



2026 State of the University Address

March 19, 2026 | President Pat Pitney

Rotary Club of Fairbanks

“Progress and Promise: The Bright Future on the Horizon for the University of Alaska”

Fairbanks Rotary - thank you so much for hosting us and for the opportunity to present my final address on the State of the University of Alaska.

As I begin, 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’m pleased to be in Fairbanks for this address, and I want to recognize Regents, Foundation Directors, and elected officials who are here today. Thank you for your support.

To the faculty and staff across our system, you are the ones, day in and day out, who empower our students and make it possible for them to achieve their dreams. Many of the great stories I’ll be sharing are the results of your hard work. I’m very grateful for all you do and for your commitment to our students and our state. Thank you.

To all of you here in the room and listening online, I’m proud to call each of you a partner. Whether you realize it or not, all of you are part of our mission. 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 UA empower Alaska. Thank you.

A shoutout as well to the UA athletes who represented their countries and our universities at the 2026 Winter Olympics in Italy. 10 Athletes - [5 UAA alums](#) and [5 current or former UAF students](#) - competed



at the highest levels of international competition. And as a fellow Olympian, it was exciting to cheer them on and see them represent our institutions.

Leadership & Transitions

As you know, I will retire at the end of May. Leaving this institution will be bittersweet. Until then, I remain full speed ahead: working with our talented leaders, faculty, and staff, advocating for UA's priorities in Juneau, and working closely with the Board to ensure a seamless transition for both the UAF chancellor and UA system president.

The leadership at our universities is stable and strong. Each of our three chancellors has the trust of the Board and me, and we are confident in their ability to continue the forward momentum.

Dr. Aparna Palmer continues to lead UAS, and though she joined us from Colorado, she is wholly embraced by Southeast Alaska.

Most recently, I was thrilled to appoint Dr. Cheryl Siemers as the permanent Chancellor at UAA. An amazing leader and former community campus director, she is beloved by the community, and I'm excited to watch the impact she will have on UAA, Southcentral Alaska, and our State.

While our search for a permanent Chancellor at UAF remains ongoing, Ambassador Mike Sfraga has been a steady hand. He has helped elevate America's Arctic University to the forefront of national and international discourse. Mike, I'm grateful that you were willing to return to UAF. And we know you won't be too far away, as you continue your work internationally.

Alaska's Public University System

It has been a true honor and privilege to lead the University of Alaska system. Our three universities, along with their community campuses, are an integral part of our state and the communities they serve.



- The University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) is our comprehensive, dual-mission university and the largest provider of workforce education in Alaska, especially in healthcare.
- The University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) stands as Alaska's premier research university and a global authority on the Arctic.
- And the University of Alaska Southeast (UAS), recognized as one of the most picturesque campuses in the nation, has a growing emphasis on undergraduate ocean science, mariculture, and maritime workforce.

Each university offers a valuable yet distinct student experience; every campus is crucial to its local community, significantly contributing to both the economy and our unique workforce needs.

I first joined UA in 1991. Throughout my time here, both while earning my master's degree and while working, I've seen the incredible impact it has had on Alaskans. I believe in the power of the UA system. I see the generational impact just in my family, with each of my kids earning degrees from our universities.

When I stepped away in 2014 to serve in state government, even from that vantage point, I saw the profound ways our universities empower this state.

Over the years, we've had times of scarcity and times of opportunity, times of major disruption and times of stability.

I've seen enrollment surge. I've seen it fall. I've seen our research steadily gain national and international prominence. And I've seen the positive impact of generations of our graduates across Alaska.

I've seen uncertainty. But I've also seen extraordinary resilience. Our staff and faculty innovate despite constraints, mentor students, and create opportunities, each inspiring a shared sense of resilience and purpose.



The State of the University

It is in part thanks to this resiliency that I am able to say: The University of Alaska is strong, and UA is positioned for long-term success!

Stabilizing our system was my goal when I walked into this role. We've done that - in part - due to stable state funding. State support remains critical to UA's long-term success.

Equally important, though, is continued enrollment growth in our high-quality academic programs, capitalizing on our research excellence, and constant, intentional operational improvements.

As I prepare to pass the torch to the next president, I want each of you to understand the progress made over the last six years:

- more students and families choosing UA,
- attracting growing levels of nationally competitive research,
- strengthening our quality reputation, and
- graduating more students for Alaska's workforce

That success is a full-out team effort. And it positively impacts thousands of lives, supporting communities, businesses, and entire industries.

Progress: What the University has Overcome

Let's talk about progress. To understand progress, we have to acknowledge the enormous challenges we faced.

Budget crises and funding uncertainty.

Declining enrollment for more than a decade

A global pandemic that forced us online almost overnight.

And turbulence at the federal level.



Yet, during that time, our faculty, staff, and researchers continued to work tirelessly to serve students, compete for research funding, and build exciting academic programs relevant to today's students.

[In the last 6 years](#), we've reversed enrollment declines. In 2022, our incoming freshmen classes started growing - last fall, we had 40% more incoming freshmen than the low point. And total enrollment turned positive starting in 2023 and is now 9% higher¹.

Our enrollment growth is even more impressive when you consider that it's *not* happening in other states - UA is an anomaly among state institutions, as we have growing enrollment.

We've turbo-charged our research, a direct reflection of the quality of the work being done here. The National Science Foundation conducts an annual research survey. In the most recent report, UA's research totaled \$273 million, an all-time record high. That's up 14% year over year, and up 55% over pre-COVID levels. The bulk of that research is right here at UAF, including fisheries, remote sensing, cold-weather engineering, critical minerals, wildlife biology, drones, and more.

At UAF, researchers and students are helping map and understand Alaska's vast critical mineral resources. That work helps ensure the state can responsibly develop the minerals essential to America's energy and technology supply chains. [We will hear soon if we are selected as one of four NSF "engines"](#). This endeavor is a state-industry-university collaboration that can multiply the 10-year, \$160 million federal investment to more than \$1 billion.

As Alaska explores major infrastructure opportunities like the LNG project, UA's programs in welding, process technology, engineering, and construction management are building talent. More importantly, though, we stand ready to help advance the future industries that are enabled with secure, reliable

¹ Starting in 2024, UAA reclassified select for-credit courses to non-credit status, and they are no longer reported in Banner headcount metric. The headcount numbers reflected here are inclusive of that methodological change.



energy sources, like data infrastructure, critical mineral processing, and hopefully, some manufacturing.

Across the state, our scientists are helping communities adapt to a changing Arctic; forecasting glacial floods; studying permafrost stability; and addressing coastal erosion. These projects are relevant to us here, but will also be of significant benefit nationally and across the Arctic.

This is real capacity. It demonstrates the role UA will play in shaping the future of both Alaska and the Arctic.

The federal funding supporting those projects has worked in tandem with our fiscal stability from the state to create a solid foundation.

That foundation of stability positions us for an even brighter future. We are investing in initiatives and programs that will meaningfully improve the student experience and strengthen our research impact for Alaska.

I need to make this point, though. **Stability requires change.** And progress requires us to continually evaluate our priorities and make disciplined decisions about where to invest.

In a system as large and complex as ours, that means reallocating resources, making difficult choices so that we can move forward in the areas that matter most.

With more than 7,000 employees across Alaska, those decisions are visible, and they don't always land the same way for everyone. At times, they create what I'll call negative "swirl" - around things like restructuring, funding shifts, personnel changes, or other things.

But those moments of swirl don't define us. Long-term outcomes do.



We remain focused on doing what's right for students, for Alaska, and for the long-term strength of this institution. So if you see a headline or hear a concern about UA, I'd encourage you to take a moment to seek the full context. We don't make decisions in a vacuum. And if the context isn't clear, ask us, and we'll do our best to provide a clear response.

Investing from within on our highest priorities is working. Last year, the Board of Regents directed the Chancellors and I to specifically invest in and focus our time on three things:

- student recruitment - that's bringing more students to UA
- Student retention - that's keeping more of our students at UA, and
- speeding the time it takes for those students to graduate.

While many of our students-first actions are still in their early stages, they are bearing fruit.

By joining the nationally recognized Common App and modernizing the admissions process, UAF is seeing more students express interest. That's been the key to UAF's increasing enrollment.

UAA is focused on recruiting Alaskans who started but never finished their degree. Over 500 of those stop-outs chose to come back in the last two years, meaning more future graduates and more qualified employees for your businesses.

UAS is implementing "Alaska Unlocked", bringing out-of-state students to UAS for in-state tuition. I'm confident this will be a game-changer. It will help grow enrollment by filling existing capacity at UAS. And it will boost the southeast economy, once those students graduate.

Systemwide, our retention is improving with more than 75% of first-year students returning. And with stronger recruitment and improved retention, we are beginning to see more graduates.

Those are just three of our student-first actions. We have 27 in progress.



Fiscal Stability. Research Excellence. Prioritizing Recruitment, Retention, and Graduation. That's progress. That progress is empowering Alaska. The success of these efforts has even greater promise.

The Promise the Future Holds

We're focused on making post-secondary education, from short-term certificates and associate's degrees all the way to Ph.Ds, more affordable and accessible across the state.

The expansions and increases to the [Alaska Performance Scholarship](#) and our [UA Scholars Award](#) mean that more Alaskans now can pursue an education in a wide variety of disciplines important to Alaska.

Process technology, medical Technology, accounting, engineering, teaching, nursing, veterinary medicine, and more: UA's breadth and depth of programs meet Alaskans where they are, helping them create their own future.

Another way we meet Alaskans where they are is dual enrollment. Dual enrollment allows students to begin their postsecondary education in high school, earning college credit, learning about career opportunities, and discovering ways they can contribute meaningfully to their communities. In Juneau, dual-enrollment students are currently earning their Emergency Trauma Technician (ETT) certificates. Several of them are pursuing careers in emergency medicine.

The Mining Occupation Endorsement at UAS aligns regional workforce needs with student interests. Two of these dual enrollment students already have career plans:

One is continuing coursework in diesel mechanics at UAS. Another wants to pursue underground mining through the Mining and Petroleum Training Service program at UAF. Students see these programs as a way to build a strong, secure career shortly after high school.



We have dual enrollment opportunities like this throughout the state. At UAA, there are opportunities in Anchorage and Mat-Su, and in Western Alaska through ANSEP. And here in Fairbanks, we have the North Star College.

A UA education pays dividends. Literally. [Department of Labor research](#) shows that regardless of degree level achieved - vocational, associate, bachelor's, or graduate - annual earnings of UA graduates exceed those of folks without post-secondary training. There is a big difference between making \$50,000 a year and \$90,000.

My favorite example is the life-changing impact of our 2-year process technology degree. [Over the last 10 years](#), more than 85% of those 700 graduates are employed in Alaska. Their average wage immediately after graduation is over \$80,000, and five years later, it averages \$130,000.

Earlier this year, [we launched the Process Technology Support Fund with a generous \\$400,000 gift from ConocoPhillips Alaska](#). The fund helps connect classroom learning to careers. Programs at UAF's CTC and UAA's Kenai Peninsula College prepare students to step directly into process technology careers.

I am so grateful to ConocoPhillips Alaska for their support of essential workforce programs and for working with us to develop and educate future workers across the state. And I'm also grateful to the countless other corporations and individuals who have supported training and educational facilities that are making a meaningful difference for students.

And speaking of philanthropy - I would be remiss not to remind you that our annual UA Giving Day is next week, March 24-26. It's actually 49 hours. Giving ripples outward with real, lasting impact. What we support today directly shapes our future. I encourage you to make a gift of any amount at [givingday.alaska.edu](#). For those of you who have an MBA from UA - yes, I see a few of you - I sponsored a giving day challenge - please help unlock it!



Also, thanks to donors, we are strategically positioning our institution as a beacon for Alaska and the U.S. on the international Arctic stage. Last year, we [launched](#) the Arctic Leadership Initiative with generous support from the Rasmusson Foundation. This program equips students to be our future leaders with local, state, national, and international connections vital for Alaska to seize its future in an increasingly global Arctic.

UA truly is America's Arctic University, and having Ambassador Sfraga - or, just Mike as many of us know him - at UAF has helped bring even more urgency and attention to the work being done here.

Mike's team is leading the charge to establish a formal National Arctic Policy Center that will leverage and complement the work conducted in UAF's many research and academic units, and units throughout UA. It will also incorporate partners from across the state and nation.

Such a center will connect and collaborate with a host of federal agencies and departments to advance our understanding of the Arctic and inform domestic and foreign policy. More importantly, it gives Alaskans direct influence on our future.

In his Chancellor role, with the support of the UAF team, the Board of Regents, and many of you, Mike has rebranded UAF's West Ridge to UAF's Arctic Research Park! This branding recognizes the world-class research conducted here and cements UAF's role as an elite Arctic research institution.

It also says: we are open for business and ready for partners - military, Alaska Native Corporations, mining companies, the space industry, just to name a few.

The next decade belongs to the Arctic. And with America's Arctic University, Alaska is positioned to lead.



But our vast and varied research spans well beyond the Arctic. It isn't just global positioning - it's vital to Alaska, helping solve local problems and spreading that knowledge for others to use.

For example, at UAA, Dr. Brandon Briggs is [applying](#) microbiome research to real-world challenges, including using microbes to mine rare earth elements. [Microbes for mining](#). This approach has the potential to unlock new economic opportunities for Alaska.

Also, under the leadership of newly appointed College of Health Dean Dr. Jay Butler, UAA is leading partnerships with the state and Alaska health care providers to meet the challenge of the Rural Healthcare Transformation Program. That program was created by Congress to strengthen healthcare access and quality in rural communities. These partnerships will create expanded and innovative opportunities for students pursuing health careers at all three of our universities.

In Juneau, UAS researchers Jason Amundson and Eran Hood [developed](#) a flood-forecasting dashboard that helps the community prepare for glacier outburst floods. Working closely with the City of Juneau and federal agencies, this is exactly the kind of science that protects lives and livelihoods across Alaska. And its principles apply to other places around the world at risk of similar disasters. More importantly, our students are involved in, contribute to, and experience the impacts of these relevant projects.

Stewardship & Continuity: Reflecting Back and Looking Forward

Let me leave you with a couple of facts:

More than 80% of Alaskans [believe](#) the university positively impacts Alaska as a whole. Alaskans consider the University system very important to the state, and three-quarters of those surveyed say the university has a major impact on local communities.

And our students directly grow Alaska's workforce. [National statistics](#) have shown that [two-thirds](#) of graduates remain in the state where they attended college. We do better than that: 90% of graduates



from our universities remain and work in Alaska immediately after graduation, and 75% stay long term.... Of those who leave the state for college, only 25% come back.

It's clear: UA is vital to building and empowering Alaska's economy.

When I returned to UA as president in 2020, we were focused on survival. Today, we're positioned for long-term, sustainable growth that will shape Alaska's future for decades to come.

For more than three decades, this university has shaped my life. Serving this institution and leading our universities has been an honor. And as we transition over the next couple of months, I'm thankful and humbled knowing UA is well-positioned for the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Thank you!