



*University of Alaska:
Executive Interviews*

Prepared for:
University of Alaska

May 2016



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Executive Summary

The University of Alaska contracted with McDowell Group to interview Alaska leaders about the role and direction of the University. This report is designed to accompany McDowell Group's recent study *University of Alaska: Economic Impacts and Public Perceptions*. Following are key findings.

"Great communities always have a great University, and Alaska needs the University of Alaska."

Alaska leaders have numerous connections to the University of Alaska.

Many are alumni themselves or have relatives and/or children who attended one of the University of Alaska campuses. Some have served in official positions such as adjunct professors or Regents; while others volunteer, attend University events, provide scholarships to students, and hire University of Alaska alumni.

Executives have strong opinions about, and a vested interest in, the University.

Interviewed leaders spoke with authority about their views of the past, present and future of the University of Alaska system. Their responses -- whether praising, balanced or critical -- underscore that executives recognize the University of Alaska's significant influence on the state.

Although leaders have different opinions about how to arrive there, all executives dream of a similar future for Alaska that relies on the University of Alaska.

Leaders hope Alaska will have boundless opportunity for future generations and a stable, diversified economy that retains and attracts talent. They see the University as an integral part of shaping a vital and robust Alaska.

All interviewed leaders believe a strong University of Alaska system is essential for Alaska.

Executives believe the University of Alaska contributes to workforce development, improves the quality of life in Alaska through population retention, and is an engine for economic growth, innovation, and technology. Leaders spoke of specific examples of the University's current impact and indicated ways in which the University could improve for greater impact.

Looking to the future, leaders are divided on the importance of the University of Alaska's identified priorities but are unified that the University is currently spread too thin.

Executives diverged significantly in their reactions to University priorities, but most leaders believe that the University is trying to accomplish too much, with too little, and in too many places. All leaders recommend a narrower, more specific, and cohesive direction.

Leaders believe that the University must be more visibly lean, coordinated, and connected to the needs of the state.

Many leaders expressed concern about the coordination and integration of campuses. These concerns have implications for fundraising, strategic direction, and public awareness.

All interviewed executives believe that the State of Alaska should support the University of Alaska.

Interviewed leaders differed when discussing the extent and channels of State support, but all agree that the state should play a financial role supporting the University.

“During these times, I hope that like a family, when there is a threat, everyone comes out bound together instead of fighting each other for crumbs. I would like to see the University come together as a unit. I would like to see us come out of this organized to survive and thrive.”

Introduction and Methodology

The University of Alaska contracted with McDowell Group to conduct a series of executive interviews with Alaska leaders about the role and direction of the University. This report is designed to accompany and deepen McDowell Group's recent study *University of Alaska: Economic Impacts and Public Perceptions*.

The McDowell Group study team designed the interview protocol with input from University of Alaska staff, the University of Alaska Foundation, and Gary Hubbell Consulting. The questions addressed a range of topics from each executive's connection to the University of Alaska, assess its' quality, reflect on the contributions of the University, and recommend how the University system should contribute to Alaska's future. Several questions from the recent household opinion survey were also included, though in more detail. A copy of the interview protocol can be found in Appendix A.

McDowell Group collaborated with University of Alaska staff to identify potential interviewees from across the state who would offer diverse perspectives on the University of Alaska system. During April and May of 2016, McDowell Group interviewed 23 executives by phone, including representatives from ANCSA corporations, industry, business, the non-profit sector, and trade associations. Executives shared opinions informed by numerous connections to the University and sincere commitment to the future of Alaska. A complete list of interviewed executives is included in Appendix B.

Perception of the University of Alaska

Role of the University

All interviewed leaders see the University of Alaska playing a crucial role shaping Alaska's future. Executives believe the University system contributes to the state in numerous ways, and many leaders believe the University has the potential to do more.

When asked how the University of Alaska could support a vital and robust Alaska, interviewed leaders identified several functions of the University:

- Prepare diverse students to perform careers needed 10-20 years from now.
- Meet the needs of new generations and also serve the state.
- Support resource development and partner with industry.
- Teach, research and provide a public service within the University's mission.
- Create programs that are innovative and attract youth.
- Coordinate, streamline and strategize offerings across all campuses.
- Attract and retain young minds to do research.
- Conduct applied research to help Alaska communities compete.
- Diversify the economy by training students in needed fields (such as medicine, mining, fishing and non-petroleum industries).
- Keep students and talent in Alaska.
- Round out and "Alaskanize" students.

The scope and range of the functions described indicate: the significant role the University does and can play; the extent to which leaders would like to rely on the University in the future; and the standards the University is held to and a challenge to meet them.

At the same time, almost all executives believe the University is trying to do too much with too little. Leaders recognize that the University cannot be all things to everyone. They caution that the role and impact of the University is less visible, because of attempting to do too much. Leaders advise a narrower strategy.

"The role of the University needs to be defined and it shouldn't be an ever-growing role. They should use a market-based approach to assess the demand. There would be more value if this was demonstrated."

Quality of the University

In general, executives rate the quality of the University of Alaska as good to average, with several stand out programs. Many Alaska executives, in particular those who attended the University, describe the education offered as high quality and single out the University's history of producing state leaders. Those without a strong connection to the University were more likely to describe the quality of education as below average in comparison to other state universities.

Leaders diverged slightly on whether or not it was important for the University to offer the high quality compared to other states. While executives agree generally that the University should offer a quality education, some executives implied that high quality compared to other states is important, while others acknowledged that they do not expect the University quality to be extraordinary, except in specialty fields.

Those who viewed a University of Alaska education as high quality commented:

- UA does a good job at providing direct, hands on internships and mentorships, opportunities that cannot be offered in larger states.
- There is a small enough community that the University can maintain connections to industries.
- We do not pay a lot for a quality education.
- The University of Alaska has educated a lot of Alaska leaders.
- Oil engineering and fisheries programs are top tier.
- The University offers high value due to its small classes and direct contact with professors.

Those who view UA education as medium to low commented:

- Quality is solid, but not outstanding.
- It can be mixed. The University is trying to be all things to all people.
- Except in specialty fields, the quality is not very high.
- The quality of education is below average compared to other states.
- They can do a better job of providing opportunities for students at the top of their class.

Notably, executives acknowledged that the University could do a better job communicating its strengths:

"I think we do some things really well (Museum of the North, UAS, the Arctic programs etc.). We are on the cutting edge of a lot of what we do, but we don't communicate this out to the public or outside of the state. We are doing a lot of things at the cutting edge that other universities should know about and that we should publicize and celebrate."

Recommendation of the University

When asked whether leaders would encourage their children or grandchildren to attend the University of Alaska, most said yes while a third said no. Executives commented that their child's interests would be a key factor.

Most leaders believe that by offering Alaska students the opportunity to stay in state for higher education, the University of Alaska plays a crucial role keeping talent in the state. However, they also described out-of-state higher education as a desirable growth opportunity for their own children.

Leaders who have or will encourage their children and grandchildren to attend the University of Alaska cite the quality and affordability of the education, as well as its ability to develop Alaska leaders as key reasons. Notably, the same executives expressed concern that the budget changes would impact the quality of University of Alaska education in the future.

Of the executives who have not or will not encourage their children and grandchildren to attend the University, most cited their desire for their children to gain experience outside of Alaska, regardless of whether they came

back to the state or not. Other reasons included more prestigious options elsewhere, concerns about the quality of education, and reluctance for their child to pursue a four-year degree while sharing a campus with part-time, remedial, and community college students.

Pride in the University

In general, executives feel proud of the University of Alaska. Some leaders indicated experiencing overall pride, while others identified feeling especially proud of the University at a distinct point in time, during a specific program or on a particular campus. For many leaders, programs strongly tied to Alaska's economic development are a source of pride (petroleum engineering, aerospace program, geophysical institute). Many leaders who attended the University or had family alumni described multi-generational pride. Some executives were unable to identify a time when they felt particularly proud of the University.

Examples of statewide pride included:

- During the late 90s when there was a lot of forward thinking.
- Forefront of petroleum engineering and development.
- Governor Murkowski.
- Groundbreaking research in aerospace program.
- Mark Hamilton.
- Pipeline pride.
- Sports-related accomplishments.
- Statehood.
- Vic Fisher's era.
- Women's basketball this year.

Examples of campus pride included:

"If UAF was not there, it would be a far less attractive place to live and work. The University shapes who we are, our cultural diversity, our hope for the future, our desire to be innovative or to take risks. Business leaders and those who shape policy firmly believe that UA plays a big part of what makes Fairbanks an attractive place to live and work."

"Fairbanks engineering program is a source of pride for the community. Their discoveries are exciting for Alaskans: aurora, Arctic, rocket launches. Lessons: we need exceptional programs that are unique to Alaska."

"UAA has invested a lot of resources, people, and money into expanding Anchorage. The UA/hospital district has grown considerably since 1997. Other expansions include the engineering program, ANSEP, sport facilities."

Description of the University of Alaska

When asked to list words that best describe the University of Alaska, executives shared a wide-range of responses from adjectives to program associations. Leaders were also asked to react to a set of five words – important, vital, diverse, relevant and accessible – that emerged during the recent household survey.

The compiled responses are listed below.

Open-Ended Responses

Of the open ended responses, most had positive connotations while several had more negative associations. Responses were not always uniformly positive or negative. Interestingly, none of the positive words were repeated by more than one executive, while a number of the negative words were repeated by multiple leaders. This suggests that positive associations with the University may be more diverse and personal, while negative associations may be more visible and aligned. The range of responses also indicate interviewed leaders were comfortable with candor.

Positive words used to describe the University of Alaska included:

| | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Affordable. | Embedded in community. | Mind-broadening. |
| Alaska. | Empowering. | Potential for greatness. |
| ANSEP. | Engaged. | Pride. |
| Arctic university. | Expansive. | Proactive. |
| Big. | Experiential awareness. | Quality of education. |
| Broad. | Experimental. | Resilient. |
| Collaborative. | Far-flung. | Responsive to market. |
| Connected to rural hubs. | Fiscally-responsible. | Serious. |
| Creative. | Focus. | Social values. |
| Credible education. | Forward-thinking. | Sports accomplishments. |
| Decentralized. | Growth. | Stable. |
| Diverse. | Individuals count. | Strong core values. |
| Diversified. | Interested in value. | Strong departments. |
| Economic driver. | Involved. | Urban campus. |
| | | Value. |

Words and phrases with a negative connotation used to describe the University of Alaska included:

| | | |
|--|----------------|-----------------------------|
| Bureaucratic. | Divided. | Needs to overcome barriers. |
| Challenging to manage. | Frustrating. | Silos. |
| Important by default. | Inefficient. | Slow to react. |
| Competitive between campuses and programs. | Large. | Spoiled. |
| Confusing. | Myopic. | Takes more than gives. |
| | Over-extended. | |

Responses to Survey Terms

Overall, the responses of interviewed executives to the survey terms aligned with the public reactions to the five descriptions of the University of Alaska. With few exceptions, leaders agree that the terms important, vital, diverse, accessible and relevant accurately describe the University. Of the five terms, interviewed executives felt that important and accessible most accurately describe the University.

In contrast to the survey, the one-on-one interview structure allowed for more nuanced reactions to each of the five terms. The quotations below illustrate that even a vetted list of terms can yield subtle differences in interpretation.

"I wish I could say vital, but I think important is more accurate."

"We may be too accessible, as in spread thinly across many campuses."

Confusion about University messaging and branding across campuses was also mentioned.

Direction of the University of Alaska

Executives were asked a series of questions to illicit input on the direction of the University of Alaska, starting with the University's prioritized program areas. Strategic partnerships and innovation were also discussed.

Priorities

Interviewed executives commented on the importance of the following program areas:

- Meeting Alaska's workforce needs.
- Diversifying Alaska's economy through the development of new technology and innovations.
- Helping Alaskans understand, adapt to, or reduce the impacts of climate change in Alaska.
- Helping Americans understand the importance of the Arctic.
- Preserving Alaska's cultural heritage.
- Creating a culture of education and encouraging more high school students to pursue a college degree.

Reactions ranged significantly and, in general, yielded strong responses. Some leaders were highly supportive of the University's role in all areas, others questioned the University's role or efficiency addressing these priorities, and some leaders expressed concern that such broad goals may be unattainable and should not fall entirely on the University. Overall, the areas that most leaders identified as top priorities were workforce development and innovations and technology. Climate change, culture, and Arctic awareness had more mixed support.

MEETING ALASKA'S WORKFORCE NEEDS

All executives cited supporting workforce development as an important priority. Leaders ranged in their assessment of the University's effectiveness in this area, but most leaders describe the University as generally effective with room for growth. Some leaders described challenges finding qualified alumni to hire, advised strengthening vocational programming, or felt that competition among campuses limited access to degrees that in turn impacts workforce development.

DIVERSIFYING ALASKA'S ECONOMY THROUGH THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATIONS

With some exceptions, most interviewed leaders agreed that this priority is important. Leaders differ in their assessment of the University's performance on this priority. Many leaders believe that there is room for improvement: by increasing awareness of efforts already under way and by anticipating future market needs. Several executives expressed either a lack of knowledge about the University's technology and innovation, while some were familiar with specific examples.

HELPING ALASKANS UNDERSTAND, ADAPT TO, OR REDUCE THE IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN ALASKA

Most leaders believe the University should continue its existing programs and research climate change and its' impacts in Alaska, but leaders were adamant that this should not be a significant priority, nor should the University take up a leadership role, unless direct funding is available. Some of the cited University programs

included the Geophysical Institute, Arctic biology program, atmospheric program, and glaciology program. There is perceived value in University research in climate change, but their role as public liaison, especially with a reduced budget, is questioned. Some leaders did, however, agree that this is an important priority.

HELPING AMERICANS UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ARCTIC

Most interviewed leaders feel that the University has a role in Arctic issues, but expressed uncertainty about what role the University should play and do not believe Arctic advocacy falls within the University's mission. Some leaders also expressed concern about the University taking on a "philosophical" mission and wondered why Americans need to be convinced about the importance of the Arctic and whether success at this priority is possible. Some leaders thought the University was highly effective and cited the Institute of the North and Arctic policy panel involvement as examples.

PRESERVING ALASKA'S CULTURAL HERITAGE

Many interviewed leaders believe that preservation of Alaska's cultural heritage is an important priority for the University, and most executives believe that the University does well at this objective. Several executives felt strongly that, while an important priority overall, cultural preservation should be the responsibility of other dedicated organizations, not a strategic priority of the University. Many examples of success were cited including: the Alaska Native Studies program, the UAF Festival of Native Arts, special records archive in the University libraries, and overall accessibility to college education for Alaska Natives.

CREATING A CULTURE OF EDUCATION AND ENCOURAGING MORE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS TO PURSUE A COLLEGE DEGREE

Most executives agree this is an important priority for the University; however, a group of interviewed leaders strongly disagreed and felt this issue stems from Alaska's K-12 education deficiency and is not the responsibility of the University. When asked to assess effectiveness, responses were across the map. Some leaders described the importance of scholarships and vocational training, but most interviewees did not cite particular examples. Several leaders cautioned that a focus on increasing numbers should still emphasize quality over quantity.

Innovation and New Business Development

Interviewed leaders discussed innovation and new business development at length. Overall, leaders recognize the University cannot meet all industry needs and urge the University to stay on mission course. Leaders suggest the University of Alaska can help connect people through groups and panels or even look to other universities for examples. Interviewed executives also acknowledge the challenge of the University current situation:

"The University is in a tough spot: it has a short-term funding problem and a long-term service gap. Investing in progressive departments dedicated to entrepreneurship and innovation is a long-term investment and strategy, not short-term."

Specific recommendations to support innovation and new business development included:

- Apprenticeships
- New business partnerships focused on engineering, technology, and light manufacturing
- Pilot programs
- Anticipate business opportunities that could be developed in Alaska

- Create a University medical district
- Competitions to address problems and generate ideas
- Progressive departments dedicated to entrepreneurship and innovation
- Passionate department heads who are leaders
- Supporting innovation with research grants
- Study school systems like Stanford and MIT that capture innovation
- Commercialize intellectual property processes to be more competitive

Strategic Partnerships

When asked about strategic partnerships the University should pursue, leaders focused on resource industries. Several executives said the University should focus attention on each the strengths of each campus and consolidate when necessary. Niche employment gaps, maintenance of current industry partnerships, and hosting industry panels were a few of the ways executives suggested the University could strengthen their connections to industry.

Recommended partnerships included:

AEDC
Alaska Marine Highway
ANCSA corporations
Banks and other financial services
Construction companies
Donlin Mine – Bethel Campus
Engineering firms
Ketchikan shipyard
Medical institutions
Mining
Oil and gas companies
State agencies
Timber

Funding the University of Alaska

Charitable Donations

When asked what would motivate Alaskans to make a charitable donation to the University, most leaders acknowledged that the University has significant room for growth in its development efforts. Many leaders recommended tapping into the growing alumni population, though several interviewed alums described that they did not feel they were approached effectively by the University. Interviewed leaders provided both broad and specific suggestions including:

- Actively manage the public perception of the University of Alaska such that the public sees the University making judicious, effective financial decisions and creating visible, positive impact.
- The public needs to feel engaged and heard by the University in order to be willing to donate.
- Giving is about connection: connection with people and people seeing value in University work.
- Consider donors as potential investors that want to see their dollars will be well spent, with measureable outcomes for the state.
- Look to prestigious public institutions as establish a robust development model. Pick.Click.Give. will pay a bill, not make a difference.
- Focus on results and make a connection. Showcase graduates who are working in Alaska.
- Support a paradigm shift from the University as the state's University to Alaskans' University.
- Donations need to be visible and not disappear within the University, rather they should be attached to specific programs, initiatives, and projects that inspire passion.

State Funding

All interviewed executives believe that the State should support the University of Alaska. Interviewed leaders differed when discussing the extent and channels of State support, but all agree that the state should play a financial role supporting the University. Most interviewed leaders also believe that the University should have leeway in determining how to best allocate state funds.

Recommendations for the University of Alaska

Throughout their interviews, Alaska leaders shared recommendations and advice for the University of Alaska. Below are their thoughts.

Narrow strategic scope

- Know what to focus on. Do what is excellent and relevant for Alaska. Do not compete internally. Be selective about areas of strength and focus.
- Ensure that efforts across campuses are coordinated and not duplicative.
- Use a market-based approach to assess demand when determining direction.

Integrate and coordinate campuses

- Come together as a unit. The University tends to compete with itself, and competition and turf wars between campuses hurts them.
- Integrate all campuses. Siloed nature of the University system is detrimental to students and potential donors. Students should be able to go between campuses and have classes transfer.

Reduce and control expectations

- Too many people have extraordinary expectations of the University and expect the University to solve all problems. The University of Alaska can be a place to host discussion, facilitate dialog, foster communication and research about problems, but it should not be expected to solve them.

Demonstrate efficiency with financial resources

- Reduce overhead costs for managing the University.
- Ensure that resources are deployed across campuses as efficiently as possible.
- Visibly address concerns about inefficiency, overhead costs, bonuses, and construction projects.
- Use existing assets. The University has a competitive advantage due to its location near the Arctic, its land, sea, and space grant status, and its unique cultural heritage and associated programs.

Focus on applied research and service

- Applied service and research can support Alaska's economic and community evolution.
- Faculty should be more applied in their public service; the University should encourage faculty to choose public service that meets the mission of the University, not just goals of the individual.
- Applied research can help Alaska compete. For example, the University can drive public policy research that supports leaders at all levels in our communities.
- Support applied research and development with commercialization and intellectual property laws.

Take cues from past successes

- Broaden the successful “pipeline” of employees for the mining and petroleum industries to help create an educated workforce in more sectors.
- Maintain and consider expanding the WAMI program to other degree programs the University cannot offer. Likewise consider degree programs the University of Alaska can uniquely offer that may be relevant to out of state students.
- Continue ANSEP and create other programs that are innovative, focused, and appealing to youth.

Increase awareness of current successes

- Communicate the University’s successes and cutting edge impacts to a wider audience both in state and outside.
- Increase touch points to the University for businesses.
- Ensure the public understands what the University of Alaska is doing.

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. How have you and your family been involved with the University of Alaska? (Probe, if necessary: "Have you or any of your family members been enrolled in the University?")
2. What is your dream for a vital and robust Alaska?
3. In what ways could the University of Alaska support that dream? (Probe, if necessary: "What specific steps can the University take to ensure a vital and relevant Alaska a decade from now?")
4. Do you think the University of Alaska plays a role in shaping Alaska's future?
5. Can you recall a time when Alaskans felt particularly proud of the University? What lessons can we learn from that time?
6. What is your opinion of the quality of public university education in Alaska? (Probe, if necessary: "How does the quality of Alaska's public university education compare to other states?")
7. What words best describe the University of Alaska? How well do you think the following words describe the University of Alaska (important, vital, diverse, accessible, relevant)?
8. As I read each of the following University program areas, please tell me your thoughts about the University's role. (Probe: priority, effective, examples, ideas)
 - Meeting Alaska's workforce needs.
 - Diversifying Alaska's economy through the development of new technology and innovations.
 - Helping Alaskans understand, adapt to, or reduce the impacts of climate change in Alaska.
 - Helping Americans understand the importance of the Arctic.
 - Preserving Alaska's cultural heritage.
 - Creating a culture of education and encouraging more high school students to pursue a college degree.
9. How can the University help support innovation and new business development?
10. Can you think of strategic partnerships with industry or schools that would strengthen the University?
11. What do you think would motivate Alaskans to make a charitable donation to the University?
12. Do you think the state should have a role in supporting the university? Do you think the state should have a role in supporting scholarships or educational grant programs?
13. Would you encourage your children or grandchildren to attend the University of Alaska? Why or why not?
14. Finally, what else would you want us to know about the role and value of the University?

Appendix B: List of Interviewed Executives

Rob Allen, Sitka Community Hospital

Stephani Allen, United Way-Mat Su

Anna Atchison, Kinross Fort Knox Mine

Joe Beedle, Northrim Bank

Patrice Case, Florcraft

Charles Clement, SEARHC

Larry Gaffaney, Huna Totem

Grace Greene, Totem Ocean Trailer Express

David Karp, Northern Aviation Services

Nina Kempel, Alaska Community Foundation

Rebecca Logan, Alliance

John MacKinnon, Associated General Contractors of Alaska

Lance Miller, NANA Corporation

Bill O'Leary, Alaska Railroad

Mike Orr, Sitnasuak Corporation

McHugh Pierre, Goldbelt

Angela Rodell, Alaska Permanent Fund Corporation

Rachel Roy, Sitka Chamber of Commerce

Julie Saupe, Visit Anchorage

Aaron Schutt, Doyon Limited

Hugh Short, PT Capital

Curtis Thayer, Alaska Chamber of Commerce

Shelley Wright, Southeast Conference