

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA IS RISING TO THE OCCASION

By Jim Johnsen

There was a time in Alaska when leadership was seized by those who had inexhaustible enthusiasm and strong motivation to address the challenges faced by our state. Today, our leaders face demands – financial, social and educational – that are daunting. Now, more than ever, is the time for Alaskans to step up and join together to address our state’s challenges and seize our opportunities.

At the University of Alaska, we understand the challenge, and we have felt the pain of fiscal reality. Our budget gap heading into the coming year is \$40 million, even after the Legislature brought our operating budget up to the level requested by the Governor. Despite this challenge, we cannot, and will not, sit idly by and wish for a different outcome. Rather, we are devoting our brains, our hands, and our hearts to our state’s most pressing imperative – educating Alaskans with the skills and the know-how to become teachers, nurses, and engineers; to innovate and create new businesses that diversify our economy; to serve and contribute to our communities; and to become the leaders who build a bright future for our state.

The university is driving the educational imperative for Alaska. We have launched initiatives to become an even stronger, more effective institution that better meets Alaska’s educational and workforce needs.

The first initiative, **Strategic Pathways**, is engaging the university community and experts from around the state to determine how we can expand access to our programs to all Alaskans, operate more cost effectively, and build on the unique strengths at each campus to meet our state’s higher education needs. More than 100 Alaskans came together last week to begin work on seven major program areas. They made great progress and are set to present reports to me in mid-August. I will then formulate recommendations and action plans for implementation.

Central to our commitment to Alaska's education imperative is an emphasis on teacher education. The university is reinvigorating our teacher education programs. We must graduate more teachers to serve the needs of K-12 students who then would be more likely to go on to higher education, whether at one of our community campuses across the state or at one of our main campuses. We also are reinvesting in programs geared to encourage and prepare rural Alaskan students for a science, math, or engineering education.

We must reverse the trend of the declining pursuit of higher education in Alaska. Despite our growing population, university enrollment has stayed fairly constant over the last forty years—approximately 30,000. That means, as a share of the population, the percentage of Alaskans enrolled in college has fallen by 32 percent since 1980, while the demand for a highly skilled workforce has been and will continue to increase.

Last fall, we learned some startling statistics from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS):

- Alaska's workforce will need 65 percent of its workers to have some higher education by 2025. According to NCHEMS, we are at 37 percent. We need to increase our skilled workforce production by 76 percent over the coming decade.
- We hire 70 percent of our new K-12 teachers each year from outside Alaska, 70 percent!

We need to understand the changes in demand for our economy and take advantage of the opportunities. Our environment is changing, with dramatic effects on Alaska's infrastructure, wildlife, society and culture. Our economy has for too long been dependent on just a few sectors, with one in particular playing a dominant role, and it is in decline. What will take its place? Whatever it is, you can be sure it will need a highly skilled workforce, best prepared by the University of Alaska.

Higher education attainment is strongly correlated with increased income, health, civic participation and family success whether in rural Alaska or in our cities. Improving the future lives of our students can directly, and positively, impact the future of our state.

Another major initiative is to complete construction of the Engineering Building at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. This initiative is part of a statewide partnership with engineering leaders in Anchorage and Fairbanks. UAA's building was fully funded and completed last year. UAF's building was not fully funded and will need \$37.5 million to complete. This coming week, the Board of Regents will decide whether to authorize UA to take the necessary steps to complete the building so that we can enroll and educate more engineers to meet Alaska's workforce needs.

A third major initiative is to assess the efficiencies of single accreditation for the university versus three separately accredited institutions. The pros and cons will be researched and weighed objectively, and the regents will make a final determination this fall whether our interests in access, quality, and cost effectiveness are best served under one or three accreditations.

The long summer months have traditionally been a time of transformation. In July 1776, we exerted our sovereign freedom with the signing of the Declaration of Independence; in July 1862, the Morrill Act became effective creating land grant universities like ours; in July 1915, the cornerstone establishing the University of Alaska was laid; and in July 1969, we walked on the moon for the first time.

Just as we recommit to our nation's enduring values when we celebrate its founding this week, I hope you will join the University of Alaska in our work to lead the state forward through higher education. Now more than ever, this is our time to build an even greater university and, as a result, an even greater state.

Alaska depends on us to resolve its most pressing needs through our research, creative activities, teaching and learning, outreach and service to our people. We have done a great job over the years in performing to our purpose, but the work is never done, and there remain many large needs, and many exciting opportunities that require our renewed commitment.

We understand what is at risk if we fail to lead. It is a simple truth, in all times and in all places, 100 years ago when we were a fledgling university and right now as Alaskans face an uncertain future. But, as Alaska's great university, lead we must, and we will with confidence, untiring enthusiasm, and with that special grit that makes Alaskans rise up together for a strong and prosperous future for us all.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James R. Johnson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.