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UAF programs designed to ease college transition

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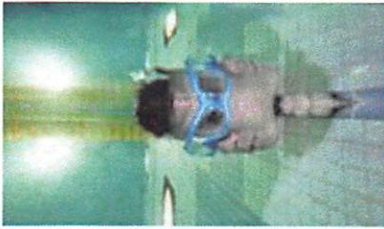


Photo by [Eric Engman](#)

FAIRBANKS — College can be a daunting place with its new buildings, people and schedules.

Sometimes, it's too daunting. Twenty-eight percent of University of Alaska freshmen don't return for their second year, according to a study by the Institute of Social and Economic Research.

In an effort to make the campus more personable and accessible for incoming students, the University of Alaska Fairbanks is developing and implementing programs to get more local teens on campus.

"We're trying to give students a taste of what college is all about and let them know UAF is a choice," UAF Interim Chancellor Brian Rogers said.

Rogers said making contacts at a university will make it harder for students to drop out.

UAF, like many other schools in the nation, is specifically focusing on STEM fields — science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

"We are pressured by industries and the government to produce more graduates in those fields," Rogers said.

UAF isn't the only institution feeling pressure — the whole state is suffering enrollment problems. Alaskan students are less likely to go on to college than students in the Lower 48, according to Kids Count Alaska, a collection of data regarding children's health, safety and economic status. The 2005 American Community Survey showed fewer than one in four 18 to 24-year-old Alaskans had enrolled in or completed college. Alaska had the lowest percentage of



Photo by [Eric Engman](#)



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college-bound young people in the nation.

UAF's outreach programs have been built up over time and range from the 26-year-old Rural Alaska Honors Institute to the Effie Kokrine Early College, which is starting its second full year.

Rogers said UAF has worked with the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District, is collaborating with Hutchison High School's vocational education programs and working in numerous science fairs and math competitions.

Rogers said the purpose of all the UAF programs is to highlight the university. Rogers said the priorities for the programs are to show the community the diversity of opportunities available at UAF and to provide a quality experience in a sound, enriching and safe environment.

Rural honors

The Rural Alaska Honors Institute was created in 1983 by the Alaska Federation of Natives and UAF to prepare rural and Alaska Native high school students for college by having them live and learn at UAF for six weeks. According to Kids Count Alaska, Alaska Natives had a graduation rate of 45 percent in 2006.

During their time at honors institute, students live in the dorms and have access to campus buildings such as the Student Recreational Center, Wood Student Center and Patty Pool. Rogers said the program is designed to help students understand how the university system works.

Denise Wartes, program coordinator of the rural honors program, said students who complete the program can earn as many as 10 credit hours that can be used at any college or university.

The program has hosted more than 1,200 students, and Wartes lists one medical doctor, five lawyers, 31 master's degrees and 241 bachelor's degrees among the alumni. Wartes said most of the college-bound alumni choose to go to an Alaska college, but there have been students who have continued their education at distinguished Outside schools such as Stanford, Harvard, Dartmouth and Yale.

The program has evolved since its inception and now includes classes in writing, study skills, math, chemistry, physical education and engineering. The students are in class from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. five days a week, with mandatory study hall periods on Sunday and Thursday.

Wartes said the program is still evolving and has added a second program, RAHI II: Next Step, which focuses on the study of genetics and offers seven credits upon completion.

To apply for the program, students must be a high school junior or senior with at least a 3.0 grade point average and strong reading skills.

In 2006, the program was the subject of a study conducted by the American Institute of Research, funded by the National Science Foundation. The study found program participants were almost twice as likely to earn a bachelor's degree than students in similar situations who did not attend the rural honors program.

“The program opens up the campus, and it opens their eyes to possible college material in a safe and structured way,” Wartes said.

Earn and learn

The Earn and Learn Program, overseen by Summer Sessions Director Michelle Bartlett, combines education with a part-time job. Students take two classes and work on campus. The cost of books and tuition are deducted from students' paychecks and ease the burden of paying for a college education.

“I wanted students to get through school in four years, if possible, and not carry that kind of debt,” Bartlett said.

The program grew out of the Jump Start program, which allows students enrolled at UAF for the fall to visit the campus during the summer before officially starting classes.

Earn and Learn campus jobs can range anywhere from the laboratories to the grounds crew, Bartlett said.

The program is open to 16- and 17-year-olds, who are allowed to keep their jobs after completion of the program.

Bartlett said by securing a job on campus, the student feels more connected to campus and has a sense of ownership.

“The program makes the university more accessible to learning and it's a wonderful incentive,” she said.

Early college

One of the newest programs for high school students is the Effie Kokrine Early College. Early College liaison Carol Lee Gho stated in an e-mail, the program was created to help Native students adjust to life in college.

“Most of our Native students have not had many of their family members attend college, and this helps the students get orientated into what college classes are all about,” she said.

Students work with an advisory teacher to determine what their four-year plan will look like and which classes they will be able to take. Making UAF more accessible and comfortable for students is a goal of the program, but Gho said it also aims to help promote the idea of career planning.

“In last year’s graduating class, every one of the students had taken at least one college class, and several of them had 16 to 20 credits,” Gho said. Some have earned as many as 25 credits.

The program started two years ago, with the number of participants jumping from 25 students during the first year to nearly 60 students. So far, 160 credits have been earned by Effie Kokrine students.

Research

The Alaska Summer Research Academy not only attracts local students. During this summer’s session, 23 of the 125 participants came from out of state, including one from Australia. There also were 59 Alaskan students from outside the Fairbanks area.

Participants’ time at UAF can be a factor when it is time for them to make decisions about college.

“A pretty high percentage go to UAF,” said Jeff Drake, director of ASRA. “We know that for a fact.”

The eight-year-old program is open to students in grades 7-12 and has modules ranging from science to technology to the arts. Students spend eight weeks living at or commuting to UAF, earning one college credit after completing the program. The 2008 summer program offered 14 modules, including glacier dynamics and biological succession, creative writing, and Web and digital media, Drake said.

Drake said the variety of programs helps engage students. He also wants students to learn to take chances and not fear failure.

The program is continually evolving and adding new programs. Courses are taught by UAF staff or professionals in their field. Drake said he looks for teachers who are at the top of their field and also have a passion for passing on their knowledge to a younger generation.

Drake said the digital photography course was led by a former ASRA participant who is now

continuing her education at Yale University.

“UAF isn’t going to get everybody,” he said.

Seeing results

The student retention programs seem to be having an impact, to a point.

Eighty-five percent of the UAF student body hails from Alaska, and throughout the whole UA system, 63 percent of students are from in-state. It’s a big change from 10 years ago, when only 44 percent of students were Alaskans. But while those number are rising, the total number of Alaskans attending college is decreasing.

UA President Mark Hamilton said a state college system’s purpose is to provide an affordable and quality university choice for a state’s students, so it has to appeal to local students through its achievements and outreach opportunities.

“It is an essential priority for the university to serve Alaska,” Hamilton said.

Hamilton said he is seeing a trend in UA enrollment. Alaskan students who left the state for college are transferring back to finish their education in-state.

“If they’re coming back, I say, ‘Welcome,’” he said. “Students returning are the best advertisement we have.”