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DATE: October 31, 2016
TO: James R. Johnsen, President, University of Alaska
FROM: Tara Smith, Chair, UA Faculty Alliance TS
RE: An Assessment of **Single Accreditation vs Three Separate Accreditations** for the University of Alaska's Three Universities

The Faculty Alliance would like to address "An Assessment of Single Accreditation versus Three Separate Accreditations for the University of Alaska's Three Universities" by Dana L. Thomas on July 26, 2016 and the Board of Regents discussion thereof on September 16, 2016. The Faculty Alliance unanimously and vigorously supports the central findings that,

"Single accreditation is neither necessary nor sufficient to achieve cost savings, enhance the student experience, or improve state higher education performance measures. In addition, the process to merge UA's institutions would be disruptive, take at least two years, and might not be approved by the Commission. Therefore, undertaking an accreditation merger at this time is not recommended."

While we agree with the fundamental conclusion and specific recommendation on maintaining the accreditation of each university in the system, we were disappointed at the limited number of faculty consulted in the information-gathering process for the report. Only two faculty members appear on the list of those consulted, and none were currently members of faculty governance. We note that a wide range of administrators and outside experts were consulted, and we thank them for their input on the challenges facing all Alaskan universities. Given that this issue, and the underlying pressures that produced it, have yet to be resolved, we would like to offer our constructive comments, recommendations, and measured cautions. We hope to see an expanded faculty voice in this conversation going forward and urge all academic leadership to continue strong outreach and inclusion efforts to students, faculty, and staff.

The discussion of accreditation changes hinge upon two main issues: the need to cut costs and the need to maintain and improve outcomes (e.g., maintain leadership in Arctic research, improve graduation rates, increase enrollment). Cost-cutting must be carefully considered and options for increased revenue are limited. It is neither possible nor advisable to attempt to offset the budget cuts from the state, the total deferred maintenance of UA infrastructure, rising energy and health care costs, and even modest cost of living salary increases through increased student tuition alone. A massive tuition hike would eliminate a major driver of student enrollment (value/cost) and increase a major barrier to completion (cost). In addition to the need to spend less money, UA must maintain the excellence already achieved and improve in meeting priorities for the state. The suggestions for internal policy and process changes to address issues of quality fall into two main categories: administrative and academic. This memo addresses each domain (cost cutting, administrative changes, academic changes) separately below and concludes with a summary of our main recommendations in bullet points.

Cost Cutting

The discussion of the “Single Accreditation vs Three Separate Accreditations” report at the September Board of Regents meeting made it clear that a number of regents believe that the organizational changes necessitated by merging accreditations would result in significant cost savings for the entire system. In fact, there are dramatic cost savings that could be implemented much more rapidly and less disruptively than merging accreditation. The regents have as yet not fully exploited powers to influence popular opinions of and attitudes towards higher education generally and that provided by the UA family of institutions specifically. The UA Statewide Offices have real and present opportunities to reduce costs that will improve our system metrics on the cost side immediately. The universities are the direct providers to students and have the most opportunity to impact student outcomes and experiences. The Faculty Alliance offers our thoughts and recommendations for each level of leadership and would like to emphasize our willingness to work collaboratively on improving the culture, outcomes, and experience of higher education in Alaska.

The Board of Regents has rightfully identified the need to enhance the culture of education in Alaska and has committed to working with the Board of Education on toward this end. We commend this spirit of cooperation and inclusion for all Alaskans. We would like to offer the regents the example of the Montana University System Board of Regents “[College!Now](#)” initiative. This initiative promoted the opportunities for education and training available to Montanans in their community colleges. A similar UA initiative need not be limited to community college-level programs. The UA regents are recognized leaders in Alaska and could coordinate their efforts to communicate and promote the value of higher education across the state. We know that the regents are busy, committed individuals, and we recognize their service is important and demanding. We believe they should be fully supported in crafting a public outreach campaign. The diversity of the educational options available to Alaskans is to be celebrated and the Board’s participation in the effort would be welcomed.

The UA Statewide Offices can adapt most quickly to our changing circumstances, and should lead the efforts to cut costs. Their focus should be direct support of our universities’ missions. Statewide funding can be consolidated to those services that are legally required to be at a system-level and only those that the individual universities could not do for themselves. The changes that Statewide could make to reduce its costs overall to the system can be implemented on much more aggressive timelines than actual savings can be realized from cuts to academic programming. Statewide can set a strong example that leads our universities to greater efficiencies and system collaboration, but only if it is willing to make these difficult decisions now. Every study/audit of Statewide has come to the same conclusion: it must be reduced. In fact, most of these studies occurred in better budget times. Leadership in cost cutting within UA Statewide for the greater good of students has never been more urgent.

The universities must responsibly allocate funding to achieve the mission of each institution. Support services that do not contribute to mission fulfillment cannot be justified in this climate. As the leadership have noted, the institutions have been cut to the extent that delivery of programs and research productivity have been negatively affected, and more cuts loom. The expectations set by our state government, communities, and individual constituents are considerable. The university leadership must be able to demonstrate to the public that their funds are being utilized effectively and their contributions respected.

Faculty Alliance represents the constituency with the most direct, sustained impact on institutional mission fulfillment and student success. We stand ready to participate, advise, lead, and innovate with all

levels of academic leadership and with our faculty colleagues across the state. Please do not hesitate to call on us.

Administrative Changes

The Faculty Alliance supports the alignment of administrative functions, such as payment deadlines and policies. The common calendar is an example of overlap between administrative functions and academic issues.

The report emphasizes a common student experience, which has some appeal in terms of streamlining processes and leveraging cooperation. However, there is tension between this idea of commonality and the Strategic Pathways goal of enhancing distinction. Alaskan students generally choose one of our institutions based on their region of origin, which means they likely expect to have an academic program in their interests available. Strategic Pathways seeks to emphasize specializations for each university, which will necessarily alter existing regional attendance patterns. To be successful in this framework, each university must have the means to distinguish itself and to communicate its uniqueness to all Alaskans. A common student experience should only be implemented in ways that do not interfere with institutional missions and academic excellence.

While we agree there are several administrative tasks, registration dates, and behind-the-scenes tasks that can be common across universities and that students may appreciate this homogeneity, a common academic experience is not a good target. All too often, the cost of alignment is dampening to innovation. This has already occurred with the common calendar. Prior to the Statewide decision to have one academic calendar, UAA had been in discussions internally with faculty, staff, and students on innovations to their semesters. The majority of UAA students at the time were interested in pursuing intensive, 13-week fall and spring semesters with a 3-week January term in between. While there is evidence that shorter, more intensive courses produce greater learning gains for students, this project had to be abandoned for a mandated, lock-step approach to the academic calendar. The common calendar also costs programs additional staff and faculty time to seek approvals for alternate calendars or schedules based on sound pedagogical and industry demands, for example the trimester system used by the UAA program in nursing. The common calendar may make taking courses from multiple institutions less challenging but, the number of students doing so before it was implemented indicates course timing was not a significant barrier. We hope that the benefits of alignment activities will be weighed carefully against its costs as we move forward.

Leadership incentives could be helpful in promoting unity of purpose amongst administrators. However, unless these are formulated as a joint enterprise between leadership and faculty, they may simply become a reward to administrators for the work of faculty, and thus undermine both faculty morale and educational quality. We propose engaging with faculty to generate leadership incentives that reward leaders for their own work and that produce meaningful benefit to students.

Promotion and tenure criteria need to be stable and reliable as faculty use them over long arcs of their careers. Rapid changes are disruptive and, as the process is only a periodic review, the rewards would come too far in the future to produce efficient, immediate results. However, incentives could be offered annually to faculty for identified institutional priorities if funding were allocated. The incentives and award criteria should be structured to produce the type of collaboration and results that are critical for student success and mission fulfillment. A transparent review process is also important for incentives to function in the manner intended.

Any performance-based measures used to evaluate mission fulfillment of the universities must focus on their individual missions. Faculty and administration could collaborate to develop incentives, accountability, and effectiveness.

Academic Changes

Faculty Alliance agrees with alignment of academic policies that enhance the quality of educational opportunities for Alaskan students. Faculty must lead these efforts and have proven themselves effective and innovative. We are already collaborating across the system in meaningful ways for students on GER coordination. We appreciate the benefits of the larger common calendar framework.

However, students are individuals and express their individual interests and culture preference through choosing different majors and different universities. Diverse academic options are vital for students to pursue their long-term goals. Strategic Pathways points towards specialization and distinction for each university while seeking to maintain the breadth of programs, research, and creative activity necessary to be vibrant institutions and worthy of public investment.

Recommendations

- Create a statewide outreach campaign based out of the BOR on the value of higher education;
- Enhance public awareness of three distinct universities and the various opportunities this affords all Alaskans in pursuing higher education;
- The President should reduce the cost of UA Statewide Offices immediately and publish cost savings;
- Prioritize mission fulfillment for budget allocations within all three universities;
- Address the need for a permanent chancellor at UAF;
- Pursue incentives as a joint faculty and academic leadership project;
- Allocate funding for faculty incentives for work towards institutional priorities at each university;
- Partner with faculty on institutional performance measures and consider that they may differ by the mission and context of each university;
- Focus efforts on the beneficial *administrative* elements of a common student experience (parts of the common calendar, administrative deadlines, single email and Blackboard login, etc.) and work closely with Faculty Alliance and other governance groups on these projects.