Regents approve Bachelor of Arts in Yup’ik language, culture

Starting in January 2008, students at the University of Alaska will be able to begin earning credits toward a four-year degree in Yup’ik language and culture at the Kuskokwim campus in Bethel.

“In Yup’ik, the program is called Yupiit Nakmin Qaneryaraat Piciryaraat-llu,” Oscar Alexie, assistant professor of Yup’ik at the Bethel campus, said Dec. 6, 2007 at the UA Board of Regents’ meeting in Anchorage. “That means ‘the very own language and culture of the Yup’ik people’.”

The board, which met for two days on the University of Alaska Anchorage campus, approved the four-year program. The program will build upon existing certificate and two-year programs in Yup’ik language proficiency and Native language education in Bethel.

The new program is expected to attract up to 15 students initially. It was designed to meet specific local needs expressed by Bethel region schools, communities and students. University officials believe, however, that the program will serve as a model for additional indigenous language programs throughout the state.

Kuskokwim Campus, under the umbrella of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, worked closely with UAF’s Alaska Native Language Center to develop the program.

“Part of the focus of the program is improving Yup’ik language instruction in the K-12 school system—that holds strong potential for increasing interest in this baccalaureate degree,” said Susan Henrichs, UAF provost.

The new degree program is not expected to cost additional money because
Kuskokwim Campus already has two Yup’ik language faculty members who actively teach. However, the classes haven’t been packaged into a four-year program in the past. Doing so will allow students who have already completed the certificate or two-year program the option to continue on with their studies.

Alexie and Henrichs spoke in favor of the program, as did Patrick Marlow, an assistant professor of linguistics at UAF’s Alaska Native Language Center and the School of Education.

The Fairbanks campus offers four-year degrees in Inupiaq and Yup’ik, but those programs are more focused on grammar, translation and literacy rather than the full immersion program Bethel will offer, which emphasizes speaking the language as well as learning the culture. UAF also offers certificate and two-year degree programs on Native language education with an emphasis in Inupiaq, Athabascan or Central Yup’ik.

The University of Alaska Southeast, headquartered in Juneau, offers courses in Tlingit and Haida language as part of a minor in Alaska Native studies, but does not offer a specific degree in the language itself. UAS also works with local high schools to provide Tlingit language instruction with the hope that students will pursue Tlingit courses later in college.

At the University of Alaska Anchorage, Alaska Native language courses offer students instruction in Central and Siberian Yup’ik, Tlingit, Inupiaq, and Haida-Eyak. Students may take these courses as part of a minor in Alaska Native studies, to meet general education requirements or for their personal interest, but a bachelor’s degree is not available.

Future Board Meetings

February 6-7, 2008
Juneau

April 17-18, 2008
Ketchikan