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UA's students are motivated to finish faster

By Pat Jacobson

As chair of the University of Alaska's Board of Regents, I hear a lot of stories from our students. Often these stories come from students who face down enormous challenges, stick with it, work hard and earn that certificate, associate, bachelor's or master's degree. For most of them, the payoff of a better job, increased earnings and more skills and opportunities is well worth it.



Not all of our students are the same, and prescriptions to help them shouldn't all be the same, and they're not. But one message we've been working on seems to be making a real difference: students who attend full time and take a heavier load each semester—say 15 credits per semester vs. 12—have a much greater chance at success than students who take fewer credits.

In the last year, we've seen an increase of nearly 10 percent of our full-time students at UA taking 15 or more credits, versus the minimum of 12 for financial aid purposes. As someone interested in lifelong education, I find this information heartening. These students will graduate with less debt, too—a real bonus.

Why has the UA System seen a nearly 10 percent increase? We think there are several reasons.

One big one is the governor and Legislature had the foresight to approve the Alaska Performance Scholarship, a college scholarship based on taking a more challenging curriculum while in high school. One of the requirements for this scholarship is that students must take a minimum of 15 credits from their sophomore year in college on. You might wonder why the scholarship includes that minimum. Well, research shows students who take at least 30 credits a year are more likely to attain their graduation goals in a timely manner, and at less cost to them, than students who don't.

The governor and Legislature also supported the university's request for more academic advising money two years in a row. At each of our

campuses, the focus on advising and mentoring has never been better. We know we have room for improvement, but we're already seeing the results of this investment.

The university also has a timely completion campaign aimed at our full-time students called Stay on TRACK. The TRACK acronym stands for Take a full load of 30 credits a year or 15 each semester; Register early to get needed classes; Ask an academic advisor and use DegreeWorks (a software program used throughout the UA System to track progress toward degree programs); Choose a major and stick with it; and Keep up the grades! The message to our students that each additional year pursuing a degree costs an extra \$10,000 seems to be resonating.

This growth in workload among full-time students is at a time of overall shrinking enrollments due to demographics (we don't have as many high school graduates in Alaska, so a smaller pool from which to draw). In the last 10 years, the increase in students taking a heavier credit load has, in fact, never been bigger than what we've witnessed from fall 2011 to fall 2012.

Students are hearing the message, and demanding more of themselves and our faculty and staff. Our faculty and staff are more engaged in helping them than ever before. We have more work to do to improve course sequencing and credit transferability between our three universities and community campuses, as well as improved eLearning processes, but we're getting there. The nearly 10 percent increase in full-time students taking heavier credit loads demonstrates that the University of Alaska is on the right track.

Pat Jacobson of Kodiak is chair of the University of Alaska Board of Regents, the 11-member governing board for the 16-campus UA System. A former elementary school teacher for 26 years, she also served on the Kodiak School Board.

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