

Why Do We Need To Change UA's Strategic Direction?

Setting Sails For Success

Scene Setter

The national higher education agenda is in transformation and is generating a powerful message which is being broadcast across the United States. At the University of Alaska (UA) we interpret it to say: "The time has come to raise the bar ... to shape a new vanguard of workforce that is trained, educated, and ready to benefit economically by meeting the demands that a resource hungry, environmentally conscious, digitally supported world economy will place on our doorstep." Or not. Yes, we have a choice. We can demur and say, "No need. Nothing's broken. What's the urgency? We're doing just fine the way we are." We can certainly choose that road. But, in my opinion, if we do, the consequences for Alaska become entirely predictable ... and all bad.

UA is Alaska's higher education engine, with three separately accredited universities comprised of 16 campuses stretching from Kotzebue to Ketchikan. Today, there are nearly 35,000 students enrolled in our universities and college campuses statewide. Over the past decade we have witnessed the number of students seeking postsecondary education continue to grow steadily. UA student enrollment has grown 8.8% just over the last five years, with students enrolled in high demand Alaskan career fields accounting for about 40% of that. Enrollment of first-time-ever freshmen over the same period has grown nearly 28%, with most of that group being Alaskan high school graduates. The UA Scholars Program, our top 10% performing students, has increased its enrollment by 12%. These are all unambiguous indicators that UA is winning the fight to recruit, retain and refine our state's most precious natural resource ... well educated citizens. We have been generally pretty good at building baccalaureate-level graduates ... teachers, nurses, engineers, to name just a few. But we have much more to do. The competency bar keeps going up by itself. To meet the growing standards, we are going to have to focus on successful partnerships with Alaska's industries so we can turn out specifically trained and educated employees where and when the Alaska workforce needs them. Associate degrees are rapidly becoming required, more than simply desired, because employers today want critical thinkers as well as technical experts who can manage their logistics and operate their technology.

To those ends, the university is in the midst of a major institutional directional change. We call it the Strategic Direction Initiative (SDI). Beginning about 2 years ago, UA teams hit the road for several months, out soliciting the people of Alaska to help us chart a new course. We were highly encouraged by their strong response, their passion, and their commitment to support the work that

they said we have ahead of us. Our promise to them was that we will seek out and remove frustrating, expensive, bureaucratic, and administrative barriers to student success that might have unintentionally grown up over time within our university system. We intend to employ readily available technology to help open expeditious pathways for our many categories of students to move both physically and virtually throughout the UA system to meet their attainment goals as quickly and affordably as possible without sacrificing learning quality or value. By asking ourselves why we do things the way we do, and answering honestly and objectively, we intend to create a culture of sustained continuous improvement throughout the UA system.

Upon distilling the SDI outreach data down to its essence, we acquired a much higher degree of clarity regarding our purpose and need. Now, we plan to systematically unlock the potential energy that we observed within the businesses and communities all across our state, and use it to help power our own higher education future. Our ability to parry the challenges lying in ambush along the way of progress links directly to our ability to foresee and then nimbly respond to the myriad of economic market changes trending throughout the Alaskan workplace. Our university system's ability to adapt plays an essential role in this process. For example, after a decade, Alaska is about to reach a pivotal decision on oil and gas development. What is decided on paper will undoubtedly be hailed as a landmark achievement in our state's economic history. But at the same time Alaska employs an aging imported oil and gas workforce that needs replacing. Alaska has prospects brewing for several diversified industries. Alaska sits on the cusp of realizing significant brand new types of mining and oil/gas expansions. Alaska is center stage for international arctic environmental and geophysical research. Alaska is responding to a growing number of economic development inquiries that are being received as a direct result of our highly advantageous market location in a world of expanding globalization. In short, Alaska is potentially lead time away from confronting a substantial need for filling management and technical jobs that don't even exist yet. To accommodate the need without resorting to outside labor will require much closer interface with the Alaska Department of Labor, local industry, and local communities. They will help us identify how many, where, and what those future jobs will look like so UA can get down to the business of designing, planning, engineering and resourcing all the customized workforce education and training programs we will need.

We Are Alaska's University

In Alaska, anyone eligible and ready for college essentially has an open door to enter our universities and campuses. The burden on a new student of making so many difficult decisions that typically come with enrollment can be quite intimidating. We believe our students deserve first class personal service as they each seek out the best placement in order to transition academically (and affordably) from high school into and through the UA system. To accomplish that tall order we have to form a solid, trusting relationship with Alaska's school districts ... aligning curriculum, collecting student academic data from preschool to high school ... making sure that teachers, principals, advisors,

parents and students alike are all confident that their expectations for continued academic success are addressed and well placed. Rural Alaska presents its own very important imperatives. We believe that the successful university education programs for rural Alaska are the ones that will prepare students for the analytical rigors of college through the use of culturally-relevant social norms and curriculum. This idea is breaking new trail at the college level. We believe that students learning critical thinking in humanities, math, and science can thrive just as well academically by applying quantitative and qualitative reasoning to the lessons of Alaskan history, culture, and the learning ways of a subsistence experience deeply rooted in their Native heritage. After all, math and science in the bush are the very same as that found in urban Washington, D.C. We believe economic and infrastructure disparities in rural Native communities stand the best chance of elimination by returning well educated, well trained sons and daughters ... who never lost sight of who they are during the process of becoming academically prepared ... back to their villages as leaders and educators.

Student-Centered Focus

Clearly, our state lawmakers want the same things we want: a systematic reduction of institutional barriers so that Alaskan students can easily and cost effectively transition into, through, and out of higher education. For example, students and parents alike have come to expect that the basic core courses taken at any one state campus should transfer to any other, regardless of the method of instruction used, such as the increasingly popular eLearning methods. We agree. This saves money, time, and eliminates a major source of student/parent frustration. Reducing the “hassle factor” would undoubtedly encourage increased enrollment, contribute to better retention, and enhance faster graduation. Additionally, our student-centered community focus needs to be reinforced by similarly progressive attitudes throughout UA itself regarding the system’s co-equal responsibility to provide high quality, timely, student personal service, world-class academic and financial advising, and a genuine inviting and pleasant overall student campus experience inside and outside the classroom. Students want choices and flexibility. They want expanded eLearning opportunities and custom course offerings that allow for family schedules commonly required by our “non-traditional” working students. To that end we are looking at more non-traditional classroom hours, supported by universal internet access and broadband upgrades. We are dialoging across the state with Alaska’s business communications leaders. Off the grid students desperately need access to high data rates that can enable the latest software applications, regardless of where they live in Alaska.

Accountability

When it comes to our role in providing for student’s success, a cursory look at the rate of change occurring around the nexus of leading edge communication, teaching and learning clearly demonstrate that we can’t rest on our laurels. The university has an obligation to maintain the best environment we can for student success, upgraded regularly at a rate commensurate with the high

tempo development of their commercial personal technology, and with the expected tempo of the business and scientific advances we are teaching them about in the classroom. Anything less is akin to the illusion of Michael Jackson's famous "moonwalking" ... backward progress disguised as forward motion.

"Why?" Indeed.

Alaska's communities told us clearly that their future is deeply invested in the entire education continuum, K-16. Every Alaskan school district, business, and community is a potential partner, beneficiary and contributor toward UA's comprehensive effort to meet state education and workforce development challenges. SDI, our university system institutional shift in strategic direction, is a comprehensive initiative to pursue much improved and measureable student outcomes at every level ... to create greater academic and economic value, and stimulate a greater state return. SDI is about UA adopting a philosophy of system-wide continuous improvement as an enduring cultural tenant. That is what a top line university system should be all about. We Are Alaska's University. We are all about UA graduates who not only succeed in their higher education aspirations, but also succeed in their life's calling. For we Alaskans will all assuredly depend on them someday.