

HOW CAN THE UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA FAIRBANKS IMPROVE THEIR RETENTION RATES OF ALASKA NATIVE STUDENTS?

By

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Abstract

Retention rates of Alaska Native students at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) can be improved. Although great strides have been made and continue to be made with the creation of Rural Student Services (RSS), more can be done. This case study explores why retention is a challenge, what has been successful, and explores new ideas.

Background

The University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) was founded in 1917. As a land, sea, and space grant university, the modern-day UAF has locations throughout Alaska. UAF's main campus is in Fairbanks, and the rural campuses are located in Dillingham, Kotzebue, Fairbanks, Nome and Bethel. Alaska Native students are enrolled in all of these campuses. The main campus has the highest number of Alaska Native students enrolled. However, most rural campuses have a higher percentage of Alaska Native students in the overall enrollment. The location of rural campuses encourages placed-based education. In Fairbanks, the Troth Yeddha' Campus is located on the lands of the Dena people of the lower Tanana River. The first UAF graduation took place in 1923 with one graduate. It would take until 1935 before an Alaska Native student, Flora Harper, would graduate. Over the years, Alaska Native students have faced challenges at UAF. Work is being done to help students complete their degrees but more needs to happen. Specifically, what can be done to increase retention rates of Alaska Native students to ensure they complete their degree?

Higher education degrees were not common among Alaska Natives early in the twentieth century. Data from 1895 to 1950 shows twenty-four college degrees were awarded to Alaska Natives.² Between 1950 and 1967, 101 Alaska Native earned degrees.³ With the discovery of oil in Prudhoe Bay in 1967, an influx of oil tax money brought attention to education. Schools were being built and funded in rural areas. Questions about what opportunities were available at UAF for rural students, who were mainly Alaska Native

¹ Copyright 2020 by The Evergreen State College. Minnie Naylor is an advisor for Rural Student Services at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) as well as a graduate student in the Department of Alaska Native Studies and Rural Development at UAF. Cathy Brooks is a faculty member in the Department of Alaska Native Studies and Rural Development. Teaching notes are a tool to create discussion and hopefully formulate new ideas.

² Michael Jennings, *Alaska Native Political Leadership and Higher Education*, (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2004), 81.

³ Ibid.

began to surface. In 1969, Student Orientation Services (later renamed Rural Student Services) was established by students at UAF and began a slow movement forward in addressing the challenges facing Alaska Native students.

Alaska Native students appear to be getting the message that post-secondary education is important. In 2018, almost 25 percent of UAF’s first-year students at Troth Yeddha’ Campus were Alaska Native/American Indian (AN/AI) and as a student body, over 20 percent of UAF’s students are AN/AI.⁴ In 2018, UAF had 261 Alaska Natives receive degrees.

Year	Troth Yeddha Campus (Fairbanks Main) Alaska Native Students Enrolled	Troth Yeddha Campus (Fairbanks Main) Non-Native Students Enrolled
Fall 2013	705	5655
Fall 2014	662	5870
Fall 2015	669	5546
Fall 2016	691	5385
Fall 2017	743	4924
Fall 2018	724	4593

As encouraging as the increase in Alaska Native/American Indian students attending UAF is; there is still work to be done. Many Alaska Native/American Indian students are dropping out within their first year or before they finish their degree program. The first-year retention rate at four-year public institutions, in the United States, for Alaska Native/American Indian students is 56.2%⁵. Alaska Native/American Indian students at UAF have a retention rate of around fifty percent. The five-year average retention rate from 2013-2018, for UAF’s Alaska Native students who were first-year students, was only 50.9%.⁶

Why Students are not retained

⁴ “UAF Facts and Figures,” University of Alaska Fairbanks, accessed August 6, 2019, <https://uaf.edu/facts/>.

⁵ National Student Clearinghouse <https://nscresearchcenter.org/snapshotreport33-first-year-persistence-and-retention>

⁶ University of Alaska Fairbanks Office of Planning, Analysis and Institutional Research, *Rural Student Services Statistical Abstract*, (Fairbanks, Alaska: University of Alaska Press, July 2019), 14.

Over the years, RSS Advisors have anecdotally gathered reasons for students not continuing their post-secondary education. While the reasons vary for each student, the recurring theme based on RSS exit survey information and closing semester statistics have been homesickness, trying to balance family responsibilities and financial resources. Other observations have included time management challenges, drug and alcohol addiction, and may include less discussed challenges such as sexual assault, racism, and discrimination.

Whatever the reason, the challenge is to keep the students who are facing the challenges while they work through the difficulties and ensure they are supported and successfully complete their first year or continue their education. Maintaining support, advising, and re-entry options are important to the RSS approach to advising the “whole” student. If these students do not continue their post-secondary education, Alaska will miss out on growing their own educators, chief executive officers, business owners, and future leaders of the state.

Challenges in Alaska that impact Alaska Native student retention

Although several elements can impact the Alaska Native student retention rate, a closer look at high school teacher turnover, family needs, and the impact of the new structure at the college may give potential insight into some new pathways for working with students.

Most rural high school students in Alaska have to deal with high teacher turnover rates. The consequence of having numerous teachers means less relationship building and students receive different teaching styles, content in their subjects, and levels of expertise throughout their four years in high school. According to the University of Alaska Anchorage Center for Alaska Education Policy Research, the school districts in Alaska hire nearly 1,000 teachers every year.⁷ One reason why there is a high teacher turnover rate is that teachers are not ready for rural Alaska living.⁸ The high teacher turnover rate impacts the students as they often lack a strong foundation of skills they need to succeed in post-secondary education. A seemingly minor impact of the turnover rate is study skills. Having various teachers with different teaching pedagogy can impact how a student learns to complete homework and study. Instructors that constantly badger and remind students of their homework deadlines instead of allowing them to experience the consequence can create an extra challenge for the student at the post-secondary level. Once they are in college, students are expected to know how to manage their schedules and complete their assignments and exams in a timely manner. This study habit foundation is needed for success in post-secondary education.

⁷ Hanlon, Tegan. "Teacher Turnover Costs Alaska about \$20 Million a Year, Study Says." *Anchorage Daily News*, April 28, 2017. Accessed March 20, 2018. <https://www.adn.com/alaska-news/education/2017/04/27/teacher-turnover-costs-alaska-about-20-million-per-year-university-study-says/>.

⁸ Ibid.

Another retention issue potentially tied to their high school education can start right at the beginning of the student's post-secondary career. Once the student graduates high school and enters college, students are required to take placement tests for math and English. The outcome of these tests have many first-year Alaska Native and rural students required to start in developmental math and English classes. Most students are embarrassed and discouraged about the placement of these courses. Sometimes students are simply bad test takers and end up not placed into the right course; finding themselves frustrated in a course that is too easy and costing them time and money. The placement not only increases the time it takes to get the degree but increases the cost as well by having to pay for courses that will not count towards their degree requirements. Some students are so discouraged with their placement, they do not want to continue their education.

Family can play a huge factor in retention for some students. It is not uncommon for an Alaska Native or rural student to need to help their family, which could mean taking time off school and away from their education. In most places, the assumption would be made that this means the student is needing to work a job to create additional income. While that may be the case, most of the time for Alaska Native students it means helping with the family's subsistence lifestyle. Many Alaska Native families still hunt and gather for their food. Providing is important to the family and is healthy, organic, and cost-efficient. For example, an entire moose can provide food for months, versus purchasing beef from a store, saving the family valuable cash income and culturally continuing their subsistence diet. Some rural schools do offer subsistence leave for students to help families during the hunt, but that takes time away from education and if an instructor is not willing to work with the student, it can create extra challenges. Participating in the hunts, students learn essential cultural skills but it can delay their western education. Typically, first-year college students living away from home will gain weight during their first year because of the different types of foods that are available to them. Rural students often miss their native subsistence food. Not only will they miss the food, they miss the cultural activities and family aspects the food represents, making them homesick because it is not as easily accessible to them.

Retention issues also appear to be tied to the lack of certain tools for first-year students. Students will have to learn how to be successful through their mistakes during their first year. Some students do not know how to create boundaries between their social life and school. This form of freedom and new friendships can lead to poor study habits. Some students will get very homesick and want to head back to the village. Homesickness is very common for students from smaller rural areas. Parents will tell them it is okay to return home making it even harder to retain those students. Typically, this is the first time first-year students are on their own with no one organizing their time and reminding them to study. Students are learning to budget not only their finances but their time. College classes are offered at different times of the day and different days of the week, creating a schedule that can be challenging to find the time and place to study. It can be an adjustment for some students to realize there is no set time to do homework unless they set it. For various reasons, setting a time to study and do homework seems challenging for many students. Consequently, when the students do not do their homework, they do

not attend class and eventually fall so far behind they do not finish the course or semester. Sometimes it is difficult for students to grasp at the beginning of the semester how important it is to set routines that will help you succeed.

RSS recognizes the importance of catching students early in the semester. UAF does have a TRIO program where first-generation students, low-income students, or students with a documented disability and enrolled in a bachelor's program can apply to receive services. Some RSS students qualify and participate in both programs. This dual tracking can sometimes help catch students falling behind more quickly. RSS provides services for students who are rural or Native, their degree type is not a factor, so an RSS advisor can be working with a certificate degree student or a bachelor's degree student. UAF is attempting to address tracking students better through a new computer program that is meant to improve communication between advisors, faculty, and eventually students.

Faculty and their pedagogy can also influence student retention. Most faculty come to the university having received their education through the western education system. Western education tends to have a strong content focus design versus a process-centered design that ties more closely with Alaska Native ways of learning. Not surprisingly, students can struggle in courses using curricula that move through material quickly and do not allow a lot of processing or deep reflection. Depending upon the faculty member's teaching style, students from rural Alaska can struggle with engagement and find a professor intimidating. This impression can impact the necessary communication needed with a faculty member when a student is struggling. The student will be afraid of approaching the faculty member to discuss challenges or feel like they are not being understood when they do. Often faculty may not be aware of the strong non-verbal communication an Alaska Native student is sharing and the student feels frustrated and misunderstood.

Many students do not understand that dropping classes can have catastrophic consequences as well. The student may lose scholarships or funding because dropping a class does not give them enough credits or if they choose to not drop the class and simply fail the class, their grade point average (GPA) can drop causing the student to possibly lose scholarships or be put on academic probation that limits what a student can take. UAF also has to follow federal funding rules that may also impact the ability of students to take out loans. For example, Lucy Ann⁹ had a conditional grant helping her pay for college and in the terms of the agreement, if the student does not graduate, the student will have to pay back the scholarship. As a freshman, Lucy struggled with how to budget her time and the money she suddenly had available to spend through her scholarship. Unfortunately, she did not focus on her education and made some poor choices. Eventually, she dropped out of school and she had to pay back her scholarship of \$40,000. Sadly, this left her without a degree and a huge debt hanging over her head. In most cases, the debt is required to be paid before the student is allowed to take more classes, so even if the lesson is learned, the consequences can have a long-term impact. The student may or may not ever return to complete their education.

⁹ Not the real name of the student.

Attempted Solutions and Challenges

Rural Student Services (RSS) was started in 1969 at UAF when a group of college students needed help with their transition from high school to college. This group of students initially called this program Student Orientation Services (SOS). The mission of RSS is:

Rural Student Services is committed to responding to student needs by providing quality services to Native and rural students who expend positive effort in the pursuit of higher education and its opportunities. Our comprehensive approach is unique in recognizing students' efforts to develop and maintain academic and personal balance as they contribute to the cultural richness of the University of Alaska Fairbanks and beyond.¹⁰

RSS has an excellent program for Alaska Native and rural students. They close the gap with their transition into post-secondary education. Their program includes cultural activities, tutoring, and tips and tricks to graduate from college. The advisors at RSS create an environment that is like a rural community with cultural events. RSS teaches the introductory college course, which introduces study habits and familiarizes students with the University of Alaska Fairbanks. In the school year for 2018-2019, the Alaska Native/American Indian population was 76% of the students who utilized the RSS program.¹¹

During the 2011-2015 academic years, the Alaska Native/American Indian first-year students who used Rural Student Services, have a retention rate that is slightly higher, at 52.2 percent than the overall UAF retention rate of 45.8 percent cited earlier.¹² In 2015, the overall graduation rate of students not using RSS services is 42.1 percent while¹³ students that utilize Rural Student Services have a graduation rate of 52.2 percent. One could conclude something is working if the Rural Student Services program has a ten percent higher rate of graduating Alaska Native/American Indian students. However, RSS is working at increasing these numbers; just like the advisors take holistic with the students, it is important to review the program with a wide lens as well. For example, students may be working with RSS advisors as well as an advisor in their major.

Currently, Rural Student Services has four full-time advisors and one office manager. RSS has a five-year average headcount of 600 students¹⁴ These students are divided into

¹⁰ "Our Mission Statement." Our Mission Statement. Accessed March 20, 2018. <https://www.uaf.edu/ruralss/about/what-we-do/>

¹¹ Naylor, M. (2020). 2018-2019 Student Data. Internal RSS report: unpublished

¹² Ibid, University of Alaska, 15

¹³ Ibid, University of Alaska, 15

¹⁴ Ibid, University of Alaska, 2

groups for each of the advisors, and the student stays with their one advisor.¹⁵ The RSS program offers tutoring, registration, major and career exploration, and hosting cultural events.



Photo by Minnie Naylor, cranberry picking in Fairbanks with a rural student

¹⁵ One of the advisors is currently part-time due because she is working on her Ph.D. degree

At RSS, students can also use the computer lab and free printing. The cultural events allow for students to have access to their native foods and it makes it easier to complete their semester. It makes it easier because students feel more at home and like they are part of a community.

Despite the support, some of the students create bad habits and may lead students to drop out of school. These students are typically not heavily involved with Rural Student Services. Once students have created a working relationship with their RSS advisor, they tend to meet their goal of graduation. RSS advisors keep their students informed of important information, but students can overlook or ignore those emails. There are students who feel irritated or overwhelmed with all the university emails and information. Ignoring the emails may cause students to miss important deadlines for events, assignments, or tests.

Although the support that the RSS advisors give students makes a difference, they are limited by their capacity. As more students are added to the list, the less time advisors can devote to the individual student. If the numbers from 2016 were used, then each advisor would have around 144 students. At what point do advisors max out and not be able to provide the best services to their students? Time is needed to create relationships that help make a difference with the students. As funding dictates fewer funds for advisors, RSS must grapple with how to meet student needs with less time and resources. What is the optimum ratio? No one seems to know the magic ratio between advisor and student load due to the overwhelming variables that can come into play.

RSS students will stay in the program throughout their whole degree, and some will transfer to their department. It comes down to the scenario of the advisor, the student, and the department. There is no way to differentiate between the students and the program. Plus, personal factors come into this as well, because students will take breaks in their education.

Students are also offered tutoring services through Rural Student Services, but some students are too shy, embarrassed, or lazy to ask for help. As RSS advisors touch base with students and review early grade reports, they remind students of these resources and encourage them to attend. RSS holds the tutoring in their Gathering Room space so it is a familiar and comfortable location. Unfortunately, some students wait too long and it will be almost impossible to catch up enough for a better grade. A lot of these students lack structure or time management skills to complete their courses.

RSS advisors attempt to create working relationships with their students, but there is one crucial part of the mission that students will often overlook. The RSS mission statement includes “Native and rural students who expend positive effort in pursuit of higher education and its opportunities”.¹⁶ The positive effort is an important part of the student’s success. Effort and motivation appear closely related and RSS advisors try to create

¹⁶ Ibid, Our Mission

pathways for students to improve their academic accountability. Often it is trying to get the student to understand that accountability is not punishment but a pathway for improvement.

Internal Examination/ What might work?

Looking to find new ideas, one of the RSS advisors examined four examples of different students who use Rural Student Services at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. These examples give an insight into how the student's high school background and habits followed through into post-secondary education. How do students learn from their mistakes and become accountable for their post-secondary education?

Example RSS Student Backgrounds

Pepper Sunset¹⁷ has lived in Alaska her whole life and has gone to two different schools. Her parents are divorced and now live in two different regions of Alaska. Both communities have a population of around three hundred. When Pepper started her first semester at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, she was a developmental student. She was not strong in math and not prepared for post-secondary education. Her first year at UAF, she had a 1.65 GPA. After her second semester, she wanted to quit college because she thought she did not do well enough to pass her classes.

Katie Star¹⁸ is from a small village in the northwest part of Alaska. She graduated high school with eight other students. Only one other classmate was planning to attend post-secondary education. Her first year in college, she averaged around a 2.0 GPA but lacked time management skills. Where she grew up, it is normal for students to stay up all night and sleep all day. This schedule became a challenge as Katie transitioned into college, and she would sleep through classes, quizzes, and tests.

George Night¹⁹ is from a larger hub community in rural Alaska and graduated in the top 10 percent of his high school graduating class. During high school, he took some college prep courses and his average grade was a B. He took a summer college prep course after his senior year and his semester GPA was 2.90. He attended his first year of college and failed his first two semesters. He now has a 1.70 cumulative GPA. He is currently academically disqualified and can only take a limited number of credits. To get back into a degree program, he has to pass nine credits and have a 2.0 GPA successfully.

Mary Sunrise²⁰ is an example of a student who was not academically accountable. As a first-year student, she entered as a developmental student. Her GPA was 1.08. She wanted people to do things for her, for example, her scholarships. She had the list of

¹⁷ Not the real name of the student.

¹⁸ Not the real name of the student.

¹⁹ Not the real name of the student.

²⁰ Not the real name of the student.

things that she needed in order to receive funding for post-secondary education. She was told to call her scholarship funders to check the status of each one and when her monies would arrive at UAF but she made her mother call the scholarship agencies. If Mary had to connect with someone that she did not know, she was afraid and would not follow through.

Rural Student Services is full of cases where students were academically disqualified, started in developmental courses, and overcame homesickness. What it comes down to is the fight between the student and that uphill battle they need to face.

What can we learn from these students?

All these students needed help with their transition into college. The shared quality of the first three students is that they required accountability. After working with an RSS advisor, the first three of these students are doing much better. Pepper had midterm grades that averaged a B; Katie has attended the majority of her classes, and aced her math test; George has raised his cumulative GPA to a 2.0. The first three students were all encouraged by their RSS advisor to check in with them weekly. Each of these students personally decided to check in after each class and their efforts of accountability reflected in their success in college. A common factor is that these students did create a working relationship with their RSS advisor. The last student was offered the same services, but she was not ready or prepared for college, she chose to take actions that would not help her academically.

The RSS advisor provided the relationship that helped hold students accountable for where they were at with their work, what they needed to get done, or taking away their phone while the student completes their homework. The first three case study students learned from their mistakes and now know they need to put in work and effort to get good grades in college. They had to learn their time management skills and to use the resources that were available to them.

Looking for new ideas and solutions

One new idea being considered would have two phases, one in high school and the other stage at the college level. The first phase of high school would target high school students who intend on going to the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Each of the community campuses connected with UAF would create a cohort with a limited number of students to keep it manageable and to create a small support community. The group will start with an English course and study skills class for their first semester. The next semester, it will be a math and study skills course. The students participating would need to promise that they will attend the University of Alaska Fairbanks for their first year of college. The primary incentive would be that the student will receive dual credit for completing high school and college courses. Another motivation would be to get a tuition waiver for attending their first year of college at UAF. If students complete their first year, and the budget allows for funding further semesters, students would be eligible for additional scholarships.

The second phase of the new idea would have the students working together once they are attending the University of Alaska Fairbanks. The cohort would take the next level math, English courses, and whichever classes they need for their major. The students would be required to attend a mandatory study hall. If they do not participate in the study hall, then the student will jeopardize their tuition waiver for the spring semester. The study hall would be student-led, organized as a UAF club, where student's participation and leadership is vital. During their first semester, students will need to 1) utilize all tutoring sessions offered at UAF, at least once, and 2) select a study group that they will attend for the semester. Each semester, students will rotate being accountable for other students attending the study hall.

As part of the college phase, students will have to create and host workshops for their Rural Student Services peers. The workshops can be on tips and tricks for studying various subjects, using technology or apps, and cultural skills or activities. The cultural skills or activities workshops could include hosting a potluck and events like native games or native dancing. The RSS advisors would assist with the workshops, but it must be student-led. During their first year, students would be required to check-in with their RSS Advisor every week. The weekly meeting requirement could be changed the second semester to bi-weekly if the student is successful in all of their courses their first semester. Upon successful completion of the first year, students would serve as mentors for the next year's incoming cohort. The students participating in the cohorts would receive special recognition at their UAF graduation. Students would receive a special cord, patch, or button that would be worn with the Alaska Native red sash at graduation and hopefully an acknowledgment in the program.

The end-goal of the cohort model would be that the student learns to be accountable as an individual and to their group. Using the skills and knowledge they acquired in their participation, the first-year cohort would help lead the next first-year students. Building upon their successes, hopefully, students would be able to obtain scholarships and tuition waivers to fund their entire college career. As the number of Alaska Native students graduating with their degrees grew, there would be more alumni to inspire and mentor future students. High school students could find familiar homegrown examples. The UAF graduates would serve as people the high school students could talk to where they could hear the stories of how the individual worked hard and worked with their cohort to complete their classes. They could listen to how the individual had to push through the uphill battles of the semester.

Conclusion

Numerous reasons exist as to why Alaska Native students do not stay in college to obtain their degree. Rural Student Services is an excellent service for rural and Alaska Native students to help retain students in college. However, we have to be willing to look at new ideas that can strengthen programs like RSS even more.

Students need help understanding that there is a way to get their college education and still be connected to community and culture. Sometimes, students do not realize that home will always be there, and going to college is not a permanent move. Students can return home educated and contribute to their community.

One possible solution for higher Alaska Native student retention at UAF would be to create a cohort model to be implemented through partnerships at the UAF community campuses. High school students participating in the cohort will gain valuable insight on how to graduate from college. Students can learn how to be accountable for their actions, ask for help, and work with a group of students. Students can also work on their study skills in preparation for college. If the University of Alaska Fairbanks created a cohort of students within Alaska, the retention rate would increase, and more students would graduate. This model would increase tuition revenue and produce successful Alaska Native students. If students are willing to learn and put in the effort, they will succeed in college. Students need to understand that there is help out there for them, and they need to learn to use the resources available to them. Unfortunately, limited funding and budget challenges may impact the ability to implement this solution. However, we should be willing to consider new ideas and look at the potential short-term/long-term benefits.

Our rural communities are filled with intelligent Alaska Native students who need to help educate the rest of the world. Their cultural experience can help others see things through new lenses. Who knows what the next great discovery might exist when Indigenous knowledge intersects with western ways? Bringing educated students back to the community builds hope for other Alaska Natives to obtain their degrees and help build a better tomorrow.

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