To: University of Alaska Faculty and Staff

From: Pat Gamble, President

Date: Sept. 1, 2011

RE: UA’s Strategic Direction – An Invitation to Participate

With the new semester having begun at all of our campuses this week, now is the perfect time to begin a meaningful discussion about a new Strategic Direction for the UA System that just got underway.

Note I’m not using the term “strategic plan.” A plan sounds passive, like a map or a document that often gets published with great fanfare then ends up gathering dust on a shelf. A Change in Strategic Direction suggests an effort that’s dynamic and responsive. It will provide ample latitude for individual campuses and programs to move within it. So long as we’re collectively pushing in the same general direction in order to move the entire institution forward, there’s room for individual campus style contributing to the vector.

I’ve already begun meeting with faculty and staff governance groups about our proposed idea of a directional shift for the University of Alaska. I’ll meet with more governance groups, our students and many other affected parties in the months ahead as we develop more fully our priorities and desired outcomes. Constructive discussion is needed now more than ever, and I’ll tell you why: the economies of the nation and our state need our graduates like never before.

Any institutional journey through these uncertain economic times will call for ways to adjust course to accommodate a tougher fiscal reality. We don’t want draconian, double-digit cuts to our university programs dealt out to us exactly when students need education and workforce development the most. We will need to create and demonstrate student success through meaningful outcomes. We will have to improve our database and data analysis, systemwide, in order to substantiate progress in the desired direction.

For a decade, the university has put considerable (successful) effort into getting more Alaska secondary graduates to choose their own state university or community campus for career training or advanced education beyond high school. Today, as I look at the output statistics, including retention and graduation rates, it’s clear to me that it’s high time to look at more effective ways of serving our growing student body. This means delivering education and training in a more efficient and timely fashion--so students can get out the door with a degree, certificate or license in hand, with far less debt, and begin contributing to a stronger economy for Alaska.

We are Alaska’s university. Our mission is to educate Alaska’s students, first. But shouldn’t we look for ways to do this complex task more effectively if we can?
Our Strategic Direction course adjustment will help us address that question, head on. It will lay out the desired improvement areas without dictating to a chancellor, professor or even an advisor how their campus will get there. The process will take time---at least a year---to be fully established. I’m not so interested in what a final document might look like, but I am interested in the intellectual framework and supporting data analysis it will take to reach consensus on outcomes and make substantive progress.

There will be meetings and listening sessions held across the state, and all of our employees will have the opportunity to participate, as will current students, alumni, business owners, elected leaders, donors and many others.

Overseeing the strategic direction effort will be Dr. Paula Donson from Academic Affairs. She has significant experience in this area. If you have questions at this early stage, please feel free to call her at 907-786-7729 or email her at pmdonson@alaska.edu. We anticipate hiring a temporary staff position to help us with all this work as well. We’ve already received the wise counsel of Dr. Terry MacTaggart in mapping out concepts regarding our initial move forward. We are not in a hurry. We want to do this right.

As a university employee or student, you will have good opportunities to tune in, get engaged and/or take part in the process. Watch for news about a new special web site where all the latest information will be housed.

There is no single person in the UA System who can claim that they are more important than any other UA employee. That is one way to say that this effort we are undertaking will rely on a team—the UA team. The game is education. The goal line is more students … completing … faster.

***For a PDF version of this memo, please go to: http://www.alaska.edu/files/pres/memo20110901.pdf