



MEMORANDUM

To: Board of Regents and President Johnsen

From: Faculty Alliance

Date: 5/25/2020

RE: Student Success, Shared Governance, Revision of BOR Policy and Accreditation

Please consider that student voices are the most important voices in the system as we exist to engage students in the art and science of learning. Our students have been through the declaration of exigency, the attempted forced consolidation, exigency rescind, and are currently enduring the pandemic. Please consider the impact of your actions, regarding the options presented by the president, on our students as we move forward as a system.

On October 7, 2020, the UA Board of Regents passed the following motion during an emergency meeting of the full board:

“The Board of Regents approves ceasing consideration of a single accreditation until such a time as the University of Alaska Fairbanks secures its Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities accreditation in 2021. Subsequently, if the board chooses to actively consider single accreditation it will direct the president by formal action to conduct an independent cost benefit analysis and clearly examine accreditation issues.

This motion is effective October 7, 2019.”

The Board passed the first of these motions in response to a letter from the NWCCU indicating that the restructuring process did not adequately include the chancellors of UAF, UAA, and UAS and shared governance and failed to recognize the chancellor’s proper roles as heads of their institutions. The Board has yet to delineate the roles of the chancellors as CEOs of their respective universities in Board policy, which retains the vestiges of policy language from when there was a single university, the University of Alaska. The Board has failed to do this despite the letter from the NWCCU identifying a lack of delineation as a source of the problem in the fall. Faculty leadership has recommended that the Board amend its policy to allow chancellors to report directly to the board as is done at the University of Arizona, Kansas University, and elsewhere.

Last fall, without this clarifications of roles and responsibilities in place, the system president moved quickly toward a consolidation plan without carefully surveying restructuring options, performing a thorough cost analysis, or adequately engaging university leadership in a deliberative process regarding the fate of their respective institutions. Currently the president and the Board find themselves in a similar position, at risk of forcing major changes through without adhering to the principles reflected in the standards of university accreditation regarding the delineation of authority and the role of shared faculty and student governance.

At the May 18 Board of Regents Audit Committee meeting, the system president raised the fear of impending financial exigency as a consequence of the pandemic (though the warrant for such concerns is questionable) and has insisted that decisive action is necessary. In response, the committee passed a motion directing the president “to create a series of options to address budget issues that the full Board of Regents will consider when it convenes in June,” providing the chancellors and faculty (who are off contract) and students (who are not at the university) and only three or four weeks to contribute to plans that have the potential to reshape higher education in Alaska for decades. The options delivered to the chancellors in less than a week consisted of the following: (1) All community campuses throughout the state would be placed under a new MAU created out of UAS, which would serve as a center for a statewide community college, (2) UAS would be closed and its programs merged into UAF and UAA, (3) Community campuses would be reduced and restructured, (4) Some community campuses would be closed, with others transitioning to tribal college status or supported by local community, (5) The Statewide Office would be restructured either by consolidation or decentralization.

It is appropriate for leadership in the UA System to consider whether significant changes in institutional structure and programs may benefit students in Alaska during this time of fiscal uncertainty. However, as in the fall, it is necessary to carefully and thoroughly examine these restructuring options (accurate cost benefit analysis) and to also consider the extent to which more immediate savings might be achieved through reductions in existing administrative costs and the elimination of planned compensation increases.

The Board should heed the warning from the regional accrediting body in the fall and not make the same mistake of failing to incorporate the university chancellors, students and faculty in the deliberative process as well as community leaders and the public. Any of the options identified above would have long-term consequences for the people of Alaska. They should not be rushed into with the mistaken understanding that somehow long term structural changes will somehow ameliorate the short term revenue gap caused by the pandemic. Nothing could be further from the truth. Major structural changes have financial, cultural, and personnel costs in an institution before one may reap any long term benefits.