

October 3, 2011

Shaping Alaska's Future:

Setting Strategic Directions for the University of Alaska

A solid, balanced university system is crucial to a state's healthy growth and development....As a university system, the value we bring to Alaska depends on the quality of our graduates at every level. Our success in offering a premier education and world-class research opportunity will substantially drive Alaska's future.

University of Alaska President Pat Gamble

This paper outlines an approach to setting strategic directions for the University of Alaska System that combines listening intently to what our students and the people of Alaska tell us they want and need from their colleges and universities, along with a tough minded examination of what we do now and how well we do it. The outcome of this process should be a vehicle for bringing positive change to the University of Alaska System that further aligns it with the priorities of students and the people of the state and results in an even more effective System overall.

“Guidepost Measures”

Setting strategic directions, then actually pursuing them, represents a journey through time featuring specific achievements along the way that mark progress toward the overarching goal of improving our performance in serving the people of the state. We use the term *guidepost measures* to suggest the dynamic character of this process. Some of these guidepost measures are identified below; others will emerge as the result of discussions, achievements along the way and our collective experience with this change process.

Guidepost measures of progress in this direction-setting process would include:

- A concise, readable document that outlines the broad strategic directions for the System, its colleges, universities and research and service units, as well as means of evaluating the change process itself. This document, of about 10 pages, would be written to provide a clear message describing the strategic directions of the UA System to a broad audience of Alaskans
- A set of five to seven strategic direction shaping priorities that grow out of the series of listening sessions held throughout the state

- Selection of a few, critically important guidepost measures of success that will tell us and the people of Alaska how well we are realizing our mutual priorities
- A management model that aligns college and university plans aimed toward achieving the selected priorities, but looks to the institutions and their leaders to determine the best way to achieve the overarching goals. The idea of alignment includes policies to avoid unnecessary duplication of programs and services, integration with the Academic Master Plan as well as campus strategic, capital and related plans
- A new leadership development program within the System administration aligned with this direction-setting process. The current project to evaluate senior staff through a 360-degree review underpins this direction-setting effort
- A straightforward communications program directed to students and the people of Alaska, elected representatives as well as other formal and informal leaders, defining what the University does to merit their support and the standards by which the System holds itself accountable to all Alaskans

Major Themes for the Statewide Conversation

The top priorities will be discussed and weighed through the course of extensive conversations with people of the state not directly connected to the University as well as students, faculty, and staff within the System. Several broad themes that are part of the dialogue within the state will likely serve as springboards for the statewide conversations.

These themes include the need to:

- enable more students to complete their training and education more quickly than in the past
- build a much stronger working partnership between the state's K-12 schools and the universities and community campuses to enable an increasing number of better prepared high school graduates to begin their careers earlier, engage in further study, or both
- work with K-12 schools throughout the state to enable an increasing number of high school students the opportunity to participate in the Alaska Performance Scholarship program
- build or strengthen partnerships with other sectors, agencies and industries in Alaska such as those in natural resources, transportation, education, Native corporations and other professional areas
- recognize the immense diversity of educational, economic, social, and cultural needs of Alaskans, Native and non-Native alike
- work tirelessly to confront and overcome the immense challenge of delivering high-quality education to rural Alaska students

- build or further develop effective working relationships with other educational, economic and cultural organizations in the circumpolar region and indeed around the world
- place a high premium on providing world-class service and value to students
- strengthen and diversify economic opportunity within the state through education, training, as well as applied and pure research that in the short or longer term can help businesses grow and create new, high-paying jobs
- clarify the roles of the community and branch campuses especially with respect to serving a broad spectrum of students and partnerships with employers
- re-envision the role of technology as a means of communication, education, outreach, training and service to students
- hold to the highest standards of fiscal integrity, accountability and resourcefulness throughout the System based on the recognition that we operate with state and federal taxpayer support and the tuition payments of Alaska students and their families

“We are Alaska’s colleges and universities—help us serve you”

The statewide dialogue that will shape the System’s strategic directions may employ the message above to indicate that we are proud to be Alaskans, and seek foremost to serve the state. The goal here is to engage as many people of the state as possible in a structured conversation about the job the colleges and universities do now and how we can serve them more fully. The plan envisions 30-40 meetings throughout urban and rural Alaska attended by a broad range of people. Regents, the president, chancellors, members of the UA Foundation’s Board of Trustees, other college and university leaders, elected officials, advisory board members to the colleges and universities, and many others, would attend these listening sessions across the state.

In addition to these face-to-face meetings, we would establish an extensive and responsive electronic communications network using a special website, email and social networking to encourage input. Based in part on models used in the University of North Carolina System, the University of Wisconsin System and others to engage citizens in determining how public higher education can serve them, this part of the direction-setting effort would be highly visible work aimed at involving a large number of participants across Alaska.

Engaging faculty, staff members and students

In addition to the external conversations, this approach builds on the results of several dialogues with faculty, staff members, and students through their governance groups. Day-long meetings with representatives of these groups would center on such topics as identifying the current strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats; the top priorities and the most effective way to articulate them; integrating existing campus

strategic plans with the System's top priorities; and selecting the right measures to evaluate success in achieving the priorities. These groups would be engaged in the direction setting process in all stages-- early, middle and late.

The Leadership Role of Regents

As the ultimate governing body for Alaska's system of public colleges and universities, the Regents have a critically important role to play in setting strategic directions. They need to be engaged in the process from beginning to end, including reviewing the implementation phases after they endorse the directions through their formal action. Specifically, Regents will be asked to participate in the external and internal conversations that lead up to establishing the priorities; contribute their time and best thinking in selecting the strategic directions and the measures of their achievement; monitor the direction-setting process by placing this work on the agenda for their committees and full meetings; and adopt means for continued oversight and participation once the directions have been established.

Schedule

At the request of President Gamble, Vice President for Academic Affairs Daniel Julius selected Associate Vice President Paula Donson to head up the UA Strategic Direction initiative, and they have outlined a detailed timeline for this work. It is our intention that we should plan to hold the 30-40 listening sessions and other means of citizen input this fall, engage the governance groups in the day-long meetings in the fall as well, and develop a working draft of the strategic directions by December 2011, in advance of the next legislative session. The Regents, as well as the President and Chancellors, would be attentive to this process throughout the period. Refining the directions in collaboration with the governor and legislature would occur in the new year, as would development of appropriate measures of achievement. The final strategic directions would come before the Regents for their confirmation in the spring of 2012.

Terry MacTaggart