave no Tiger alone during this crisis extends to our students abroad and our foreign students on campus.

No other institution delivers quality online learning quite like Fort Hays State. We will continue to deliver our brand of rigorous learning to all our students regardless of the modality.

We are so grateful for the powerful teaching and learning expertise that our online faculty and students have helped drive. In so many ways they are our heroes. Hays, Kansas, isn't the same without the energy of the Tigers who bring this campus to life. Still, the response of our Tigers to the coronavirus pandemic is proof that our university not just a collection of limestone walls, cottonwood trees and classes. It is our people and their countless demonstrations of innovation, resilience, and compassion that make Fort Hays State University, and it is those qualities that we take with us and share around the world.

We are committed to converting and transitioning as much of our academic and cultural offerings as possible during this crisis. We have made plans to bring the John Heinrichs Scholarly and Creative Activities Day online and to ensure students have ready access to online services from Student Health and the Kelly Center.

Fort Hays State Tigers never run from a challenge, we pick up the torch and charge headlong into the darkness, lighting the way for those who will follow. I have no doubt that the challenges we face today will fundamentally change the way we teach, communicate, and work. That change will be for the better.

We will find new ways to collaborate and share knowledge. We will innovate to find solutions to problems posed by distance and time, and our remarkable people will emerge from this hardship with new tools that they can apply in the classroom and their daily lives.

I know we will all face difficulties and sacrifices over the coming weeks, and I also know there is no other university community better equipped to meet those challenges and overcome them. While we may be practicing social-distancing, we are in this together, and I look forward to the day when we can look back on these as our finest hours.