



2024 State of the University Address

March 11, 2024 | President Pat Pitney

Anchorage Chamber of Commerce

Anchorage Chamber - thank you so much for hosting us today and for the opportunity to present the State of the University of Alaska.

I want to acknowledge that across the state, our universities reside on the ancestral homelands of Alaska's many and diverse Indigenous nations, who have been stewards of this land since time immemorial.

I'd like to recognize Regents, Foundation Directors, and local elected officials and leaders here today. Thank you for your support.

I also want to recognize the faculty and staff across our system for their commitment to our mission and dedication to students. Many of the great stories I'll share today are the results of your hard work. I'm very grateful for all you do. Thank you.

Whether you realize it or not, all of you here today and watching online are our partners. You live here. You work here. You want the best for your community. In doing so, you're investing in future generations of Alaskans. We all want a prosperous and vibrant state. And your support – directly and indirectly – helps us empower Alaska. Thank you.

Before I get too far, I would be remiss if I didn't mention that our University system and state lost a legend and statesman last year. [Vic Fischer](#) was the last surviving delegate to Alaska's Constitutional Convention, and the founding director of ISER, the Institute of Social and Economic Research here at UAA.

Vic built a strong and lasting community of scholars, and ISER continues his legacy today—my sincerest condolences to his wife Jane, his family, and friends.

Leading Alaska's public university system is a true honor and privilege. Our three universities and their 13 associated community campuses are an integral part of Alaska and the communities in which they reside.

Each university provides a valuable yet distinct student experience; every campus is critical to its home community, supporting the local economy and workforce needs.

- UAA is our comprehensive university and Alaska's largest workforce provider, especially in healthcare.
- UAF is Alaska's research university and a global leader in Arctic research.
- And UAS, our experiential learning university in a remarkable location, ranked one of the most beautiful campuses in the country. UAS has a growing emphasis on undergraduate ocean science, mariculture, and maritime workforce.



Together, our universities provide the vast majority of Alaska's post-secondary education. Our academic programs range from short-term workforce development to Ph.D. programs recognized as best in class globally.

Across the system, UA's universities and community campuses provide:

- 90% of Community College and VoTech education in Alaska,
- 95% of undergraduate education such as accounting, finance, biology, engineering and fisheries,
- 98% of graduate education, and
- 99% of academic R&D in the state.

The breadth and depth of our programs and research are essential to meet our state's broad economic needs.

When it comes to public higher education in Alaska, & our ability to reach and meet people where they are....

.....UA is *it*.

The Board of Regents has adopted the "[Roadmap to Empower Alaska](#)," a path for the system's future. Its pillars are: quality reputation, fiscal responsibility, and state and Arctic leadership.

It is a testament to the Regents' investment in the success of our System, and the significant role UA will continue to play in Alaska's future. I'm excited to show continued progress on that plan in the coming months and years.

The State of the University

I'm very pleased to share: the state of the University of Alaska is strong.

UA Empowers Alaska, and our progress, people, and programs are key to Alaska's Workforce Pipeline.

[National statistics](#) show that two-thirds of graduates settle in the same state as their alma mater. However, in Alaska, we do better: The State's Department of Labor statistics show that nearly [9 in 10 graduates from](#) our universities work here in Alaska within a year after graduation.

Comparatively, only 25% of students who go to college out of state return and stay in Alaska long-term.



That means investing in and taking advantage of UA is the single best thing we can do to build a skilled workforce in Alaska — from vocational and industry certificates to baccalaureate and graduate degrees.

Celebrating Progress: The Three-Legged Stool of Fiscal Stability

The state of UA is strong mainly because of our improving fiscal environment, or what I like to call our “three-legged stool.” The first leg is state funding. [The fiscal stability we’ve seen from the state in recent years has paid significant dividends](#). I’m grateful to the governor and legislature for that. Special thanks to Representative Will Stapp and Senator Lyman Hoffman for their collaboration with us as chairmen of our finance subcommittees.

The second leg of the stool is enrollment - and thanks to the stability from the state, our enrollment is now growing, bucking national trends.

[Last Spring](#) marked the first year-over-year enrollment increase since 2011; this Spring Semester, student headcount is up another 4%.

Nationally, in Fall, first-time freshmen enrollments were down 3.6%. But UA’s number of first-time freshmen increased by 16% over the previous year. That’s meaningful progress — and **momentum worth celebrating**.

As enrollment has grown, we’ve been able to keep tuition low while increasing and expanding financial aid offerings. Both the average debt of UA graduates and the percentage of graduates with debt are below national and regional averages. And at the same time, average post-graduation wages for our students are higher.

The UA Teacher Internship Scholarship is a fantastic example of those efforts in action. It covers tuition, fees, and a stipend for applicants to complete their student teaching. 65 students were awarded the scholarship last year.

We know Alaska needs teachers. The programs at our three Universities allow future educators to gain their credentials virtually anywhere they live. And if one program isn’t offered at, say, UAA, it’s offered at UAF or UAS and available in that location. teachalaska.org takes you to all the avenues available for you to become a teacher - no matter where you live.

And the final leg of that stool is research, and our progress there is also substantial. UA received [\\$235 million in research revenue last year](#) as a system - over \$60 million more than 5 years ago. UAF is our leader in research dollars, with over \$200 million received last fiscal year.

UAF is #1 in the nation for Arctic Research, and we’re aiming to graduate more Ph. Ds to achieve Tier 1 Research Status there. Achieving that will bring more research, talent, and prestige to Alaska.



And if you haven't heard by now, UAA was just awarded a \$46 million, 10-year grant from the US Department of Homeland Security to lead a research consortium on Arctic Security. Those funds will help train the next generation of Arctic experts through workforce initiatives and research projects. It's a perfect fit for the only public university system in the country situated near the Arctic.

At UAS, faculty and students have been doing ground-breaking research on whale populations, their health, habits, and impact on Alaska. One of their [proposed projects](#) would monitor humpback whales in Juneau - one of the most valuable marine resources and a key driving attraction for global tourism and visitors.

Most of these are competitive federal dollars - if we didn't get them, they'd be going to other universities and states. Our world-class faculty and programs are clearly recognized as experts nationally and globally.

External, competitively funded research is relevant and important for Alaska. It includes remote sensing work in coastal regions to assess sea ice, and its impact on coastal communities.

And it also includes our decades-long work with the National Institutes of Health (NIH) on strategies to reduce suicides in rural communities. The key practices from that research are now being applied to suicide prevention efforts on military bases in Alaska. The breadth of the work is impressive, and deeply meaningful.

Celebrating Programs and People

Clearly, there's a lot to celebrate this year. The fiscal stability we've achieved is paying dividends, and allows us to be future-focused.

Some highlights: This year, the [UA Scholars](#) program will celebrate its 25th anniversary. And even more exciting: the number of students using the Alaska Performance Scholarship, or APS, [increased 50%](#) over last year, the first increase in use since 2016. Improving access to APS is one of our legislative priorities.

APS recipients are two times more likely to graduate with a bachelor's degree, and 95% of APS recipients remain Alaska residents two years after graduation — excellent outcomes we want to see more of.

The Alaska Performance Scholarship makes post-secondary education accessible for nearly every Alaska high school student. I'm very grateful to the Legislature and Governor for the renewed stability of that program.



UNIVERSITY
of ALASKA
Many Traditions One Alaska

[Over the last 10 years](#), we've awarded around 43,000 degrees and certificates – 70 percent of which qualify grads for Alaska's highest-demand employment fields. Again, 90% of UA grads work here in Alaska within a year after graduation.

Broad program offerings and degree pathways give students robust opportunities for success in college and in Alaska's workforce.

[Take UAA's School of Social Work](#). Last spring, they received grants from multiple partners to help educate future K-12 counselors for the Anchorage School District. The grant will allow us to leverage our current programs and ensure students get the specialized mental health training they need to walk right into jobs after graduating.

The [UAS' Maritime Education Center](#) provides hands-on training for shipbuilding and repair. Faculty and staff work with the Alaska Marine Highway System and U.S. Coast Guard to tailor courses to industry needs, and place students in internships that lead to high-paying maritime careers.

And speaking of people - ours are the tip of the spear when it comes to building community relationships. Faculty and staff are truly making a difference.

There's [Stasia Straley](#), an accounting professor at UAA's College of Business and Public Policy. She's gone above and beyond - removing barriers to help students succeed, and even helping secure jobs for them once they graduate. Earlier this year, she was recognized by Junior Achievement as volunteer of the year. She's not just teaching - she's helping future generations achieve financial literacy that will benefit them for a lifetime.

Dr. Courtney Carothers is another shining example. Courtney is a professor at UAF's College of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences and helped develop [Tamamta](#), a graduate program that bridges Indigenous and Western knowledge.

Courtney has devoted her career to working with coastal communities to improve the success of fishing and fisheries in rural Alaska. In October, she received the [Denali Award from the Alaska Federation of Natives](#), recognizing her strong commitment, dedication, and service to Indigenous and Rural Alaskans through her fisheries work. We're incredibly proud of her, Stasia, and all of the efforts our faculty and staff are making across the system.

UA meets Alaskans wherever they are on their educational journey, propelling them to achieve their desired success. Thanks to the partnerships and relationships with businesses and industries statewide, we can tailor our programs to meet your unique needs.

A quick show of hands: How many of you are, were, or know.... a student, staff, or faculty member at any of our three universities, UAA, UAF, or UAS?

Look around. That's a fair number of hands.



If you remember nothing else from my remarks today, I want you to remember that. We are a system that can meet the unique needs of Alaska's communities. We're able to do so because we meet people where they are.

Meeting Alaskans Wherever They Are

Our influence starts early. [Dual enrollment and middle college opportunities](#) allow high school students to jump-start their college education or future careers. We have onsite middle colleges in Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Mat-Su. And we have opportunities for on-site vocational dual credits.

An interesting one is in Valdez at Prince William Sound Community College, which houses the Middle College for Rural Alaska. They bring students in from rural villages and give them an intensive semester in millwright and marine tech. Most recently, across the system, 3,600 high school students were dually enrolled in university courses, an increase of 20% over 2 years ago.

Dual credit means high school students can graduate with the equivalent of an associate's degree. They'll be well on their way to a bachelor's, making college more affordable, and career possibilities on the horizon.

The [Alaska Advantage](#) program makes those opportunities available online across the state. Virtually everyone, including homeschoolers, can enroll.

We're thrilled to have partnerships with K12 districts across the state. The Anchorage School District career academies are another example. They set students up for future success early in their lives and give them a wide array of options.

The partnerships extend throughout our programs - from vocational certificates to Ph.D.s. It's everything from designing certificate programs with industry input through doctoral program partnerships with other universities. Both the formal and informal relationships set students up for success to meet Alaska's workforce needs.

One example is **Kevin Kornack**. His journey from a carpenter to a key player at GHEMM Company in Fairbanks exemplifies the transformative power of education and experience. After a life-altering injury, Kevin embraced the online Construction Management Associates program at UAF's Community and Technical College. The blend of firsthand construction & carpentry experience with formal education made him an ideal candidate for GHEMM.

Kevin is able to apply the concepts he learns in the classroom directly to his work in real-time. The result is a true win-win-win.



Dylan Barndt is another success story. He graduated from Mat-Su Career and Technical High School in 2022 and immediately started courses toward a Process Technology Associate's Degree at UAA's Kenai Peninsula College. Both his father and uncle earned Process Tech degrees from KPC before securing employment on the North Slope. Last summer, Dylan secured an internship with Hilcorp that became a full-time role with one of their facility operators.

Like the construction management program, Process Tech provides flexible training through online courses. Dylan is on track to graduate this May and has already secured a coveted role on the North Slope.

One more: **Bryan Sauer** got his associate, BBA, and MBA from UAF. During his Master's program, he was a Teacher Assistant for the Student Investment Fund, a \$2.2 million, student-managed investment portfolio that helps fund student scholarships. He graduated in 2022 and credits his UA experience and connections as critical to helping him secure his job as a credit analyst at Northrim Bank.

Those stories exemplify that our universities provide each Alaska community with the highest impact strategy to attract and retain a quality workforce. Our highly capable graduates stay here, work here, live here, and contribute to our communities.

And that's not to say those who leave aren't doing excellent work—they are. Let's take [Lindsey Bohnert](#) as an example. Lindsey got her B.S. in electrical engineering from UAA, and now works for Blue Origin on NASA's Artemis 5 moon landing mission. She credits UA's undergraduate courses on radio frequency and her participation with the UAA Robotics Club with helping her land internships and jobs in the highest echelons of space exploration.

Sometimes, our graduates even return to UA and invest in educating the next generation of Alaskans.

Two of those I want to mention are [Minnie Naylor](#) and **Skyler Kern** - both fantastic examples of Alaska Native Success at UA.

Minnie grew up in Kotzebue; with guidance from her elders and community, she earned bachelor's and master's degrees in rural development from UAF. Since then, she has worked as a student advisor for UAF and was most recently promoted to Director of the Chukchi Campus - in her hometown of Kotzebue. It's an actual "full-circle" moment. We are excited to see how she strengthens connections with youth in the region to the opportunities throughout the system.

[Skyler](#) participated in an ANSEP Acceleration Academy and Summer Bridge program. He earned his undergrad in Mechanical Engineering from UAA, and this fall after getting his Doctorate at UC Boulder, he joined UAA as an Assistant Professor of Mechanical Engineering. Much like their



own mentors, Minnie and Skyler are now investing in and supporting the next generations of Alaska students and leaders.

Empowering Alaska's Workforce Pipeline

Amazing things are happening at our Universities - From drones to Indigenous studies to Arctic Research and more. The stories I have been able to share today are representative of not just what happens at UA, but also the partnerships and opportunities we have with folks like you who help Empower Alaska.

And we want those partnerships to expand. So reach out, and let's work together to build Alaska's future. That associate in construction management Kevin Kornack is enrolled in? That program only exists because Meg Nordale at GHEMM came to us and said, "We have a need; can you help us meet it?" Success stories like that are what get me up in the morning.

The University is empowering Alaska and Alaska's future. I see that every day - from my vantage point as president, and as an Alaskan who cares deeply about building a strong future for our state.

But I also see that impact as a mother and a grandmother. As you heard in my introduction, all three of my children have degrees from our Universities. I've had a front-row seat to their accomplishments, and UA's part in their success. I want those same opportunities for my grandkids.

I want all Alaskans to have these opportunities.

So, please. Support your local campus.

Be proud of your University - UAA, UAF, UAS.

And remember. The ***single biggest impact*** on our Alaska workforce is students attending and graduating from our Universities.

Encourage your employees, friends, children, or neighbors to look at UA first.

The University of Alaska empowers Alaska's future. Let's build and invest in that future together. Thank you.