

Strength Through Knowledge

UNIVERSITY of ALASKA

Many Traditions One Alaska

2026 Alaska Native Success Initiative Annual Report



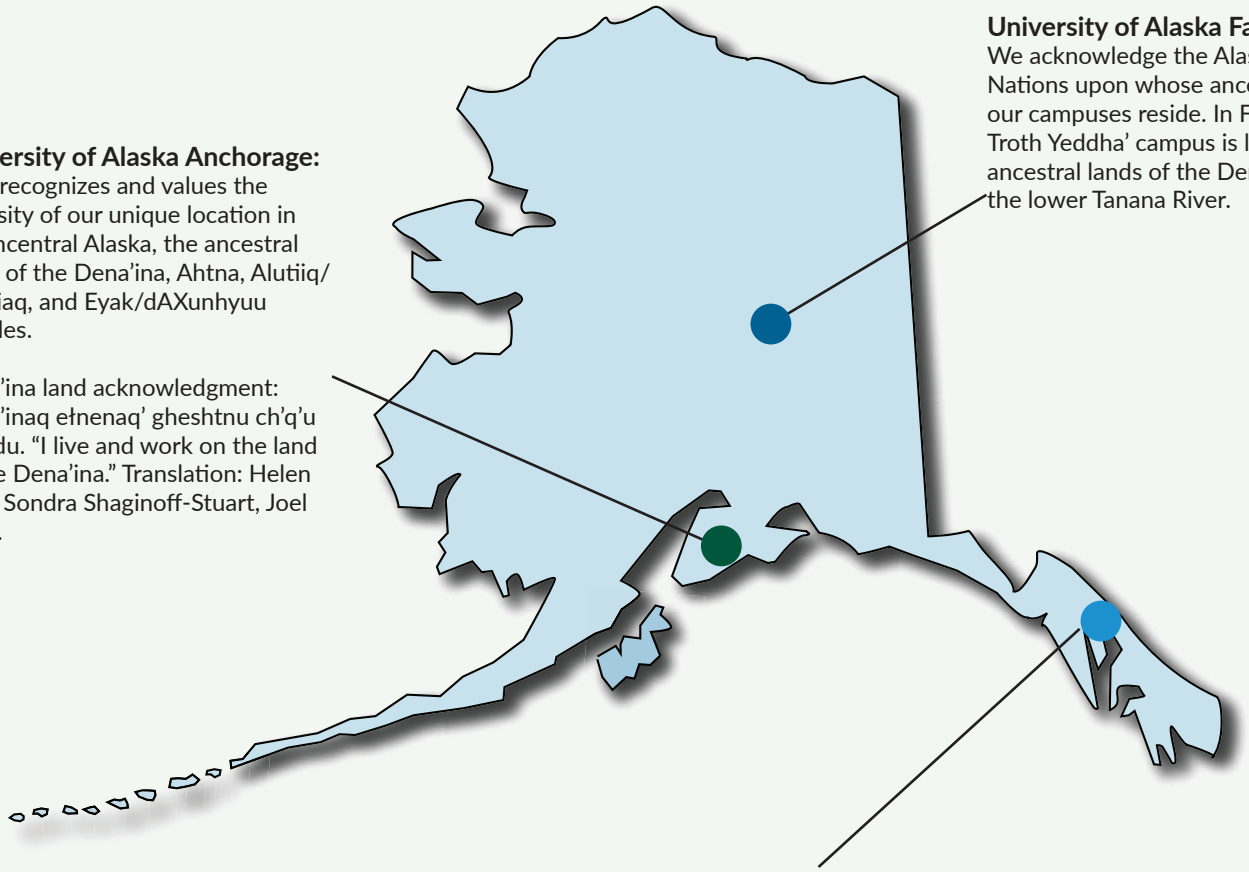
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Land Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the Indigenous Peoples of the land on which we work and live. We honor Alaska Native Peoples.

University of Alaska Anchorage:
UAA recognizes and values the diversity of our unique location in Southcentral Alaska, the ancestral lands of the Dena'ina, Ahtna, Alutiiq/Sugpiaq, and Eyak/dAXunhyuu Peoples.

Dena'ina land acknowledgment: Dena'inaq ełnenaq' gheshtnu ch'q'u yeshdu. "I live and work on the land of the Dena'ina." Translation: Helen Dick, Sondra Shaginoff-Stuart, Joel Isaak.



University of Alaska Fairbanks:
We acknowledge the Alaska Native Nations upon whose ancestral lands our campuses reside. In Fairbanks, our Troth Yeddha' campus is located on the ancestral lands of the Dena people of the lower Tanana River.

University of Alaska Southeast:
Our campuses reside on the unceded territories of the Áak'w Kwáan, Taant'á Kwáan, and Sheet'ká Kwáan on Lingít Aaní, also known as Juneau, Ketchikan, and Sitka, Alaska, adjacent to the ancestral home of the Xaadas and Ts'msyen peoples.

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Letter from the President



Dear AFN Delegates and Attendees,

I write to you for the first time as President of the University of Alaska, with a deep sense of gratitude and responsibility. I return to UA with 13 years of prior experience with our university system, and at a meaningful moment: the closing year of our first five-year Alaska Native Success Initiative strategic plan, adopted by the Board of Regents in 2021. It is a full circle from my time as General Counsel, when the original motion creating ANSI passed. This report records what that plan set in motion and looks toward what comes next.

When the Board of Regents directed the university, in November 2020, to confront the barriers facing Alaska Native and Indigenous students, faculty, and staff, it asked something of all of us: that we recognize Alaska Native success not as a program on the margins of university life, but as central to the mission of Alaska's only public university system. Today, that commitment is visible all across our campuses.

This year's report honors those roots. We look back with gratitude to the regents, Sheri Buretta and Gloria O'Neill among them, who carried Alaska Native success onto the Board's agenda, and to President Emeritus Pat Pitney, whose five years of steady, values-driven leadership turned a Board resolution into a systemwide strategic plan and then into the results that follow in these pages. I intend to keep faith with those commitments.

I also want to be candid about what lies ahead. Closing a plan is not the same as finishing the work. Our data show real progress in Indigenous student enrollment, retention, and graduation, and real gaps that remain. The task now is to build the next chapter of ANSI on what we have learned, reaching further into faculty and staff success, into rural and remote communities, and into the everyday experience of belonging on our campuses.

The theme of this report, Strength Through Knowledge, reflects how I hope to lead. Alaska Native knowledge systems, languages, and traditions are not something the university adds on to its mission; they are a source of strength for the entire institution and a foundation for educating every student who comes through our doors.

Thank you for your continued partnership. I look forward to being accountable, as an institution and as myself, as we envision ANSI's next five years.

Sincerely,

Matt Cooper
President, University of Alaska

Alaska Native Success Initiative Leadership



Dr. Michele Yatchmeneff
UAA Alaska Native Science & Engineering Program Chief Operating Officer
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An accomplished scholar and advocate, Michele leads efforts to expand Indigenous preparation, enrollment, retention, and visibility. As the ANSEP Chief Operating Officer, she supports more than 2,000 students each year in kindergarten through the doctoral program to reach their career goals. This coming March will mark her 20th year of work and commitment to UAA.



Dr. Jessica Black
UAF Associate Vice Chancellor for Rural, Community, and Native Education
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At UAF, Jessica champions rural and Indigenous education across Alaska. She works with community campuses and academic units to advance programs that meet the needs of Alaska Native students where they live, while also shaping policy at the statewide level.



Jacqueline Tagaban
UAS Associate Vice Chancellor for Alaska Native Programs & Director, PITAAS
jctagaban@alaska.edu | 907-796-6058

Jacqueline works closely with programs at UAS that support and perpetuate the values and traditions of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian peoples of this land. As the PITAAS director, she supports Alaska Native students working on degrees in Education.



Kristel Komakhuk
UA Senior Director of Alaska Native Success & Partnerships
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Kristel leads ANSI across the system. She works directly with campuses, communities, and leadership to embed Indigenous knowledge and equity into every aspect of university life, ensuring ANSI remains both practical and people-centered.



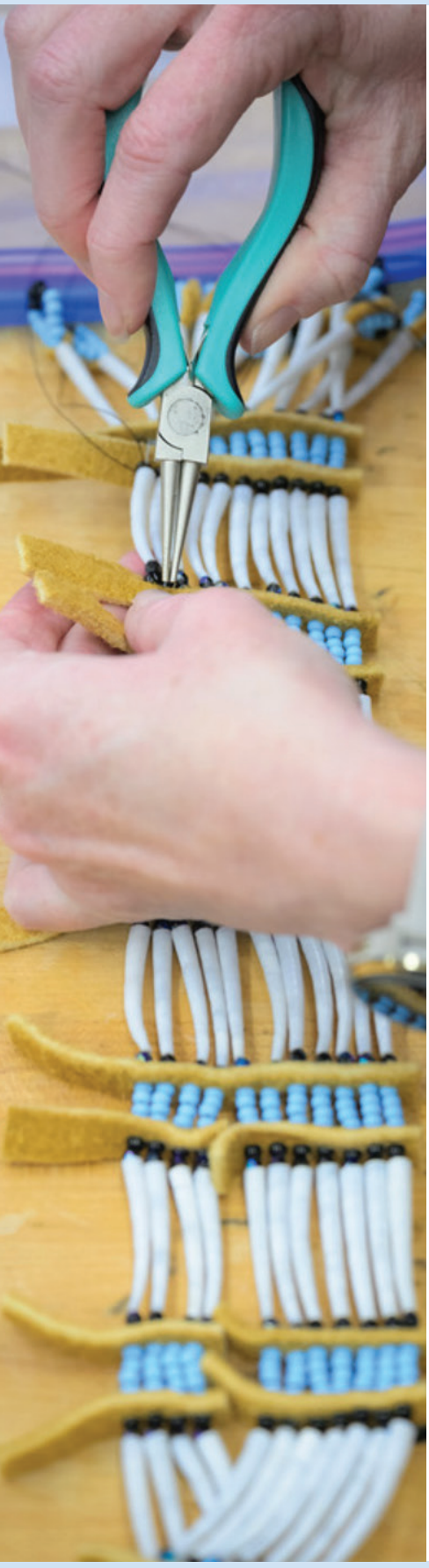
Dr. Brian Smentkowski
Vice President & Chief Academic Officer, University of Alaska
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Brian provides systemwide academic leadership for ANSI, aligning its goals with UA's strategic vision.



Nate Bauer
Strategic Initiatives Coordinator, Office of the President
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Nate coordinates ANSI and the Arctic Leadership Initiative from the President's Office, working closely with campus leads and partners. His role is to build alignment, amplify voices, and ensure ANSI's values and successes are visible across the UA system.



ANSI Highlights 2026

Since 2022, ANSI has committed to using art, signage, and other visible media to strengthen a sense of place across the University of Alaska system. This commitment began with campuses surveying priorities for Indigenous place, space, and facility naming, laying the groundwork for a more visible institutional presence.

In 2023, the initiative reached a wider audience with the debut of the systemwide "Empower Alaska" marketing campaign at AFN. Momentum continued in 2024 as campaign visibility expanded alongside the naming of UAS's Aak'w Ta Hít and further progress on the Troth Yeddha' Indigenous Studies Center. By 2025, that visible investment was sustained through the Troth Yeddha' Indigenous Studies Center and the Cyril George Indigenous Knowledge Center, with $1.775 million raised to date against UA's $10 million matching pledge.

ANSI has kept its commitment to transparency and accountability by publishing annual reports since the initiative's founding, documenting its progress each year for the university and the broader Alaska community. This 2026 report continues that tradition, closing out the first five-year strategic plan while charting the course for what comes next.

Alongside this public reporting, ANSI has worked steadily to promote efforts systemwide, sharing successes across the university and with the communities UA serves. That work took shape in 2022 with early university-level wins in facilities planning and language access, and it has widened each year since, from campus signage and naming to the listening sessions held at all three universities in fall 2025.

Across the past five years, the pattern is consistent. Visibility, reporting, and shared practice have moved Alaska Native success from a set of campus efforts into a standing systemwide commitment, one that now shapes how UA plans facilities, communicates about itself, and measures its own progress.

Senior leadership works to embed the initiative within UA's broader academic strategy. ANSI's goals are built directly into the university's Systemwide Attainment Framework, the structure that UA uses to track progress toward its educational attainment goals for the state.

University of Alaska Anchorage:

Many UAA campuses, colleges, and schools have developed their own ANSI strategic plans and teams, because systemic change requires all of us.

Since ANSI launched in fall 2022, UAA's Indigenous student headcount has increased 14% as of fall 2025, with growth across campuses including a 98% increase at Matanuska-Susitna College and 14% at the Anchorage/Chanshtnu Campus, UAA's largest. Every college and school also saw Indigenous student increases, among them a 190% increase at the School of Education and 50% at the College of Health.

The Chanshtnu Council, a tri-chaired body of faculty, staff, and student leaders, guides this work with the vision that UAA continually prioritizes Alaska Native success through the representation of Indigenous knowledge throughout the learning community.

In fall 2025, the Indigenous and Rural Student Center welcomed two staff members: Phillip Aarnaquq Charette, associate director of community and belonging, who oversees the center, and Kierann Panigruaq Bailey, engagement and belonging coordinator. Both have long histories with the University of Alaska and working with Alaska Native, Native American, rural students, and students from all walks of life.

The Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program (ANSEP) Acceleration Academy enrolls high school students full-time at University of Alaska campuses in Anchorage, Bethel, Matanuska-Susitna, Kotzebue, and Nome to earn university credit while finishing high school. The Summer Acceleration Academy hosts students from across Alaska for a residential five-week session in Anchorage. In 2026, 178 full-time and 53 summer students took part, and 40 spring graduates earned 2,671 college credits, a 67-credit average that saves families more than $75,000 and can carry a student from ninth grade to a bachelor's degree in as few as five years.

The Cama-i Room has experienced significant growth in recent years under the leadership of Dawn Randazzo, the Alaska Native, Indigenous & Rural Outreach Program (ANIROP) Coordinator. The Cama-i Room is a social gathering and study space open to all students, offering culturally focused activities and fostering a sense of "home away from home." The Cama-i Room hosted new activities, including a traditional healing club, traditional art nights, and wellness weekends.





University of Alaska Fairbanks:

UAF celebrates a year of advancement for the Alaska Native Success Initiative alongside steady support for the programs students rely on, including the Rural Alaska Honors Institute and Rural Student Services on the Troth Yeddha' campus.

On October 3, 2025, UAF hosted its own ANSI listening session in the Rural Student Services (RSS) gathering space, well attended by students, faculty, and staff, and joined by university leadership. The listening session was an opportunity for the voicing of concerns and the sharing of positive experiences that support students, faculty, and staff. Participants raised retention, continuity of support, communication, and the day-to-day conditions that shape student success, including for rural and distance learners. Two themes stood out: spaces like RSS are central to student confidence and persistence, and students want practical ways to contribute ideas and stay engaged with ANSI going forward.

The UAF Tribal Governance program was approved to expand to a bachelor's degree, having previously offered occupational endorsements, certificates, and associate degrees. Many students from rural Alaska and beyond seek out this program, and the expansion widens a proven path to completion.

The USDA NIFA proposal "Drumbeats: Alaska Food Systems and Cultivators Collaborative" has also been recommended for funding, strengthening UAF's capacity for education, applied research, and community development as an Alaska Native-serving institution.

The Troth Yeddha' Indigenous Studies Center remains UAF's top fundraising priority, planned as an academic and research beacon for students, faculty, and researchers across disciplines. Alaska serves as an important place for dynamic research and collaboration around the climate, geopolitics, and the co-production of knowledge.

The Rural Alaska Honors Institute had another strong summer, graduating 38 students from 30 Alaska communities who earned a combined 362 credits. Since 1983, RAHI has reached nearly 2,000 students, who've attended more than 88 different colleges worldwide. Of those alumni, 42% are Alaska Native, and all earned a degree.

University of Alaska Southeast:

On the homelands of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian peoples, the University of Alaska Southeast serves the coastal communities, cultures, and economies of Alaska. In 2022, the UAS ANSI Action Team set three priorities: attract, retain, and graduate more Alaska Native students; attract and retain more Alaska Native staff and faculty; and support institutional change through vision, leadership, and measured growth. Four years of results follow.

Alaska Native student enrollment rose from 21% of the UAS population in fall 2022 to 25% in fall 2026. Alaska Native staff grew from 8.4% to 9.7% of overall staff, and Alaska Native faculty from 7.4% to 13.6%. UAS identified the barriers that shape those numbers, among them college access and affordability, sense of belonging on campus, misalignment between university and subsistence schedules, and coursework that does not reflect the history Alaska Native students know. Its response has been structural. The Native and Rural Student Center gives students a physical home on campus; peer-led clubs, including Wooch.een, beading, sewing, and Native Youth Olympics, meet there. An Alaska Native Student Retention Specialist advises students directly, and a formal mentoring process pairing UAS Native graduates with current students begins this fall. PITAAS expanded eligibility in Fall 2026 to fund incoming freshmen and sophomores.

In May 2026, UAS signed a Memorandum of Agreement with the Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska to begin developing a School of Indigenous Studies together, adding to existing agreements with Sealaska Heritage Institute and Goldbelt Heritage Foundation.









ANSI Roots

We cannot consider where the Alaska Native Success Initiative is going without first honoring where it began. ANSI's first five-year strategic plan is now complete.

A Board That Chose to Lead
On November 6, 2020, the University of Alaska Board of Regents adopted a motion making the understanding of racial justice issues a formal board priority, directing the president to collect data, study university climate and programming, and identify the barriers facing Alaska Native and Indigenous students, faculty, and staff. That motion became the founding charter of everything ANSI has grown into: the 2021 baseline report, the five-year strategic plan approved that November, and the systemwide action teams, centers, and reporting that followed. Sheri Buretta chaired the Board through ANSI's founding years, and guided the governance that made a system-level commitment possible. Gloria O'Neill, a regent from 2013 to 2021, brought decades of Alaska Native organizational leadership and was among the earliest voices insisting this work belonged at the center of university priorities.

A President Who Carried It Through
President Emeritus Pat Pitney led UA through ANSI's first plan. Under her leadership, UA established the College of Indigenous Studies at UAF, deepened the Cyril George Indigenous Knowledge Center at UAS, expanded Indigenous programming at UAA, and launched the Arctic Leadership Initiative, which connects students directly with Indigenous governance and Arctic policy leaders. Under her, ANSI became the first UA initiative dedicated specifically to Alaska Native success.

Built Into How UA Works
ANSI is not a standalone project. It runs through a Senior Director of Alaska Native Success and is embedded in the President's Office and Academic Affairs, ensuring the work continues through leadership transitions.

Listening as the Path Forward
In fall 2025, ANSI held listening sessions at UAA, UAF, and UAS. Common themes emerged at every campus: early and sustained advising; continuity in staffing and communication; the role of place, language, and visibility; and the value of trust and follow-through. Those themes are shaping the next strategic plan directly.

Trajectory Toward Progress
As one of the first steps in the next chapter, UA is hosting ANCSA 101, a foundational training on the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act presented by the ANCSA Regional Association and open to all UA faculty, staff, and students. UAA, UAF, and UAS are finalizing their strategic plans that will guide us into the next five years.

"When we invest in Alaska Native student success, we are building the workforce, leadership, and knowledge base Alaska itself will depend on. This is rooted in tradition and united in purpose, and it is among the most consequential things this university does for the state." - Brian Smentkowski

Community Highlights

Jessica Ross, UAA Assistant Professor



Jessica Ross is an Assistant Professor in the Departments of Human Services and Alaska Native Studies. In 2023, she established the Nughejagh Project, named for the Dena'ina word meaning "to become whole." The project provides culturally responsive and trauma-informed training to health care professionals and caregivers. In recognition of her work, Jessica received the K. Patricia Cross Future Leaders Award this past year, which honors graduate students who demonstrate exceptional promise as future leaders in higher education. Jessica proudly serves her Native Village of Eklutna as Vice President. She is also completing her doctorate in Indigenous Studies at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, where her research focuses on integrating traditional Indigenous healing practices into health care systems.

Gabrielle Russell, UAF, Student Services Manager (retired)



Gabrielle Russell retired from UAF this year after nearly 30 years, most recently as Indigenous student services manager in the College of Indigenous Studies, where she provided direction and oversight for Rural Student Services, the Rural Alaska Honors Institute, and the Eileen Panigeo MacLean House. She joined RSS as a comprehensive student advisor in August 2005 after serving as a UAF admissions counselor, and she applied her cross-cultural counseling background and knowledge of student development theory to advising first-year, first-generation, continuing, and nontraditional students from Alaska Native and rural communities. Known to nearly everyone as "Gabby," she brought a tireless work ethic and an evident love of the work to RSS.

JoMarie Alba, UAS, Alaska Native Student Retention Specialist and Academic Life Coach



JoMarie Alba provides academic life coaching at UAS through a relational, student-led framework, with coach training aligned to International Coaching Federation standards. In her sessions she asks open-ended questions and lets students raise whatever is on their minds, so they can build their own plans and stay connected through proactive accountability. Her research, using reflexive thematic analysis to evaluate the coaching pilot, focused on distance, rural, and Alaska Native student persistence, and it found that academic roadblocks are rarely about capability. Students more often contend with internal pressures like perfectionism and high personal standards, alongside external challenges like navigating disjointed digital systems or balancing school with family responsibilities. Now in its third year, the program has reached 39 students, from certificate programs through graduate degrees and across every discipline. The first cohort persisted at 75%, and every cohort since has persisted at 100%.

UAS Indigenous Gathering Space & Student Support

Founded in 1996, the Native and Rural Student Center (NRSC) marks 30 years of service to the University of Alaska Southeast community. This academic year, the center formally adopted a Tlingit phrase to articulate what it is for: “Áa a̲x toowú sigóowu yé.” (The place where I’m happy.)

Because UAS has no centralized student union, the NRSC functions as the campus gathering place, where students build community, plan events, and find professional development. Support there is deliberately low-barrier: an art station, a snack station, a tea bar, and a refrigerator stocked with sandwich fixings that quietly addresses student food insecurity. Volunteer tutors are embedded directly in that comfortable environment, which lowers the barrier to academic help for students who might otherwise hesitate to ask. Student leaders are hired and trained through a relationship-centered framework: listen to understand, speak to be understood, and connect deeply with the student body and affiliated clubs.

Kolene James serves as Multicultural Services Manager at UAS and manages the NRSC. She is celebrating 26 years of advocating for systemic change alongside student leaders, faculty, staff, and community organizations. Healing and wellness are central to her work; she has served as a Senior Fellow with the National Compadre Network of Racial Healing Practitioners since 2022, and she remains committed to holding space for healing check-ins and dialogue on campus and across the community.

Kolene’s Lingít name is DaxKilatch. She is Gaanax.ádi of the Taant’á Kwáan, and her house is Yuwulilashi Hít (Drifted Ashore House). She is also Tsimshian, Ghanhada, from the Half Woman Half Seamonster House. Her father is Francis, and her mother was Norma Jean of Metlakatla. Her father’s people are Tsimshian, Kaagwaantaan, English, and Irish, and her grandfather’s people are Haida, Tsimshian, Irish, Neix.ádi, and Teikweidi. Kolene’s pronouns are she/they. She is married to Lyle, and together they have two sons, a daughter, and two grandchildren.



UAA Indigenous and Rural Student Center



The Indigenous & Rural Student Center (IRSC) is advancing community and retention through Native Empowerment & Transition (NET) and the Student Transition & Engagement Program (STEP). Both programs are designed to strengthen persistence, first-to-second-year retention, and degree completion by connecting Indigenous students with culturally responsive transition support, campus resources, and a community of peers and staff. NET provides an intensive cohort experience for up to 20 students, while STEP extends college-readiness and transition support to students who are not placed in the NET cohort, helping ensure that students remain connected to IRSC support regardless of program placement. The NET academic-year cohort is now underway. Students began with a three-day pre-semester orientation focused on college transition, relationship-building, belonging, cultural identity, and connection to campus support. Throughout the semester, two undergraduate peer mentors lead weekly small-group sessions, providing students with consistent peer relationships and a regular space to build community, reflect on cultural and personal strengths, ask for help, and navigate college. Four full-cohort Elder gatherings are integrated into the semester to complement the peer-mentor structure by creating opportunities for cultural connection, reflection, and learning across the cohort. Early assessment from the Fall 2026 orientation shows encouraging movement in students' sense of connection and readiness. NET's assessment framework will examine belonging, help-seeking, academic progress, fall-to-spring persistence, fall-to-fall retention, and eventual degree completion to determine whether the relationships established through orientation, mentorship, Elder engagement, and continued IRSC support translate into sustained student success.

UAF Troth Yeddha' Indigenous Studies Center



The Troth Yeddha' Indigenous Studies Center will be the future home of the UAF College of Indigenous Studies, the first such college in America within a public system of higher education. The creation of this college and the construction of the UAF Indigenous Studies Center are a major step forward, and advances the position of Indigenous education within academia at large. Indigenous values have shaped the design of the Troth Yeddha' Indigenous Studies Center, so the center is more than a building project; it is central to UAF's R1 research ambitions and the ongoing evolution of Indigenous studies nationally. The center will also be a central meeting place for the Interior for visitors, residents and agencies to share and learn about Alaska's Indigenous histories, culture, and traditions. Fundraising continues in earnest: In February 2025, the UA Board of Regents approved a match challenge to incentivize giving to the Indigenous Studies Center capital project. This 1:1 match up to $10 million applies to funds raised after December 1, 2024. This commitment by the regents is critical to the success of the project's completion and legacy, making it a place for all to gather, to study, to research and to collaborate. Essential programs and services such as Rural Student Services (RSS), Rural Alaska Honors Institute (RAHI), and Indigenous academic programs will be housed within the Indigenous Studies Center as well as other programs that support Alaska Native degree completion, holistic support and overall student success.

Where We Are Now (Data & Metrics)

The following data sets illustrate the most recent reports of Indigenous students, faculty, and staff populations. These provide UA with accountability and historical baselines to measure progress.

Students of Indigenous Heritage*

Measure	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25	FY26
Increase Indigenous student # as a % of total					
University of Alaska Anchorage	11.9%	11.3%	11.0%	13.0%	12.9%
University of Alaska Fairbanks	20.9%	20.3%	20.2%	19.5%	20.5%
University of Alaska Southeast	22.8%	21.0%	22.6%	23.6%	25.5%
University of Alaska System Total	16.2%	15.6%	15.3%	16.6%	16.9%

Graduate Students of Indigenous Heritage*

Measure	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25	FY26
Increase Indigenous graduate level students as a % of total					
University of Alaska Anchorage	11.4%	9.0%	9.7%	11.9%	13.8%
University of Alaska Fairbanks	10.7%	11.3%	13.1%	14.4%	13.4%
University of Alaska Southeast	12.0%	12.6%	14.2%	12.8%	9.3%
University of Alaska System Total	10.9%	10.7%	12.3%	13.4%	12.9%

6-Year Graduation Rate (Any Award) for All Indigenous Undergraduate Degree-/Certificate-Seeking First-time Freshmen*

Measure	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25	FY26
Undergraduate Degree-Seeking Indigenous First-time, Full-time Freshman Six-year Graduation Rates					
University of Alaska Anchorage	15.4%	16.5%	17.0%	21.3%	26.8%
University of Alaska Fairbanks	26.9%	23.2%	25.0%	18.9%	22.5%
University of Alaska Southeast	11.1%	32.4%	20.9%	32.0%	21.2%
University of Alaska System Total	21.1%	21.9%	21.0%	22.8%	27.3%

University level graduation rates represent whether or not a student graduated from the same university they initially entered, while UA System level graduation rates represent whether or not a student graduated from any university in the UA System.

Minority Serving Institution Status

UAF and UAS both are designated as Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions and as Native American-Serving Non-tribal Institutions.

Faculty of Indigenous Heritage*

Measure	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25	FY26
% of Indigenous faculty					
University of Alaska Anchorage	6.1%	6.2%	6.9%	6.8%	6.7%
University of Alaska Fairbanks	5.8%	6.3%	7.4%	8.0%	8.0%
University of Alaska Southeast	7.4%	8.4%	10.6%	11.6%	13.6%
University of Alaska System Total	6.1%	6.5%	7.5%	7.8%	7.9%

Staff of Indigenous Heritage*

Measure	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25	FY26
% of Indigenous staff					
University of Alaska Anchorage	7.7%	9.7%	9.5%	8.1%	7.4%
University of Alaska Fairbanks	9.5%	9.0%	9.1%	9.5%	9.1%
University of Alaska Southeast	8.4%	10.7%	8.8%	10.3%	9.7%
UA System Office | Enterprise Entities	6.1%	8.6%	8.1%	8.0%	5.9%
University of Alaska System Total	8.5%	9.3%	9.2%	8.9%	8.3%

*Those who self-identify as having at least some Indigenous heritage.




Alaska Native Success Initiative
alaska.edu/ansi