

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA AT THE CROSS ROADS

(Prepared for the CSREES Review Team)

The Alaska Cooperative Extension Service is somewhat unique amongst its counterparts in the remainder of the United States. In 1930 the educational model which successfully brought science to the farm was established in Alaska to bring science to subsistence families in the last frontier. Alaska Extension educators have been successful in adapting the agriculture and home economics technology transfer model to a far reaching population with unique needs. Where there was no body of scientific information, agents drew anecdotal data from fishermen, herders, hunters, miners, and homesteaders to develop educational programs which addressed the problems and concerns of Alaskan families.

While many of the more advanced states were disseminating information from a vast store of science, the Alaska Extension Service was seeking ways to solve problems facing people in an evolving civilization. While the informal educational program in many states may have been supply driven, in Alaska it was demand driven.

Because Alaska Extension programs are developed around varied needs of its frontier as well as modern day urban clientele, Extension educators must be able to interact with scientists and practitioners from many fields and many areas of the circumpolar north. The most flexible of organizations will allow this required interdisciplinary and inter-regional approach.

The remoteness of Extension clientele presents problems not experienced in other states and are akin to those in developing countries. Citizens of a particular village may only have face to face contact with an agent once a year. Alaska has put to test distance learning through television, educational films and DVD's, the internet, and the ever essential local volunteer.

The Alaska Cooperative Extension Service has the advantage of not being encumbered by a stereotypical past. A quickly evolving society, natural disasters, and economic disruptions have required constant programmatic change. At the same time some programs must remain very basic.

Today's public and private universities are rediscovering the value of effective client centered outreach programs. Various disciplines within those universities see the need for their "extension service". The Land Grant University has the historical basis, the administrative model, and a corps of dedicated professionals to develop a university-wide outreach entity. The big question is: "Does it have the flexibility and the will?" The University of Alaska finds itself at the cross roads. One of those roads will lead to a deliberately designed university outreach organization which will renew an old and establish a new covenant with the citizens of this state.

Hollis D. Hall

Retired Extension Director

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