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Recent reports on higher education in the U.S. say it's in trouble—that it's too expensive, doesn't offer enough need-based aid, isn't educating people for today's jobs, doesn't demand enough of instructors or students, and isn't sufficiently accountable to policymakers and taxpayers.¹

Is the University of Alaska (UA)—the state's only public university—offering a good, affordable education for Alaskans? This paper looks at that question. It first presents the available data on various measures and then summarizes successes and continuing challenges for UA. It ends with a discussion of how UA and the state are addressing higher-education issues and what other steps they might consider.

UA has made substantial progress on a number of goals in the past decade. For example, it's attracting a growing share of Alaska's college-bound freshmen, and it's educating many more students for jobs in high-demand areas like health care and technology. The school's overall retention and graduation rates are improving.

But UA also faces many of the same issues as other public universities—like sharp increases in tuition and significant numbers of students who come out of high school unable to read, write, or do math at college-level.

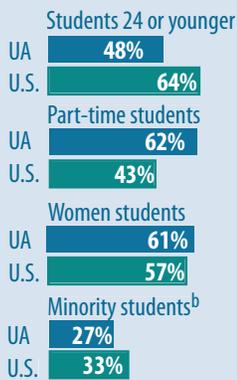
Geography and population also create special challenges for UA. Most Alaskans live in or near urban areas, but there are also

hundreds of small, remote communities scattered across Alaska's 375 million acres. Most are far from roads and college campuses, and they typically have limited Internet connections. That makes higher education less accessible for Alaskans who can't afford to attend classes on campus or don't have adequate technology to take online distance-education courses.

Many of the state's remote communities are Alaska Native villages. Students from those communities face extra challenges if they enroll on urban campuses, adjusting to life in much larger places and to cultural differences. They are often the first in their families to attend college.

UA also has considerably more older and part-time students than the average university, although more students just out of high school have been enrolling in recent years. Part-time students don't all work toward degrees—they may just want specific courses—and if they are earning degrees it takes longer. There are no good current measures of how well UA retains these part-time students or how many do get degrees, compared with full-time students who come right out of high school.

Figure 1. UA and Other U.S. Public Universities^a

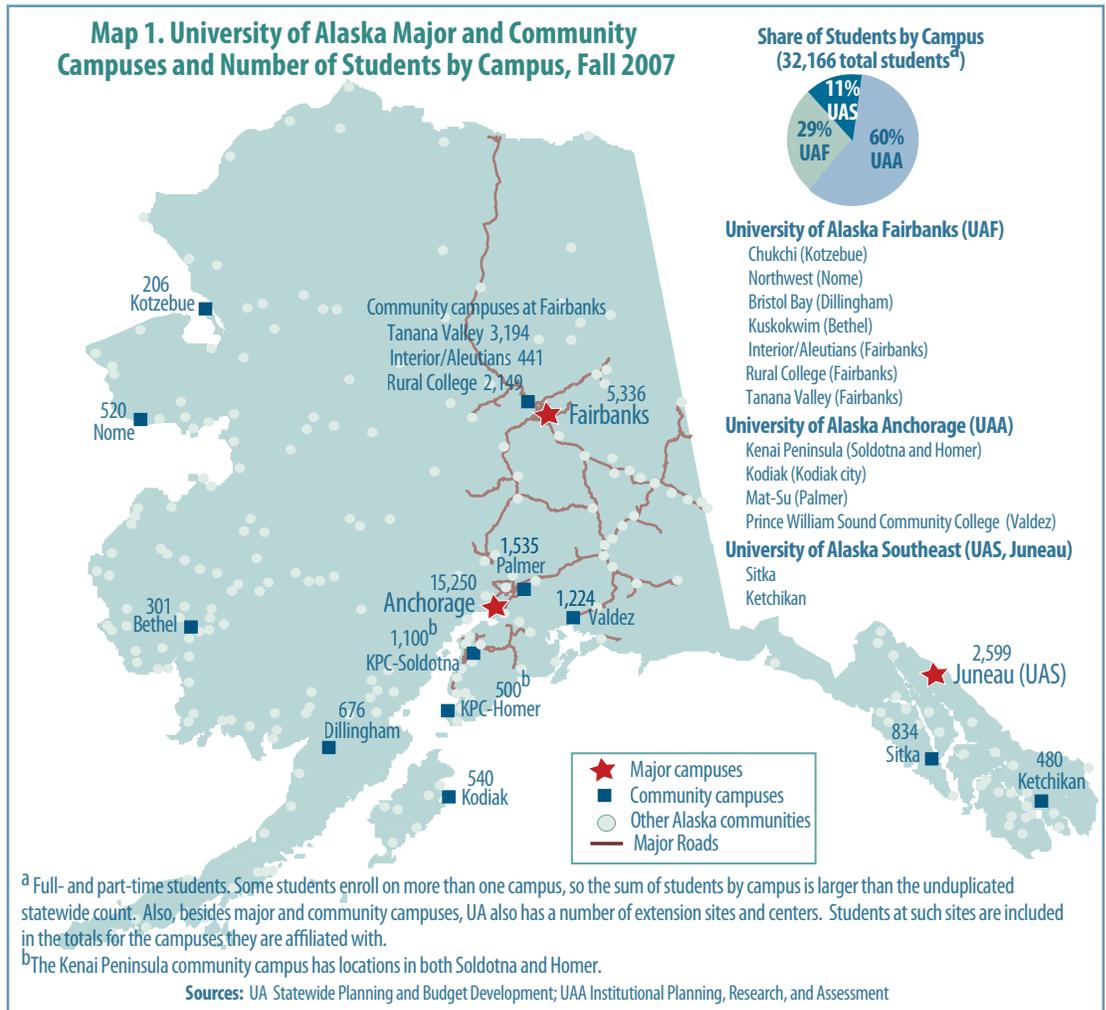


^aStudents at public 4- and 2-year schools. UA figures as of Fall 2007 and nationwide 2005.

^bAmong students who reported ethnicity. At UA in 2007, 7% of students didn't report ethnicity.

Sources: Digest of Education Statistics; UA Statewide Planning and Budget Office

Map 1. University of Alaska Major and Community Campuses and Number of Students by Campus, Fall 2007



The University of Alaska reports annually to the state legislature on how well it is responding to Alaskans' educational needs and helping support the economy—as shown by graduation rates, degrees in high-demand job areas, and other measures. Here we use those performance measures and other data to look at quality, affordability, and other issues.

CHANGES AT UA, 2000-2007

Alaska has a number of private colleges and universities, as well as career and technical schools. But UA is the only public university, and it is many times larger than any private school. It has open enrollment, accepting anyone who has graduated from high school. In 2007, enrollment was about 32,000. It has three major campuses—Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Juneau—as well as 13 community campuses and a number of extension sites and centers affiliated with the campuses (Map 1).

Table 1 shows recent changes at UA. Enrollment, including both full- and part-time students, was about 5% higher in 2007 than in 2000, but it's been relatively flat in the past several years. Student credit hours were 16% higher in 2007 than in 2000, reflecting a combination of more full-time students and bigger course loads among part-time students.

Several factors, including inflation, pushed spending for instruction up 77% from 2000 to 2007. UA also enrolled more students and offered more credit hours; developed and offered new degree programs, some of which required labs and other extra equipment or facilities; added nearly 350 new full-time faculty and relied proportionately less on part-time, temporary faculty; and paid more for health care and retirement costs.

PREPARATION FOR COLLEGE

Table 1. Change at University of Alaska, 2000-2007*

	2000	2007	Change, 2000-07
Enrollment	30,480	32,166	+5%
Credit hours, fall semester	219,265	254,875	+16%
Full-time faculty	979	1,320	+35%
Part-time faculty	1,134	1,161	+2%
Instructional expenditures	\$102 million	\$181 million	+77%

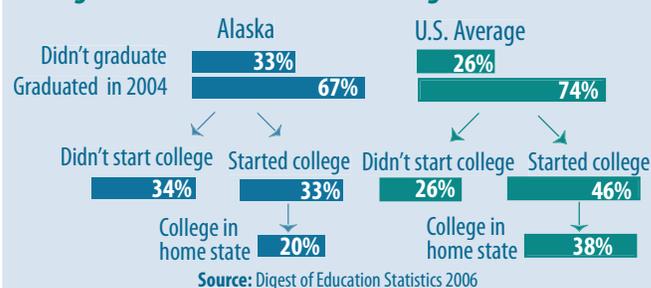
* Fall semester **Source:** University of Alaska Statewide Planning and Budget Development

A challenge for UA—and a problem for Alaska—is that so few high-school students go on to college. As Figure 2 shows, a third of Alaska's high-school students don't graduate, and another third graduate but don't enroll in college. The remaining third graduate and enroll in college—but some enroll in colleges outside Alaska. So in the end, only one-fifth of Alaska's high-school students enroll in colleges and universities in Alaska.

Nationally, about one-quarter of high school students fail to graduate, and another one-quarter graduate but don't go to college. Nearly half graduate and go on to college, mostly in their home states.

A second problem is that many high-school graduates aren't prepared for college. A 2006 report estimated that as many as two-thirds of incoming UA freshmen weren't prepared to do college-level math and English.² Poorly prepared students can be from anywhere, but the problem is especially worrisome in Alaska Native communities, where many high schools are struggling. Compounding the problem is that poorly prepared students from such communities may also be the first in their families to attend college. First-generation students typically need more support services as they navigate higher education's sometimes complex structure.

Figure 2. Students Who Started High School in 2000

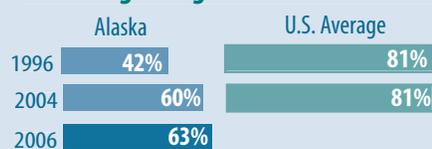


ATTRACTING AND KEEPING STUDENTS

How well UA attracts and retains students—especially full-time students working toward degrees—is one measure of the quality of education the school is offering. But it also reflects how accessible and affordable UA is for Alaskans.

• *UA and the state's private colleges and universities have been attracting more of the high-school students who do go on to college.* In 1996, 42% of Alaska's college-bound freshmen enrolled in two- or four-year programs at UA and private colleges here. By 2004, that share was 60% and by 2006 an estimated 63% (Figure 3). That still falls short of the U.S. average of 81% of freshmen attending college in their own states. But remember that in other states, students can choose from more in-state colleges and universities.

Figure 3. College-Bound Freshmen* Attending College in Their Home States



*Students who graduated from high school within the previous year and enrolled in institutions that grant either 2-year or 4-year degrees.

Sources: Digest of Education Statistics for 1996 and 2004. 2006 Alaska figure is an estimate of UA Statewide Planning and Budget Office.

• *The UA Scholars Program—an initiative started in 1999—is also attracting more of Alaska's top high-school students.* It offers four-year scholarships to students graduating in the top 10% of their classes. Before the program started, about 14% of top high-school students enrolled at UA. In recent years that share has varied between 40% and 47%.

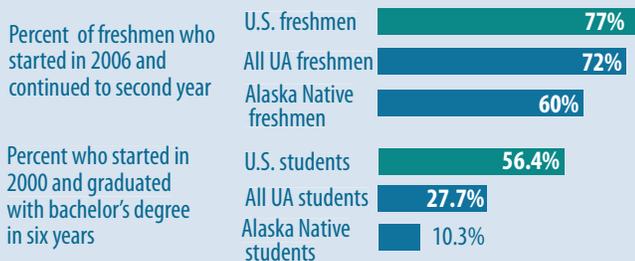
• *UA is retaining more of the degree-seeking freshmen it attracts.* In 2007, UA retained nearly three-quarters of the students who started as freshmen the year before (Figure 4). That was close to the U.S. average for retaining students the second year—and it was up from 68% in 2000 (Figure 5).

• *The percentage of degree-seeking UA students who go on to graduate with bachelor's degrees within six years is only half the U.S. average—under 28% compared with 56%. That's up from just 23% in 2000—but most degree-seeking freshmen at UA still don't get those degrees in six years.*

Part of the explanation for low graduation rates is that so many freshmen aren't academically prepared when they reach UA. In fall 2007, for example, UA offered more than 8,800 student credit hours in remedial courses. Such courses don't count toward degrees.

Also, the graduation data are for full-time students working toward bachelor's degrees. We don't have comparable data on part-time students—62% of UA students (compared with 43% at universities nationwide). Many of those students aren't working toward degrees. UA is exploring ways of tracking those students, to learn how well UA is meeting their needs.

Figure 4. Retention and Graduation Rates, U.S. and UA*



*Among first-time, full-time students working toward bachelor's degrees
Sources: NCHEMS Information Center; UA Statewide Planning and Budget

Figure 5. Change in UA Retention and Graduation



Source: University of Alaska Statewide Planning and Budget Development

COST AND FINANCIAL AID

The costs of going to school and the financial aid available are also very important to Alaskans considering UA.

- *Tuition and fees for four-year programs at the University of Alaska increased 56% between 2000 and 2007.* But at \$4,445, that tuition is still about 24% below the \$5,836 average for all public universities. Tuition climbed even more—74%—nationally since 2000.
- *For two-year programs, tuition at UA is 86% above the national average—\$4,220 compared with \$2,272.* Unlike many other states, Alaska does not have a community college system that offers two-year programs at a lower cost.

Figure 6. Tuition and Fees, UA and U.S. Average
(Full-time undergraduates at public institutions)

Increase in Tuition and Fees, 4-Year Programs, 2000-2007

University of Alaska	U.S. Average
+56%	+74%

Comparison of Tuition and Fees, UA and U.S. Average, 2007



Source: UA Statewide Planning and Budget Development, Yellow Book

Offsetting tuition and other costs is financial aid. Of the \$102 million in student aid at UA in 2005-06, 68% was for loans, 14% for scholarships, 13% for grants, and 5% for work-study programs and waivers.

- *Alaska offers very little state-funded grant aid for low-income students—about \$500,000 in 2006, or about*

Figure 7. State-Funded Need-Based Aid Per Undergraduate, 2006
(Amount and Rank Among States)

1. New York \$1,096
9. California \$514
11. Texas \$449
25. New Mexico \$261
31. Arkansas \$199
37. Missouri \$110
- 44. Alaska \$28.17**
48. Wyoming \$7.11
50. South Dakota \$0

Source: National Association of State Student Aid Grant Programs (NASSGAP), 2005-06 survey

\$28 per undergraduate, which put Alaska almost at the bottom of state-funded aid for low-income students (Figure 7). The legislature recently tripled that amount, to \$2.5 million. But that still leaves Alaska well below the national average for need-based grants.

ACCESSIBILITY

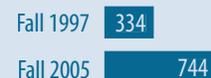
Accessibility is another measure of how well UA serves Alaskans. Does the school offer the courses students want, and can they get those courses in person or by distance education? As the map on the front page shows, UA has major campuses in urban areas of southcentral, interior, and southeast Alaska and community campuses in many rural areas. It offers one- and two-year certificates in various job areas, as well as associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees.

The programs and services available for students vary by campus, but the remote rural campuses in western Alaska in particular have less faculty and administrative support for students and few of the facilities—libraries and labs, for instance—available on the major campuses. It's very expensive to operate campuses in small, remote communities; the per-credit-hour cost is several times what it is on other campuses, even though they provide less.

A growing way of making higher education available to more Alaskans—in urban and rural areas—is distance education. Most UA distance-education courses are Web-based (and may also involve telephones or television), but some are offered by mail.

- *Since 1997, UA has doubled the number of distance-education courses it offers. But while distance education helps make UA more accessible, it has limits.* Small, remote Alaska communities currently have dial-up Internet access, which makes it difficult or impossible for students to download large files or do other things that would be straightforward if they had broad-band connections. Also, distance-education students don't typically have the opportunity to visit with instructors or other students in person, and those living far from campuses can't take advantage of libraries or other campus facilities.

Figure 8. UA Distance Education Courses with Statewide Enrollment



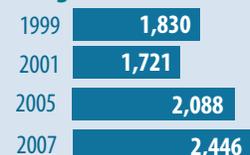
Source: UA Statewide Planning and Budget Development

OTHER PERFORMANCE MEASURES

As we said earlier, UA reports its progress on a number of measures to the state legislature. Two we haven't discussed yet are how UA helps support the economy and how UA is broadening its financial base by increasing revenues from non-state sources. One way UA helps the economy is in the number of students it educates in high-demand job areas.

- *Enrollment in technology, engineering, construction, health, and other programs that lead to high-demand occupations was up 40% between 2002 and 2006, even though overall UA enrollment changed little.* The number of graduates with degrees or certificates in high-demand job areas varies from year to year, but was 42% higher in 2007 than in 2001.

Figure 9. UA Graduates in High-Demand Job Areas*



* Includes those earning degrees or certificates in health care, engineering, business, teacher education, natural resources, transportation, and others.
Source: UA Performance Measures

For operating money, UA depends on an annual state appropriation plus federal money, research grants, and student tuition and fees. UA has broadened its revenue base since 2000, as Figure 10 shows.

- *The state appropriation for UA was up 57% between 2000 and 2007.* But that increase followed years of no growth. In 1985, just before falling oil prices created a state budget crisis, the UA appropriation was \$168 million. By 1998, the appropriation was \$164 million—less than in 1985, even without accounting for inflation. Even with the recent increase, the appropriation hasn't kept pace with the 71% inflation from 1985 to 2007 (as measured by the Anchorage consumer price index).

- *Other revenues—federal money, research grants, and tuition—grew 77% between 2000 and 2007.* Research grants in particular have grown rapidly, but revenues from tuition also increased. Higher tuition is a double-edged sword: it helps UA's finances but also prices some Alaskans out.

Figure 10. UA State Appropriation and Non-State Revenues*

	2000	2007	Change
State appropriation	\$180 million	\$282 million	+57%
Non-state revenues	\$214 million	\$379 million	+77%

*Federal sources, research grants, tuition, other

Source: University of Alaska Statewide Planning and Budget Development

STUDENT SATISFACTION

A final perspective on the education UA provides comes from students. A 2007 survey found that 52% of the students in four-year programs and 65% in two-year programs were satisfied or very satisfied with the education they were receiving at UA. Another 15% to 20% were somewhat satisfied. That left roughly 20% to 30% of students less than satisfied with the instruction, cost, financial aid, and other aspects of education at UA.

Table 2. Student Satisfaction at UA, 2007

	4-year students	2-year students
Satisfied or very satisfied	52%	65%
Somewhat satisfied	20%	15%

Source: Fall 2007 Noel-Levitz Assessments of Four-Year and Two-Year Student Satisfaction. Overall satisfaction with instruction, advising, cost, financial aid, and support services.

CONCLUSION: SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

UA has seen important progress since 2000. It has more students and graduates—especially in high-demand job areas—as well as more credit hours, faculty, degree programs, and distance-education courses. Most UA students are satisfied with the education they're getting. Still, UA and Alaska's state and local governments face continuing challenges—but also have opportunities to strengthen public education in Alaska:

- *Improving high-school and college graduation rates.* Alaska has among the lowest high school and college graduation rates in the U.S. Many who do graduate from high school aren't ready for college. If that doesn't change, more and more Alaskans won't be equipped to earn a living and will be more likely to rely on welfare and other social services.

- *Finding out why graduation rates are so low.* Better information would help focus efforts to improve those rates. Do many high-school and UA students transfer to schools outside the state? Can some former UA students no longer afford school? Are they unhappy with programs offered? Do they need more remedial help? Do they get enough academic support? It's also very important to learn more about the part-time students who make up nearly two-thirds of UA students—are they getting what they came for?

- *Documenting academic standards—from elementary through high school—needed to prepare students for college* and adjusting curricula and state requirements as necessary. This would be another step toward improving graduation rates. State, local, and university policymakers should all be involved. This is especially important for UA, because it is an open-enrollment school that accepts all high-school graduates.

- *Finding more ways to help Alaska Native students succeed.* A recent survey of Alaska Native graduates of UAA asked them to identify what helped them persist to graduation.³ Their ideas should certainly be helpful, given the odds they overcame. The Alaska Native Science and Engineering program at UAA demonstrates how providing effective support can help students succeed even in the most difficult fields. ANSEP is expensive, though, and relies on both private sector support and government funding outside the normal UA budget to pay for its staff and special programs.

- *Making sure Alaskans can afford UA.* Like other states and public universities, Alaska and UA need to balance the budget but still provide affordable education. One important step would be offering more need-based aid. Alaska ranks near the bottom in state-funded aid for low-income students. No qualified students should be kept out of Alaska's only public university because they can't get adequate financial help. The state, UA, and school districts should also work together to help high-school students and their families learn about and apply for scholarships—some of which are under-used because students don't know about them.

- *Increasing programs and services at remote campuses.* General education requirement courses and certificate and degree programs should be available throughout rural areas. Improvements will be mainly through distance-education, since costs at remote campuses are so high. But to attract and keep students, the remote campuses are working to improve support services.

- *Assessing why more men aren't going to college.* The declining share of men in college is a national trend, but the gap in Alaska is even larger—61% of UA students are women, compared with 57% at universities nationwide. We need to learn what's causing that disparity—and what could change it.

The problems identified here will be very difficult to resolve. If they were simple they'd have been resolved by now. State, local, and university policymakers are already working on these and other tough issues in public education. But for the future of Alaska, all Alaskans need to try harder.

ENDNOTES

1. See, for example, "A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education," the September, 2006 report of the U.S. Department of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education; "Transforming Higher Education: National Imperative—State Responsibility," the November 2006, report from the National Conference of State Legislatures' Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education; "Tough Choices or Tough Times," the December 2006 report from the National Center on Education and the Economy's New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce; *Declining by Degrees: Higher Education at Risk*, a collection of essays and PBS documentary; and *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More*, a 2005 book by Derek Bok, president emeritus of Harvard University.

2. Report of Statewide Task Force to Assure Readiness of Students, prepared by Dave Veazey, UA assistant vice president for academic affairs, May 2006.

3. "Alaska Native Graduates of UAA: What Can They Tell Us?" ISER, *Understanding Alaska Research Summary* No. 11, March 2008. By Diane Erickson, UAA College of Education, and Diane Hirshberg, ISER.

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