

25 January 2016

TO: University of Alaska Community  
FROM: Jim Johnsen, President  
SUBJECT: Planning Our Future

The University of Alaska Board of Regents held its annual strategic planning meeting last Thursday and Friday in Anchorage. The meeting included academic and administrative leaders from the system office and the campuses.

The purpose of the meeting was to set the long term course for Alaska's university system during this most difficult financial period for the state. The Regents were unanimous in their commitment that the university provide excellent programs at each of its campuses, ensure access to the opportunities only the university can provide Alaskans, and do so more cost effectively.

The meeting began with a report on the university's progress and challenges in meeting the state's high priority needs for higher education. The presentation was followed by detailed information on the university's organizational structure, the roles and responsibilities of the Regents and university administration, the missions of its campuses, the wide range of academic programs offered across the state, cost cutting steps already underway, options for restructuring, and planning for an additional budget cut this year.

The Regents' focus then moved to how the university could, through a more unified plan:

1. cut expenses in both academic programs and administration while investing in areas of need and opportunity
2. reduce the number (and cost) of redundant programs across the campuses while maintaining wide access to those programs for place committed students
3. diversify revenues so the university does not depend so much on the state
4. improve the student experience and their ability to make progress toward their goals
5. build on our world leading research to diversify the economy
6. meet the state's workforce needs by working with employers and K-12 leaders (with special focus on the production of teachers and health care workers)
7. manage deferred maintenance on our aging buildings
8. engage faculty, students, staff, alumni, and the community in this process

The one formal action taken by the Regents (by unanimous vote) was to support a draft framework for a long term strategic plan for the university and to charge me with building out the plan for Regents' consideration at their next meeting in February.

Jo Heckman, Chair of the Board of Regents, said: "President Johnsen discussed strategic pathways that UA can embark upon to address the many challenges facing our university. At these difficult fiscal times, it is important to note that our university has provided world class education to Alaskans for nearly one hundred years and will be here to educate Alaskans for

the next hundred years. It's incumbent upon us to clearly define a university that can do just that through its three major campuses. We have areas of excellence and expertise at each of our campuses and we hope to highlight and strengthen our campuses while eliminating redundancy, thus becoming more streamlined and efficient. I believe this is the best way to use our resources and is also the best way to serve our students and our state. The Regents gave their unanimous support to President Johnsen to proceed with the Strategic Pathways model and present to us again for review at our February meeting."

The draft framework supported by the Regents is based on several core principles:

Focus:

Each of the three universities will focus their research, teaching, and outreach activities on that university's unique set of strengths, capabilities, advantages, and opportunities. Each university will serve as a "lead campus" in its areas of focus for the UA system.

Access:

Instead of a wide range of academic degree programs delivered by each campus, diverse program options will be available from the "lead campus" to students across the system via e-learning (distance education). In addition, at each campus there will continue to be a wide range of courses offered, though there may be fewer full degree programs provided by each campus.

Diversity:

By assigning "lead campus" responsibilities to each campus, we can maintain or even expand the diversity of program options available across the system while avoiding unnecessary and costly duplication of programs at each campus.

Excellence:

Each program will be resourced sufficiently to be excellent, thus allowing the university to retain and attract top quality faculty, recruit more Alaskan and "outside" students, and attract more private donations and specialized grants and contracts.

Consistency:

General Education Requirements (GERs), liberal arts and humanities courses, developmental education classes, and career and technical certificate and degree programs will be available broadly at all campuses. The university will continue to enable student transfers and flexibility through common calendars, GERS, and courses. In addition, there will be greater consistency in administrative systems and educational technologies across the university.

The university has accomplished a great deal during the decade of higher state oil revenues. We have graduated more than 50,000 students and enabled them to improve their abilities and their earnings; initiated or expanded programs to meet state workforce needs in areas like health care, process technology, engineering, mining, and others; and led the world in arctic and Alaska-focused research. We will do everything we can to become more cost effective, but we need a level of State financial support to continue to be a strong contributor to the economic and social well-being of the state.

I, and all of university leaders, will continue to advocate for the value of the University to Alaska and for the fact that there are few investments the state can make that will provide a greater return.

The next step in the process is to build out the draft framework with greater detail as to the academic areas of focus for each “lead campus” accompanied by a high level planning and implementation timeline, communication plan, a listing of the significant issues and challenges that must be worked through, and a plan for engagement of the university’s key internal and external stakeholders. This document—tentatively referred to as Strategic Pathways—will be presented in public session to the Board of Regents at its meeting in February. A working draft of the document will be posted on the website later this week.

With continued support from the Regents, the university will use the plan for decisions required by the budget process this year, for identification of any impacts on academic programs, for consultation with governance and other important stakeholders, and for the full implementation process over the coming several years.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue for our university. As this process develops, we will make sure you are informed and have the opportunity for input.