

**Fort Hays State University
House Committee on Higher Education Budget
February 21, 2023
Tisa Mason, Eric Burks, Ben Schears
House Bill 2290**

A yellow banner with a ribbon-like shape on the right side. On the left side of the banner, there are three logos stacked vertically: the Fort Hays State University logo (a lion's head), the NCK logo (North Central Kansas Technical College), and the Northwest Kansas Technical College logo (a circular emblem with 'NTC' and 'NORTHWEST KANSAS TECHNICAL COLLEGE'). The text 'Strategic Affiliation Initiative' is written in a large, dark font across the top of the banner. Below the banner, the text 'A strategic affiliation to serve rural Kansas' is followed by a bulleted list of three items: 'President Tisa Mason - Fort Hays State University', 'President Eric Burks - North Central Kansas Technical College', and 'President Ben Schears - Northwest Kansas Technical College'.

Strategic Affiliation Initiative

A strategic affiliation to serve rural Kansas

- President Tisa Mason - Fort Hays State University
- President Eric Burks - North Central Kansas Technical College
- President Ben Schears - Northwest Kansas Technical College

Chair Howe and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to this request to better serve our students, businesses, and communities through a voluntary affiliation model designed to closer align our three institutions as we explore new educational delivery models.

Together, Presidents Burks, Schears, and I have developed a shared vision from our already established, strong common missions and focused on how we can best provide opportunities for the communities we serve.



Strategic Affiliation Initiative



Introduction

- A shared commitment to serving rural students, businesses, industries, and communities
- A common and mission-centered vision
- Our “True North”

Our ‘true-north’ goals are, and remain, student, business, and community success. We do great work in meeting these goals, but we believe our current challenges call for new thinking. In fact, I would like to compliment presidents Burks and Schears for their foresight in pursuing this initiative to drive change.



Strategic Affiliation Initiative



Why affiliate? Why now?

- Rural Kansas is under significant demographic and economic pressures.
- The need to address expected population declines in:
 - Rural Kansas
 - College-bound students
 - Workforce
- Declines in these areas ultimately lead to a declining economy in rural Kansas

Why now? Rural Kansas is under significant demographic and economic pressures that require innovative strategies in which education plays an essential role.

The population of the First Congressional District declined by 1.6% between 2010 and 2020 – a time when the state’s overall population increased by 6%.

The decline is particularly acute in the number of young people who will be passing through our schools. Demographers predict Kansas will see a 15% drop in college-going students by 2029.

Rural populations are shrinking. Experts from the Center for Economic Development and Business Research forecast a 33% decline in rural populations in Kansas by 2064. This will only be made worse by retirements, as the US Census Bureau predicts nearly 25% of the state’s population will be 60 or older by 2030.



The graphic features a yellow banner at the top with the text "Strategic Affiliation Initiative". Below the banner, on the left side, are three logos: Fort Hays State University, NCK Tech, and Northwest Kansas Technical College. To the right of these logos, the text "The path forward" is followed by a bulleted list of three points.

Strategic Affiliation Initiative

The path forward

- Focus on creating opportunities for all students
- Forge strong partnerships with business and industry
- Expand our presence and impact in local communities

For our communities to thrive:

- every individual must have a chance to fully develop their talents, skills, and interests;
- we must forge stronger partnerships with business and industry to shape how programs develop and align with essential business needs – as well as create a more resilient talent pipeline; and
- we need to expand our role as contributors to the overall health and viability of our local communities.

These are the three pillars upon which this voluntary affiliation framework is designed and how its success will ultimately be judged.



Strategic Affiliation Initiative



FHSU partnerships in rural Kansas

- Nursing
- Transition to Teaching
- Speech Pathology
- Social Work

Fort Hays State always has and will continue to have a relentless focus on serving rural communities often in partnership with community colleges. Our collective work with transition to teaching, RN to BSN, speech pathology, and the southwest social work cohort program are just a few examples of how we invest in communities locally.

We know that the demographic situation will only get worse and there are not enough people to keep up with workforce and community needs.

This proposed voluntary affiliation is firmly rooted in the Kansas Board of Regents strategic plan, offering affordability for families, strategic partnerships with businesses, and a promise of increased community viability.

While this initiative is boldly focused on today's challenges, affiliations and mergers in Kansas higher education are not new concepts and, as has often occurred in the past, involved significant legislative engagement in the process.

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A brief history of affiliations and mergers



In the late 1980s, there were nearly twice the number of technical schools (known then as Area Vocational Technical Schools) in our state as there are today.

Over the following three decades, five area vocational technical schools merged into area community colleges. In December 2006, in response to a growing sense that more needed to be done to increase and support technical education, the Kansas Technical College and Vocational School Commission heard numerous proposals, including notably a recommendation that remaining technical schools and colleges merge or affiliate with community colleges or universities.

Ultimately, this commission paved the way for the creation of the TEA, and by 2008 plans were finalized for the last of the technical schools and colleges either to merge with community colleges or universities or seek independent accreditation. As of today, all but the existing seven technical colleges have merged with nearby community colleges.

Of the seven that remain, two were recently merged or affiliated with a university. What we are proposing is a natural progression of a process of integrating technical colleges and regional partners that has been going on for decades. The difference in recent years is that our institutions, and a few before us, are working to voluntarily affiliate to meet our goals, as opposed to forced change through well-intended legislative involvement.



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How will this benefit students?

- More programs at more locations
- New pathways to educational goals
- Low tuition
- Seamless transfer processes
- Experiential learning opportunities
- An expanded career network
- Integrated student advising

For students, the voluntary affiliation increases access to:

- program offerings at more locations;
- pathways to achieve educational goals, ranging from simple credit hours to a certificate through to a graduate degree;
- low tuition and seamless transfer;
- experiential learning opportunities and an expanded career network that allows students to make essential professional connections; and
- integrated professional advising to help students navigate an expanding range of choices and opportunities, ultimately leading to higher completion rates that lead to jobs.



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How will this benefit employers?

- Employers can shape how programs develop and align
- Expanded access to employee development
- Increased access to prospective employees
- Creation of a reliable employee pipeline

For employers, the voluntary affiliation helps address workforce concerns by expanding or creating more experiential learning partnerships, giving employers the opportunity to:

- shape how those programs develop and align with essential business needs;
- expand access to employee professional/workforce development programs and services, ranging from training and consulting programs to professional continuing education opportunities;
- engage with and assess prospective employees in the workplace through micro-internships, apprenticeships, and “earn as you learn” initiatives; and
- create a reliable employee pipeline across three institutions to recruit and train new employees who are work-ready on day one.



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How will this benefit communities?

- Stronger educational institutions to better serve their local communities
- Expanded access to established outreach efforts
- Opportunities to partner on economic development
- Keeping graduates local

For communities, the voluntary affiliation grows more prosperous businesses and communities by:

- creating stronger educational institutions that better serve their essential role as contributors to the overall health and viability of their local communities and regions;
- expanding access to the expertise and services provided by established programs such as the WR Robbins Banking Institute, Cybersecurity Institute and Technology Incubator, and the Kansas Small Business Development Center;
- enhancing tactical initiatives, coordinated across three institutions, to bolster resources, plans, and attraction of business to support local economic development efforts; and
- keeping graduates local so they can contribute to the vitality of their communities through the careers they build, the goods and services they buy, and through their many social, civic, and economic contributions they will make as a result of the educational opportunities we made possible; in other words, delivering on our mission to create engaged citizen leaders.



Strategic Affiliation Initiative

Turning challenges into opportunities

- Addressing expected population and workforce declines
- Leveraging the strength of powerful partnerships
- Proceeding from positions of institutional strength

Our rural communities are experiencing population and job loss, which will continue on course without coordinated efforts to turn the tide. The communities we serve need bold solutions.

This initiative will forge stronger connections between our three institutions, current and future students, and with the communities, businesses, and industries in our service area.

And very importantly – acting now, all three of us are building our voluntary affiliation from positions of institutional strength, dramatically increasing our ability to deliver new and better solutions.

This will be a voluntary affiliation, **not a merger**. A merger would likely involve legally dissolving the partner institutions and the transfer of all assets and liabilities to the lead institution.

This voluntary affiliation involves the alignment of operations, united institutional branding, and integrated academic programs. Under our affiliation, each institution will retain its Federal ID, independent accreditation, and all three presidents will remain in their roles. **Funding streams will remain separate and intact**, they will not change as a result of our voluntary affiliation. The two technical college presidents will report to the FHSU president under the authority of the Kansas Board of Regents. We will unify our branding under the FHSU brand, and NJCAA athletics will continue at Northwest Tech.



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Next steps-academic pilot programs

- Agriculture
- Construction Management
- Nursing

Operationally, should the voluntary affiliation be approved and based on the needs of the communities we serve, we have identified a number of academic and administrative programs and services pilots by which we will test proof of concept and from which we will extract best practices before moving to full implementation. Furthermore, each implementation team will include stakeholders from businesses, our communities, and across our institutions.

Our first academic pilots will focus on:

- Agriculture
- Construction
- Nursing



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Next steps - administrative pilot programs

- Admissions and Marketing
- Advising
- General Education
- The Transfer Processes
- Registrar Functions
- Procurement
- An IT Study Group

Our first administrative pilots will focus on:

- Admissions & Marketing
- Advising for these three majors
- General education and transfer processes
- Registrar functions – as we will need to create a simplified crosswalk between institutions for cross-institutional transcript exchange
- Procurement
- IT Study Group to begin to think about data governance and identify early (low-hanging fruit) for operational alignment.

While we have set up a basic structure, the campus communities, those closest to the work – will determine how best to reach these ends.



Strategic Affiliation Initiative

Our work to date and moving forward

- Northwest Tech board vote
- NCK Tech board vote
- KBOR consideration
- Introduce legislation
- The Higher Learning Commission

Our process began with an idea and a conversation. It evolved by securing a grant and an outside consultant to help us through the process of creating a shared vision, framework, and draft legislation. We then shared the concept and documents with our campuses and boards. All three boards, Northwest Tech, NCK Tech, and the Kansas Board of Regents, voted unanimously in support of moving forward with the voluntary affiliation.

Now, it must pass the legislative process in the form of HB2290. If signed into law, we will then seek authorization from our accrediting body (the Higher Learning Commission), and finally ratification by the governing boards of all three institutions.

As this process unfolds over the next several months, we have invited input from our internal and external constituents to share their ideas and suggestions to build onto the existing framework. Their feedback will be crucial to help shape the resulting arrangement into something that will serve our students and communities well for years to come.



Strategic Affiliation Initiative

In closing

We respectfully ask for your support for an affiliation that is strongly rooted in the Kansas Board of Regents' strategic plan, and focused on:

- Helping Kansas families
- Supporting Kansas business and industry
- Advancing economic prosperity in rural Kansas

Today, we respectfully ask for your support.

We appreciate your time today and are happy to answer your questions at the appropriate time.