

Update on Planning  
for the  
Alaska College of Education

University of Alaska Board of Regents  
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President

The Board of Regents has provided direction to university administration to establish a single, streamlined and cohesive College of Education, subject to Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) accreditation requirements. The Board's action is in support of the university's commitment to strengthen the education culture in Alaska, to build on our longstanding and important partnership with school districts across the state, to provide more standardized and consistent pathways to the teaching profession, and to educate 90 percent of Alaska's new teachers by 2025.

In response, we have taken significant steps to implement the Board's direction, including critical discussions with the NWCCU.

As we move through the implementation process on any major initiative, and especially one as important as this one is to the university and the state, it is prudent to conduct a "mid-stream check." While we are committed to crossing the stream, i.e., capturing the numerous benefits of a single college of education, based on what we are learning as we move forward, we are considering whether the university's interests are best served by crossing a little upstream or downstream from our current destination.

Significantly, we have learned recently that there are significant uncertainties that could possibly impact UAS' institutional accreditation—and the viability of our current direction for consolidating teacher education programs—that result from a few selected aspects of the current plan. Given these high stakes, it's appropriate to consider adjustments that would mitigate the risks. In this way, we not only mitigate risk but also position ourselves to carry through on the Board of Regents' direction in a more timely and effective manner.

This report will cover the following:

1. Review of the Board of Regents' direction
2. Update on our progress
3. Review of institutional accreditation issues
4. An adjustment to our current plan
5. Attributes of the adjustment
6. Suggested next steps

## **1. Review of the Board of Regents direction**

In December 2016 the Board of Regents directed the administration to create a single college of education at the university, and to locate its administration at the University of Alaska Southeast (UAS). The schools of education at the Fairbanks (UAF) and Anchorage (UAA) campuses would be dissolved and all education programs, faculty, staff, and students—no matter their location—would become part of and report to this college at UAS, the Alaska College of Education. The Board's direction included the condition that the new college would be approved by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), our regional institutional accrediting body.

Interests served by this plan include:

- accountability for teacher education programs in one new dean at UAS;
- ability for that dean to establish consistent and standardized programs, set faculty workloads, evaluate faculty promotion and tenure, and ensure intercampus collaboration;
- ability of students to earn their teaching degree at a nearby campus, supported by faculty and staff at that campus
- opportunity to maintain faculty research and other specialized and valuable functions at the several campuses;
- curricular review through one rather than three separate faculty governance processes;
- opportunity to focus additional resources on teacher education in areas such as recruitment, marketing, faculty positions, student scholarships, advising, partnerships, and mentoring; and
- UAS' strong record of teacher education and commitment to this initiative.

## **2. Update on our progress**

Pursuant to the Board's direction, we have begun the process of creating the Alaska College of Education. Progress is being made, in large part due to the hard work of UAS Chancellor Rick Caulfield and the members of the Steering Committee.

To date, we have:

- established the Alaska College of Education Steering Committee comprised of administrators and faculty (elected by faculty at UAA, UAF, and UAS), chaired by Chancellor Caulfield;
- convened all education faculty from across UA for a day long summit, the first time many of them have met their colleagues from the other campuses; subsequent faculty meetings are planned in September and October;
- created an External Advisory Council made up of employers and other important stakeholders to update them on our progress and to solicit their input on our future direction;
- created several functional working groups comprised of experts in areas such as curriculum, student affairs, human resources, and facilities; and
- met with the president of the NWCCU for guidance on accreditation issues; given the primacy of institutional accreditation and success of the initiative, we have made this our top priority for near term work.

## **3. Review of institutional accreditation issues**

The chancellors and I met recently with Dr. Sandra Elman, president of the NWCCU, on the accreditation process. Our purpose was to understand in more detail the process, criteria, and standards that the NWCCU would apply to our initiative. We set

up the discussion with Dr. Elman by providing her the rationale for the Board's direction, extensive information about our plan and our progress, as well as several major questions and concerns that have been raised on the campuses.

Dr. Elman was very understanding of the challenges we face and she strongly supports our effort to strengthen teacher education in Alaska. She was most helpful in describing the major criteria the NWCCU would use in its review and the questions and concerns that likely would be asked, which include the following:

- Academic: To what extent is the proposed change consistent with the UAS' mission and purpose? What is gained for teacher education in Alaska by the change? What is lost at UAA and UAF? How would this impact faculty research, tenure, and workload? How are UAA's and UAF's missions impacted? Does UAS have the capacity to maintain a high quality teaching and research program across the state? What was the rationale for selecting UAS as the lead university versus the other universities?
- Faculty: Have the education faculty been consulted? What are the views of faculty governance? Is there faculty buy-in for the change at all three campuses? What concerns have they raised?
- Students: How will the change affect students and their access to quality teacher education programs across the state?
- Financial: Is the change financially sustainable? Is it cost effective? Does UAS have the resources to provide teacher education statewide? What is lost by the other campuses—financially—by the change? How does the loss of tuition revenue impact those universities and their missions?

After a lengthy and spirited discussion, Dr. Elman summarized her comments by saying that our request would be very challenging because it is unprecedented in her long experience at NWCCU. She characterized the request as much more complex than the NWCCU is accustomed to reviewing due to the number of institutions involved and the major scale and implications of the change. As a result, she suggested the accreditation review process would require a high level of detail in terms of information and plans required for review. Consequently, the review process likely would take significant time (multiple years) and effort. And after all that, she could not assure us that the NWCCU would approve the plan.

A difficult, time consuming, and uncertain accreditation process creates major challenges to our ability to successfully recruit students, engage our faculty, build on our strengths, and deliver programs while we go through the process. It also became clear that this change could raise questions about UAS' institutional accreditation and endanger the university's interests in strengthening our teacher education programs. Because institutional accreditation is so important, we turned to thinking about our options.

#### 4. An adjustment to our current plan

Whatever adjustments we make to our plan, they should preserve these key elements:

- a single college of education;
- a coordinated and standardized curriculum that meets the needs of Alaska;
- effective and collaborative statewide leadership from UAS;
- an engaged and motivated faculty working together across the campuses;
- a variety of attractive options for our students;
- a strong partnership with school districts and the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development;
- a financially viable, high quality set of programs that meet the state's enormous need for high quality Alaska educated teachers;
- completion in a reasonable period of time without substantial impacts on institutional accreditation.

A single adjustment to our current plan that I believe would meet these interests and, importantly, avoid accreditation concerns altogether has emerged from discussions with Dr. Elman and the chancellors. This adjustment would be for our programs, faculty, staff, and students to remain affiliated with their current universities. There would still be only one Alaska College of Education—housed at UAS—one dean, and several other unifying characteristics of the current plan. With this adjustment, we would need to request approval of the changes from NWCCU; however, the proposed modifications may reduce the challenge and complexity of the Commission's review. Here's how the adjusted plan would look:

- A single college of education at UAS would be led by a single dean at UAS. The colleges at UAA and UAF would be dissolved and integrated into existing colleges at those universities. The dean positions there would be eliminated and replaced by program directors; and the programs, faculty, staff, and students would become part of existing colleges on those two campuses. Degrees would be awarded by all three universities. Faculty workloads and promotion and tenure decisions, program funding, and student support services would continue to be managed by the several campuses.
- The dean of the new college of education at UAS would have an elevated title—Executive Dean and Chair of the University of Alaska Teacher Education Council—to communicate the position's statewide responsibility and role as chair of a statewide teacher education council with faculty and administration members from all three campuses. (The existing Steering Committee easily could serve in this role.) This council would be given statewide-level performance goals and it would, pursuant to those goals, recommend streamlined and aligned curricular changes to achieve both common and campus specific programs as needed to meet the interests of school districts and our students. In addition, the council will formulate funding requests and have ready access to all teacher education program budgets.

- UAA and UAF would provide funding, in an amount to be determined, to the new college at UAS to compensate for services provided by UAS.
- The Executive Dean would continue the External Advisory Council comprised of key stakeholders from across the state to provide advice and counsel to the dean.

## **5. Attributes of the adjustment**

By making this adjustment to our plan, we would:

- build on the strong leadership UAS already has demonstrated and the progress already made on this initiative;
- avoid the complex, costly, and time consuming process of accreditation approval through the substantive change process, thus eliminating the risk and diversion of valuable human and financial resources required for that process;
- maintain most of the attributes of the original plan, including a single college and statewide leadership of a single dean at UAS, the Steering Committee and the External Advisory Council, along with streamlined and aligned programs across the system;
- provide the framework for making near-term strategic financial investments at UAS and at the other campuses that will grow these critical programs;
- provide clear authority for the Executive Dean at UAS to escalate any intercampus issues to the chancellors and the president for timely resolution;
- utilize our current governance processes to ensure that faculty views are given due consideration as curricular changes are made;
- work with our provosts, the Statewide Academic Council, and other academic leaders to ensure that program and institutional accreditation issues are addressed;
- proceed immediately to hire the new Executive Dean position at UAS, nonretaining the current deans; and commence the work of coordinating, streamlining, and, where appropriate, standardizing our programs;
- support our faculty and staff in recruiting, educating, and placing our graduates in schools across Alaska; and
- support the University of Alaska's interests in accountability and responsiveness to the state's needs (through annual progress reports to me), cost-effectiveness, consistent and high quality programs, specialization where it makes sense, innovation in the fast changing area of education technology, and collaboration across the system.

## **6. Suggested next steps**

This report is posted on the Board of Regents' meeting website and is scheduled for discussion on September 7 with the Academic and Student Affairs Committee and with the full board on September 14.

In preparation for those discussions, as of September 1, I have briefed the Alaska College of Education Steering Committee and informed and encouraged input from education faculty and faculty governance leaders at all three universities and from key external stakeholders. I have informed the External Advisory Council and invited comment from that group as well.

I look forward to addressing any questions you may have and, more importantly, to discussing with the Board the best way forward on this important initiative.