



FORT HAYS STATE  
UNIVERSITY

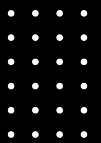


# Rooted in Rural Built to Respond

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Fort Hays State University

**A Pillar III Summary Report for the  
Kansas Board of Regents - 2025**



# Executive Summary



Fort Hays State University, in partnership with affiliates Fort Hays Tech | Northwest and Fort Hays Tech | North Central, serves as a coordinated regional economic engine for central and western Kansas. Rooted in rural communities and built to respond, FHSU aligns education, workforce development, business support, applied research, and community engagement to meet Kansas right where it is and where it needs to go next.

As a regional comprehensive rural-serving institution founded in western Kansas with a national legacy in online and global education, FHSU is intentionally designed for responsiveness. Whether serving students, employers, entrepreneurs, or communities, the university's model emphasizes access, flexibility, and practical impact.

During FY2025, this integrated ecosystem delivered measurable economic outcomes while strengthening the capacity of Kansas communities and employers the university serves. These efforts reflect an intentional shift to incorporate traditional academic efforts with solutions that are place-based, employer-informed, and continue to respond to the needs of the market.

## A Model Designed for Place

FHSU's approach to economic prosperity is shaped by place and guided by responsiveness. The university brings together education, workforce development, business support, applied research, and community engagement in a coordinated model designed to meet communities where they are and respond to the changing needs on the ground.

This model is strengthened by FHSU's extensive experience in online education, which expands access to degree completion for students across Kansas while allowing them to remain in their hometowns. By reducing geographic barriers, FHSU supports talent development without accelerating rural outmigration. This reach is complemented by a physical presence across western Kansas and formal affiliations with Fort Hays Tech | Northwest and Fort Hays Tech | North Central, creating multiple, connected pathways from technical certificates through advanced degrees.

Rather than duplicating the work of economic development organizations, FHSU adds value by aligning academic programs, workforce initiatives, and applied expertise with regional priorities. The result is a system that supports both immediate workforce needs and long-term talent development.

# Executive Summary

## Progress and Capacity-Building in FY2025

During FY2025, FHSU continued to advance its economic and workforce development efforts while strengthening the institutional capacity needed to sustain them. Business and entrepreneurship support expanded through coordinated advising and partnerships. Workforce-responsive education grew in high-demand areas, including healthcare, social work, construction management and customized training that aligns with employer needs. Community development initiatives addressed practical barriers to participation in the workforce and higher education and include tactical strategies to assist with critical childcare shortages.

The university also invested in leadership and coordination, elevating economic and workforce development within the institution and strengthening connections between faculty, industry partners, and community organizations. These efforts reflect a deliberate shift toward integration, ensuring that programs, partnerships, and people are aligned around shared economic outcomes.

## Prosperity Goals 2025 to 2030

**Jobs Created**  
10 to 350

**Direct Investment**  
\$8.3M to \$16M

**Capital Infrastructure**  
\$7.2M to \$15M

**Talent Development**  
3,571 to 3,750

## Accountability, Data, and Public Trust

FHSU recognizes that public investment carries an expectation of accountability. The university has begun to more intentionally track economic and workforce development activity, focusing on initiatives where it played a **direct** role to ensure accurate attribution and transparency. While data collection in several reporting categories remains a work in progress, these efforts represent an important foundation for more consistent, comparable reporting in the future.

## Moving Forward Together

FHSU enters the next phase of its work with focus and momentum. Priorities ahead include deeper engagement with economic development partners, expanded entrepreneurship pipelines, stronger alignment between faculty and industry, continued investment in workforce-responsive education, and improved data systems to support accountability and decision-making.

The university's future is directly tied to the future of the communities it serves. If rural Kansas *struggles*, so does FHSU. If communities *grow* and *thrive*, so does FHSU. Rooted in rural Kansas and built to respond, Fort Hays State University is committed to working alongside communities, employers, and partners to advance shared opportunity and long-term prosperity.

# Regional Economic Hub

Kansas has reached an inflection point. Demographic shifts, workforce shortages, technological disruption, and increasing scrutiny of higher education's return on investment are converging in ways that disproportionately affect rural and Western Kansas communities. Institutions of higher education are being asked to demonstrate relevance, responsiveness, and measurable public benefit. For Fort Hays State University, these realities do not detract from our work, in fact, they reinforce our mission.

## Rural Challenges

As a regional comprehensive, rural-serving institution, FHSU operates in a context fundamentally different from urban or research-intensive universities. Rural communities face persistent challenges related to population decline, aging workforces, limited access to capital, and constrained capacity for economic planning. Employers struggle to find and retain talent, while students and families increasingly seek educational pathways that lead to opportunity closer to home. Higher education cannot remain effective in this environment by operating in isolation. The era of ivory tower institutions are behind us. Those who will thrive into the future are those institutions with boots on the ground and who are embedded in the communities they serve.

Economic prosperity is not adjacent to FHSU's mission. It is embedded in it.

FHSU was founded to expand access to education. Today, that mission necessarily includes helping communities and employers translate education into economic vitality. A workforce without local opportunity will leave. Businesses without access to talent, capital, or insight will struggle to grow. Communities without the capacity to adapt will continue to lose ground. Higher education cannot solve these challenges alone, but it cannot sit on the sidelines watching and waiting either.



# Regional Economic Hub



## We're in the Game

FHSU's engagement in economic development reflects a clear understanding that education, workforce, and economic outcomes are deeply intertwined. Through business development services, workforce-responsive education, applied research, and community engagement, the university aligns academic assets with real economic needs in ways that are practical, measurable, and locally grounded. These efforts complement traditional economic development organizations by adding educational services, data capacity, and institutional reach.

A critical strength of this ecosystem is FHSU's long-standing leadership in online education. By delivering high-quality, affordable programs online, the university brings education to hometowns and communities across Kansas, expanding access to degree completion *without requiring relocation*. This model allows learners to advance their education while remaining connected to local employers, families, and communities, strengthening workforce pipelines in both large and small communities statewide.

Combined with a physical presence across western Kansas and affiliations with Fort Hays Tech | North Central and Fort Hays Tech | Northwest, the FHSU ecosystem delivers both long-term talent development and rapid workforce response. Ultimately, public investment in higher education carries an expectation of public return. Rooted in rural communities and built to respond, Fort Hays State University embraces its role in economic development not as mission creep, but as the modern expression of its mission.

# FHSU Strategies



FHSU's prosperity strategies reflect an institution taking action. These programs are practical and align education, workforce development, applied research, and business support to meet Kansas' most pressing economic challenges while positioning communities for long-term growth. And nothing theoretical here; just the typical Kansas grit and 'get-it-done' attitude.



## Supporting New and Existing Businesses

For nearly three decades, FHSU has been the Lead Center for the **Kansas Small Business Development Center's** (KSBDC) statewide network. Through KSBDC efforts, entrepreneurs and small business owners receive no-cost advising across every stage of the business lifecycle, from startup through expansion and succession planning.

In FY2025, the KSBDC delivered measurable outcomes that directly advanced the state's economic goals, including 205 new businesses, \$53.9 million in capital infusion, and 5,640 jobs retained. These results underscore the importance of sustained investment in small business support, particularly in rural communities.



## Leveling Up the Workforce

FHSU's workforce strategy extends beyond traditional degree pathways to include customized training, microcredentials, and non-credit education tailored to employer needs. **Professional and Continuing Education (PCE)** plays a critical role in delivering flexible, employer-responsive programming that supports workforce advancement and retention.



## Financial and Banking Talent Development

Through the **Robbins Banking Institute**, FHSU supports the long-term stability of Kansas' financial sector by developing current and future banking professionals. The Institute's certificate and degree pathways emphasize talent retention, leadership development, and internal advancement within community and regional banks. New programs are beginning to take root as we deepen our ties to the **Kansas Bankers Association**.

# FHSU Strategies



## Center on Rural Innovation: Heartland Rural Innovators Initiative

The recent acceptance of FHSU and Ellis County into the national **CORI network** represents a forward-looking investment in the region's tech innovation economy. As one of only five Kansas communities selected, this initiative strengthens entrepreneurial ecosystems, accelerates technology-enabled business development, and enhances long-term investment readiness. The 18-month community engagement, in which FHSU serves as the catalyst, brings together local businesses, entrepreneurs, students, and existing resources, to build a sustainable, rural, tech ecosystem.



## Applied Research and Data-Driven Decision Support

The **Docking Institute of Public Affairs** provides applied research, economic impact analysis, and strategic planning services that support informed decision-making for communities, businesses, and policymakers. By delivering objective data and insights, the Docking Institute helps reduce risk and guide investments aligned with regional prosperity goals. Communities, businesses, and organizations regularly engage with the Docking Institute to develop key insights and collect data that inform economic development activities across Kansas, and beyond.



## Developing Young Entrepreneurs

The **Entrepreneurship** program at FHSU strengthens the state's business development ecosystem by connecting education, advising, and hands-on support for new and growing ventures. Through entrepreneurship coursework, experiential learning, and a living and learning community in the Dane G. Hansen Entrepreneurship Hall, FHSU helps students translate ideas into viable businesses.



## Keeping Small Business Safe

The **Cybersecurity Institute and Technology Incubator (CITI)** supports businesses and communities through cybersecurity services, applied learning opportunities, and technology consulting. By pairing student talent with real-world business needs across Western Kansas, CITI strengthens digital resilience while expanding workforce exposure in high-demand fields. An element of the mission of CITI is to incubate new tech-related businesses within the region, which will serve as a strong compliment to the CORI engagement.

# New Key Personnel



## **Director of Entrepreneurship**

**Anticipated start Spring 2026**

To further strengthen FHSU's approach, the search for a Director of Entrepreneurship will establish leadership explicitly focused on cultivating entrepreneurial capacity across campus and throughout the region. This role is designed to serve as a strategic hub for entrepreneurship education, experiential programming, mentorship, and community engagement, ensuring that entrepreneurial thinking is embedded not only in business curricula but across disciplines and into the regional economy. By aligning entrepreneurship support with academic programs, student development, local businesses, and external partners, the Director will help foster an ecosystem where ideas can be translated into ventures, innovation can scale, and economic opportunity expands for students and community members alike. This position reinforces FHSU's commitment to meeting Kansans where they are and responding to real opportunity by building sustainable pathways for enterprise and economic growth.

## **Vice President for Economic and Workforce Development**

**New position as of July 2025**

The creation of the Vice President for Economic and Workforce Development positions Fort Hays State University with a clear, outward-facing point of leadership dedicated to engagement, responsiveness, and partnership. Serving as a "front porch" for the institution, this role is designed to meet employers, communities, and regional partners where they are by aligning university resources with real-world challenges. By elevating economic and workforce development to the executive level, FHSU strengthens coordination across academic programs, university programming, and external partners, ensuring the university remains accessible, responsive, and deeply connected to the communities it serves.

# By the Numbers



The data presented in this section reflects an ongoing effort to more intentionally track economic and workforce development activity at Fort Hays State University. Much of this work has historically occurred through responsive, relationship-based engagement that was not consistently captured in standardized metrics. As FHSU’s role in economic and workforce development expands, so too will its focus on strengthening data collection to better document outcomes and inform decisions.

## Data Context and Approach

The approach reflects the growing expectation from communities, legislators, stakeholders, and the public that institutions demonstrate clear accountability for their role in economic development. While many partners contribute to regional prosperity, FHSU is focused on measuring the work in which it was **directly** engaged in order to provide credible, transparent data that validates outcomes and moves the needle. Doing so ensures that the impact we know is occurring can be validated through evidence and measured over time.

As data systems continue to mature, and institution-wide data collection is mapped, establishing complementary definitions across institutions needs to be an important next step. FHSU views the upcoming academic year as an opportunity for the **Council for Research and Economic Development (CRED)** to help **align definitions** and improve consistency in future reporting across the KBOR system.

## FHSU and Affiliate Data

Metric	2025	2030 Target
<b>Direct Jobs Created</b>	10	350
<b>Direct Investment Attracted (\$M)</b>	\$8,390,000	\$16,000,000
<b>Research &amp; Grant Expenditures (\$M)</b>	\$36,025,396	In discussion
<b>Companies / Business Ventures Created (#)</b>	0	15
<b>Foreign Direct Investment (\$M)</b>	0	In discussion
<b>Capital Infrastructure (\$M)</b>	\$7,235,000	\$15,000,000
<b>Harvested Equity (\$M)</b>	0	In discussion
<b>Talent Pipeline in Key Sectors (# grads)</b>	3,571	3,750

# By the Numbers

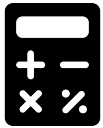
## Insights Across the Affiliation

*FHSU, FHTNC, and FHTNW*



### Combined Economic Impact

\$287.8M Annual Economic Impact



### Combined Affiliation Payroll

\$43,758,338 in payroll with an overwhelming majority feeding directly into the Kansas economy.



### Talent Pipeline Development

As of Fall 2025, across the affiliation, there are 9,146 Kansans who are pursuing certificates and degrees from the three institutions. This is an increase of 148 Kansas students from the prior Fall semester!



## FHSU Insights



### FHSU Talent Remains in Kansas

67% of bachelors degree graduates who completed the First Destination Survey indicated they are working or continuing education in Kansas.



### Visitor Spending

Students, faculty, and staff all receive visitors through the academic year. Based on the last economic impact study, visitors bring an estimated economic impact of \$23,221,770 annually to the Hays area.



## Did you know? Community College Partnership

Under the terms of an MOU between FHSU and Kansas community colleges, the university now provides guaranteed admission to students who have completed an accredited nursing program. Combined with an expansion of the FHSU nursing program, the university is committed to developing the state nursing talent pipeline. Kansas community colleges have long been innovative partners with FHSU.

# Community Development

## *Across the affiliation*

### **FHSU: Stroup Hall Expansion**

At Fort Hays State University, the expansion of Stroup Hall is addressing rising demand in nursing and allied health programs, both of which are experiencing rapid enrollment growth. Additional instructional and laboratory space allows the university to increase program capacity and graduate more healthcare professionals. These investments directly support rural Kansas communities by strengthening the pipeline of skilled healthcare workers where shortages are most acute.



### **Fort Hays Tech | North Central: New Facility**

At Fort Hays Tech | North Central's Hays campus, a new Construction Innovation Center is nearing completion and designed to expand training capacity in high-demand skilled trades. The facility will provide modern instructional space and industry-aligned labs supporting programs such as construction technology, electrical systems, plumbing/HVAC, and commercial driving. By increasing enrollment capacity and modernizing training environments, the project strengthens the regional workforce pipeline and supports long-term economic growth across Kansas.



### **Fort Hays Tech | Northwest: Childcare Center**

At Fort Hays Tech | Northwest, access to childcare was identified as a major barrier to college employment and adult recruitment. In response, the college used private grant funding to repurpose underutilized classroom space into an on-campus childcare center that also serves as a practicum lab for the Childcare Specialist program. This project addresses a critical community need while strengthening the local childcare workforce.



# Carnegie Recognition

## Carnegie Elective Classification: Leadership for Public Purpose

Fort Hays State University has been recognized as part of the inaugural cohort of institutions receiving the Carnegie Leadership for Public Purpose Classification. This elective classification honors colleges and universities that demonstrate a sustained, institution-wide commitment to developing leadership capacity in service of the public good, democratic values, and societal impact.

For a rural-serving regional comprehensive university, this recognition affirms FHSU's role in preparing graduates who are equipped not only for employment, but for leadership in their communities, professions, and civic institutions. In rural Kansas, where leadership capacity often determines a community's ability to adapt, this classification reflects FHSU's intentional focus on cultivating leaders who can navigate complexity and collaborate across sectors in order to positively impact regional vitality.

## Carnegie Elective Classification: Community Engagement

The Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement recognizes institutions that integrate reciprocal, mutually beneficial partnerships into teaching, research, scholarship, and service. With updates to the 2026 application cycle, the classification places greater emphasis on meaningful engagement that strengthens communities while enhancing student learning and institutional impact.

This recognition aligns directly with FHSU's identity as a rural-serving university deeply embedded in the communities it serves. From workforce development and applied research to service learning and community partnerships, FHSU's engagement model reflects sustained collaboration rather than transactional outreach. The classification affirms the university's role as a trusted partner working alongside communities to address shared challenges and advance the public good.

## Why These Classifications Matter

Together, the Leadership for Public Purpose and Community Engagement classifications highlight two interconnected dimensions of FHSU's mission: developing leaders who serve the public good and engaging communities as partners in shared progress. For rural Kansas, where institutional capacity, leadership, and community well-being are closely linked, these recognitions validate FHSU's place-based approach and reinforce its role as a catalyst for long-term regional prosperity.

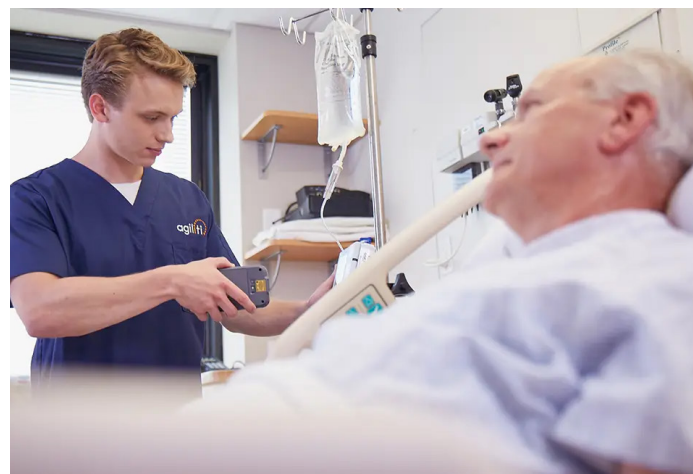


# Success Stories

## ***Agiliti Health***

When area medical equipment manufacturer, Agiliti, faced significant recruitment proposals from outside Kansas that would have resulted in the relocation of over a hundred local jobs, Fort Hays State University joined Grow Hays and the Kansas Department of Commerce to develop a coordinated retention strategy to keep them in Ellis County.

That collaborative effort helped demonstrate the strength of the local workforce and the region's value as a long-term home for advanced manufacturing, and Agiliti has decided to stay. Agiliti's continued commitment to Ellis County has deepened, including the purchase of its local manufacturing campus and plans to expand its facilities and workforce over the next five years, creating new opportunities for skilled employment, training, and career advancement. This outcome not only preserves existing jobs but also strengthens the region's economy by reinforcing Hays as a center for advanced healthcare manufacturing and regional growth.



## ***High Plains Mental Health***

As High Plains Mental Health moved forward with construction of its new Crisis Intervention Center, the organization identified a growing need for additional mental health professionals to support expanded services. In response, Fort Hays State University convened leadership from High Plains Mental Health with faculty from Psychology and Social Work to better understand workforce needs and identify opportunities for alignment.

That conversation also included Fort Hays Tech | North Central, resulting in the ongoing development of a future associate degree pathway in mental health designed to move individuals into the workforce more quickly. This pathway provides an accessible entry point into a high-demand field with strong earning potential while allowing students to continue their education, strengthening the regional mental health workforce and supporting critical community infrastructure. Earn-and-learn here we come!



# Faculty Promotion & Tenure

Fort Hays State University's promotion and tenure framework reflects its mission as a regional public comprehensive university and its responsibility to serve rural Kansas through meaningful community and industry engagement. Policies are established at the department or program level and recognize community-engaged teaching; research, scholarly, and creative activity; and service as legitimate and important forms of faculty work. Central to this approach is the expectation that faculty engagement strengthens connections between academic programs, employers, and the industries in which graduates ultimately work.

During the 2023–24 academic year, FHSU conducted a coordinated review of department- and program-level tenure and promotion guidelines to ensure that community and industry engaged activities are explicitly acknowledged and rewarded. At the request of the Academic Council, departments incorporated model or discipline-specific language affirming that faculty work involving applied research, experiential learning, industry partnerships, and workforce-aligned service carries value comparable to high-impact teaching and traditional scholarship. This process was substantially completed by the end of the academic year and will conclude across all units during 2024–25.

As a result, tenure and promotion guidelines across the university consistently recognize faculty efforts that connect students to real-world application through internships, applied learning, and partnerships with employers, public agencies, and nonprofit organizations. These policies ensure that faculty members who build and sustain industry relationships, while advancing student learning and workforce readiness, receive full consideration in tenure, promotion, merit, and retention decisions.



# Looking Ahead



*These initiatives reflect more than a strategic roadmap. They represent active, on-the-ground work shaped by the real needs of Kansas communities and employers. Together, they focus on strengthening relationships, aligning resources, and taking **practical** steps that translate education into opportunity and growth. This is how FHSU turns commitment into action and ensures that progress is shared by the university and the communities we serve.*

- Deepen engagement with local **economic development officers** across FHSU's service area to better identify opportunities for new business launches, business expansion, and business succession planning. These partners serve as the university's "boots on the ground" in Kansas communities, helping to identify where the university fits.
- Strengthen regional collaboration with the **Western Kansas Rural Economic Development Alliance (wkREDA)** to align broader higher education, workforce development, and economic development strategies across western Kansas.
- Expand entrepreneurship pipelines through continued partnership with **Network Kansas**, including development of the **Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge "Western Kansas Wildcard Competition"** to increase early exposure to entrepreneurship and innovation.
- Build direct connections between **business and industry partners** and **faculty** at Fort Hays State University and affiliated technical colleges to better align curriculum with workforce demand and improve graduate placement outcomes in Kansas.
- Deepen coordination between Fort Hays State University and its affiliated technical colleges, **Fort Hays Tech | Northwest** and **Fort Hays Tech | North Central**, specifically around economic and workforce development initiatives. This includes shared employer engagement, aligned training strategies, coordinated outreach, and clearer pathways connecting technical credentials, applied learning, and degree completion.

# Looking Ahead



- Leverage engagement through the **CORI** and **Heartland Rural Innovators Initiative** to connect innovation assets across campus (such as cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and technology-focused academic programs) and take early steps toward supporting technology sector expansion in Ellis County.
- Expand the reach and impact of the **Kansas Small Business Development Center** through continued collaboration and coordination to ensure entrepreneurs and small businesses across the state have access to advising and technical assistance.
- Intentionally leverage existing FHSU assets, including **Professional and Continuing Education**, the **Cybersecurity Institute and Technology Incubator**, and the **Robbins Banking Institute**, to support customized training, industry engagement, applied research, and workforce-responsive solutions aligned with regional needs.
- Strengthen **data tracking and reporting** related to economic and workforce development to validate outcomes, support continuous improvement, and ensure that success stories are reflected in measurable impact.
- Complete and implement FHSU's **Economic and Workforce Development Strategic Plan**, Trail Markers for Regional Growth and Vitality, to guide prioritization, coordination, and long-term investment in university economic and workforce development.
- Build a foundation for **registered apprenticeship pathways** that more directly connect education and employment, with an emphasis on employer engagement and work-based learning.
- Expand the **Forge Kansas** initiative, funded by the Kansas Department of Commerce, to elevate rural western Kansas small businesses and use the Forge Kansas platform as a resource for entrepreneurs, communities, employers, and students.

# We're Just Getting Started

Fort Hays State University's approach to economic and workforce development is not theoretical, aspirational, or confined to planning documents. It is practical, hands-on, and grounded in the same realities faced by the communities we serve. Like the region we call home, we roll up our sleeves and get to work.

Our priorities outline active engagement, not ideas waiting for the right moment, but work already underway. They are shaped by conversations in community conversations, on shop floors, in classrooms, and around conference tables with employers, economic developers, and local leaders who understand what is at stake. This work depends on trust, relationships, and presence, and it requires showing up consistently. This is especially true when challenges faced are real and resources are limited.

As a recap, FHSU's past and future is inseparable from the future of rural and western Kansas. If communities struggle to survive, so will the institutions that serve them. If businesses cannot find talent, they will leave to pursue it elsewhere. If opportunity disappears, so does population, investment, and vitality. Conversely, when communities grow and thrive, so does the university. This shared reality serves as a gut check that our commitment to economic and workforce development is core institutional work.

That is why FHSU is leaning in with local economic development officers who know their communities block by block and business by business. It is why we are building partnerships that move beyond county lines and community rivalries. It is why we invest time and energy in entrepreneurship, workforce pipelines, and business support that meet people where they are as opposed to asking them to come to us.

It is also why coordination and collaboration is critical across academic departments, programs, and our affiliated technical colleges. The challenges facing rural Kansas do not fit neatly into organizational silos, and neither can the solutions as both are adaptive in nature. By aligning education, training, innovation, and business support, FHSU is building systems that will respond to real needs in real time.

This work requires grit. It requires patience. It requires persistence. Progress in rural Kansas is rarely immediate or linear, but when built on relationships and shared responsibility, it is certainly durable. FHSU is committed to staying in the work, adapting when conditions change, and continuing to invest in the places that have invested in us since 1902.

Rooted in rural Kansas and built to respond, Fort Hays State University is approaching the future with clear-eyed determination. We are not observers of regional change. We are participants in it. Our success is tied to the success of our communities, and together, we're just getting started.



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