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# Take charge of your education

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Shauna Thornton, Speaker, University of Alaska Coalition of Student Leaders

By Shauna Thornton

UA Coalition of Student Leaders

At 50, I'm not considered a traditional student in the usual sense of the term. My years between 18 and 24 were not filled with thoughts of colleges or degrees, but about getting the best paying job I could to help my family. I was "getting by" but never able to really "get ahead." I was held back often for lack of a degree. First it was that coveted high school degree, which I got a little later than most, now it's a bachelors degree, but that will be awarded to me this spring. Overall my experience with education has been a struggle, and I can honestly say that decisions I made way back then, had flaws.

I would have helped my family far better by staying in school. I could have used my time and money much more efficiently. I should have researched my options and asked more questions. Despite my list of 'woulda, coulda, shoulda's' I'm on track now with school and am proud of my path, goals and accomplishments.

I moved to Alaska in my 30s on a whim — I had always dreamed of having an Alaskan adventure. I landed in Kenai and it has been my home since 1991. But being passed up for promotions and missing out on advancement opportunities because I lacked a degree had grown tiresome. So four years ago I decided to buckle down and finally get my degree. Kenai Peninsula College offered me great local student employment and degree options. I applied, registered for classes and joyfully started attending classes. During my second year I

begin getting involved with student activities and was elected into student government. It was a

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little strange as most classmates were younger, but I was welcomed and had much to offer in terms of life experience.

One of the first meetings I attended as a student representative was a town hall sponsored by the UA President's Strategic Direction Initiative. It was titled "Shaping Alaska's Future" — and who wouldn't want to be part of that? During the discussions, deans and directors from the UA System spoke openly about issues keeping students from completing college, such as transferring credits or other barriers students encounter. They presented student achievement statistics and discussed efforts focused on student achievement and keeping students on track. This was the first time I'd heard about UA's Stay on TRACK program. The conversation sent my head spinning.

I knew what my goals were, but never put the pieces together to chart a realistic path for myself. I didn't do the math. A bachelor's degree is typically 120 credits. To attain this in four years a student (like me) needs to take 30 credits a year. The concept had never occurred to me, and I initially felt embarrassed about it as I sat there. They were talking about me. I remember realizing "I can get this done faster and spend less money doing it." I changed my behavior immediately and sought out an advisor to help plan for graduation.

My new routine included taking 15 credits that counted toward my degree each semester. I made up for lost time by taking summer classes. I shaved 2 years off my education just by taking charge. I saw myself positioned to succeed. It was a very powerful realization. I had switched from thinking about "if I graduate" to "when I graduate."

I am now enrolled at UAS via distance delivery, yet I use the services and facilities through the UAA campus in Kenai. I'm sort of a dual citizen. I received a \$500 tuition rebate this last year from UAS — kick-back for completing 15 credits a semester. I thought it was a mistake but it is part of their way of supporting the Stay on TRACK campaign.

Most semesters I have taken 15 credits, and if needed, a summer class to keep ticking off the needed credits for graduation. I have heard "you're crazy," directed at me more than once these past few years and I laugh and think at times that that is quite possibly true. I then focus on why I'm sticking to my plan. It's simple. It makes economic sense. I will graduate this spring — on time. If saving money, graduating in a shorter time frame and incurring less student loan debt are the benefits, I think a little crazy is a good thing.

When I graduate in May 2014 my family and friends will be there to celebrate with me as I walk across the stage in Kenai. Yes I will be getting a degree from UAS, but the UA system works like that. Education in Alaska isn't a one size fits all system — it is even flexible enough for me.

*Shauna Thornton lives in Kenai and is a full-time UAS student attending classes via distance delivery. She is Speaker of the University of Alaska Coalition of Student Leaders.*

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