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By LARRY PHILLIPS • Daily Leader Fort Hays State University had its best-known ambassador cruising the High Plains of Kansas last week – Dr. Edward H Hammond. The FHSU President made his annual stop in Liberal to extol the accomplishments at the Kansas Regents' school he has administered since 1987. “We’ve been able to keep our tuition fees lower than our competitors,” Hammond said, pointing out FHSU’s tuition has only increased a total of 33.1 percent over the last five years to \$1,473 for a 15-hour, full-time student.

In comparison, Emporia State University’s tuition has increased to \$1,713, Pittsburg is at \$1,826, while Wichita State is at \$2,249 and Kansas State is at \$3,093. The University of Kansas’ tuition tops the list at \$3,284. To put an asterisk with those figures, Hammond pointed out FHSU’s enrollment has continued to grow – and at a rate higher than any other Regents’ school last year. FHSU student enrollment increased 5,963 students or an 8.1 percent growth from last year. By comparison, Pittsburg State and Wichita State grew 6.5 percent and 2.1 percent, respectively. KU saw only 0.5 percent increase in enrollment and Emporia State and K-State actually had decreases in the number of students enrolled this year. ESU decreased 6.1 percent and K-State fell 7.1 percent.

Hammond attributes FHSU’s success to three things the school is doing.

“It’s low tuition costs, efficiency and the China program,” Hammond said. “Our enrollment has more than doubled since the turn of the century.”

The China program is where the Chinese government has worked out an online agreement with FHSU to educate chinese students.

“In 2000, they put up 50 students in a pilot program,” Hammond said. “Then it was doubled to 100 and then 200 the next and doubled again that next year. Then they said we could do 2,000 students and by 2006, it had leveled off around 2,500 students.”

Today, the Chinese government will pay the costs for up to 4,000 Chinese students. and FHSU is educating around 3,500.

“They pay us about \$4.5 million, and we use the profits off that to help keep tuition low,” Hammond said. “If we can deliver a high-quality education to 3,500 Chinese students and to a Samoan student on dial-up Internet access, we can deliver a high-quality education anywhere in Kansas. We offer tremendous support for Virtual College students – tutoring, a help desk, a writing center and many other services. Our goal is to make the virtual learning experience every bit as great as the on-campus learning experience.”

Hammond believes FHSU's online program – or Virtual College – is the wave of the future.

“Not too many years ago, typical Kansans expected to graduate from high school, perhaps get an associate or college degree, and then spend the rest of their lives working in one profession,” he said. “Now, Kansans may find themselves in a job that did not even exist when they were attending college, so they have to return for additional coursework, certificates and degrees in order to advance in their careers. We make it possible for Kansans to get the additional education they need, wherever and whenever they need it.”

There is also competition in the Virtual College marketplace, but Hammond pointed out, FHSU has positioned itself to compete with just about any school with online services.

“We compete against for-profit organizations who are pushing Virtual College, like Phoenix University and other with online services,” Hammond said. “They charge \$300 to \$500 per credit hour, and we're charging \$170.

“So, I tell people all the time, ‘Take advantage of being a Kansas taxpayer and take advantage of what we offer.’ We are the largest provider of distance learning in this state,” he added.

FHSU has a long history of providing distance education to Kansans, dating back to 1911 when it created a “Correspondence Department” to solve the problem of the numerous teachers who could not afford to travel to Hays for their continuing education needs. By adapting emerging technology to address the needs of place-bound Kansans, FHSU has offered online degree programs since 1999.

“The Virtual College delivers more than 40 degree and certificate programs online and is a leader worldwide in offering distance education programs,” Hammond said. “Today, more than 3,000 Kansans are enrolled in Virtual College degree programs. The Virtual College currently serves students from every county in Kansas and has students from 28 countries enrolled in degree programs.”

He also noted that FHSU had established 2+2 agreements with community colleges statewide in response to the needs of students who are place-bound and cannot attend the university in a traditional way. This allows those students to transition easily and efficiently into FHSU online programs to complete bachelor degrees and earn master degrees.

When it comes to efficiency, Hammond pointed out that at \$227, FHSU had the lowest cost of production per credit hour of any of the Regents' schools, and at 5.9 percent, FHSU also had the lowest increase in cost over the past five years. The next lowest, respectively, were \$256 and 24.2 percent.

He also admitted efficiency wouldn't be possible without all the FHSU faculty and staff being on the same page and striving for the same goals.

“We are very fortunate to have the people and staff we have,” he said.

During his tour of the state, the president is also reporting on other areas of progress at FHSU over the past decade and the steps that are being taken to align the university's strategic planning with the Foresight 2020 plan recently unveiled by the Board of Regents.

Part of the process will be a formal alignment with the North Central Kansas Technical College, which has campuses in both Beloit and FHSU's home city of Hays.

"This will not be a merger," Hammond emphasized. "Both institutions will remain distinct entities, but some functions, such as business and student-affairs functions, may be combined. We believe this will enable both institutions to better meet the needs of the citizens of Kansas."

Hammond will visit at newspapers, radio and television stations, and with community leaders, alumni and friends of the university in 14 other Kansas cities.

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