



ALASKA NATIVE GRADUATES OF UAA: WHAT CAN THEY TELL US?

BY DIANE ERICKSON AND DIANE HIRSHBERG

UA Research Summary No. 11 • March 2008

Institute of Social and Economic Research • University of Alaska Anchorage

Alaska Natives make up 9% of students at the University of Alaska Anchorage, and the number attending classes on the Anchorage campus is up more than 40% since 2000—from 950 to nearly 1,400.

But despite that fast growth, few Alaska Native students go on to graduate. Less than 5% of the students earning bachelor's degrees at UAA in 2007 were Alaska Native. And as Figure 1 shows, only about one in 10 of the Native students who were freshmen in 2000 had earned bachelor's degrees six years later, in 2006.

Alaska Native students begin leaving at high rates in their second year at UAA. Among those who started in 2005, less than 60% of the Native freshmen but 70% of all freshmen went on to the next year. Still, that was an improvement over 2000, when only about half the Alaska Native freshmen continued on to their second year (Figure 1).

The low graduation rates among Native students—not only at UAA but throughout the University of Alaska—are worrisome. Alaska Natives are under-represented in teaching, health care, business, and many other professions—and that won't change until more Alaska Native students get the educational credentials they need.

But what about those Alaska Native students who do succeed in earning bachelor's and master's degrees and doctorates? What keeps them going, when so many others don't make it to graduation?

We decided to ask them. With support from the UAA Chancellor's Fund and the University of Alaska Foundation, we set out to understand what contributed to their college success—and how that success might be replicated among many more Alaska Native students. UAA provided a partial list of Alaska Native graduates, and we called all those we could find telephone numbers for. UAA faculty also made recommendations, and we tried to recruit participants in various other ways.

In the end, we were able to complete interviews with 23 Alaska Natives who had earned bachelor's degrees at UAA between 1975 and 2005. Many completed those degrees when they were in their 20s, but a third were in their 30s and 40s. Eight went on to get master's degrees (at UAA or elsewhere) and one earned a doctorate. They represent several Alaska Native groups (see Figure 4 inside). The quotations in the adjacent column give a flavor of what drove them to succeed. It's clear that aside from anything else, all the study participants were remarkably determined. Inside we discuss their observations about how they succeeded and their recommendations about how to help others do the same.

I don't give up. I face challenges and I fight through them. I was failing, I flunked, but I retook that class. I flunked it again and re-took it again. I am that type of person and eventually I would pass it.

Jane, 1983 graduate

It goes back to my grandmother. She was just such an advocate of Western education . . . to be able to function in it and to be able to make changes . . . How do we make them listen to us? Will we have to use their own words to show them what's going on?

Sharon, 1997 graduate

I saw the other side of life, and I knew that to have a better life I needed an education. In spite of all that was going on at home, the one thing that kept me going in my mind was, get an education, get an education . . .

Lily, 1975 graduate

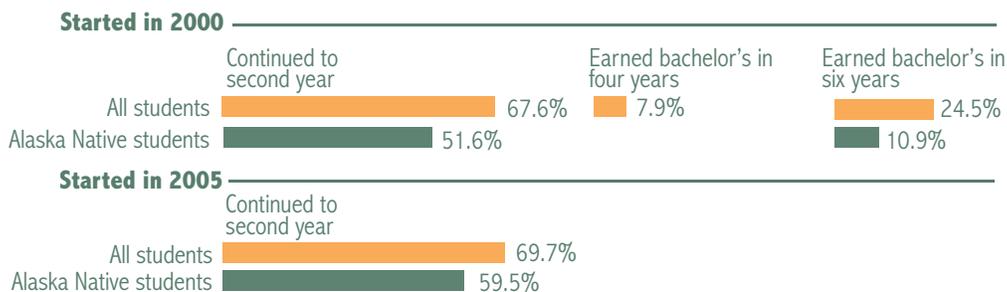
For me, it always came back to, how can I better my life and the life of my kids? School was always at the end of the answer to that question.

John, 1997 graduate

Our resources and our society are ours to do with what we want, so long as we exhibit the drive and initiative and willpower to face a world of challenges, to be ready to be resilient in the face of what we're going through.

Diane, 2005 graduate

Figure 1. Retention and Graduation Rates Among UAA Degree-Seeking Students (First-Time, Full-Time Freshmen)



Source: Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange, cited in UA Performance Measure: Student Success, First-Time, Full-Time Undergraduate Retention Rate, UA Statewide Planning and Budget Development

BACKGROUND

To understand why Alaska Natives face challenges completing college, and why they're under-represented in many professions, it's helpful to understand how difficult it was until recently for Alaska Native students to even reach college.

When Alaska became a state in 1959, almost all Alaska Natives lived in small, remote communities. Only about 15% lived in urban places.¹ Residents of small villages faced big barriers in getting the high-school diplomas they needed before they could even consider college. As recently as 1974, there were only a few high schools in Alaska Native communities, and students from small villages generally had to leave home for larger communities (sometimes outside Alaska) that had either boarding schools or boarding home programs.

Then, in 1976, the state government agreed to build local high schools in more than 100 small Alaska Native communities. That agreement settled a lawsuit rural Native students had brought against the state for failing to provide them with equal access to education.

But because their access to high school had been so limited, in 1980 fewer than half of Alaska Native adults (25 and over) had graduated from high school, compared with 88% of other Alaskans (Figure 2). Only about 4% of Alaska Native adults held bachelor's degrees, compared with 24% among non-Natives.

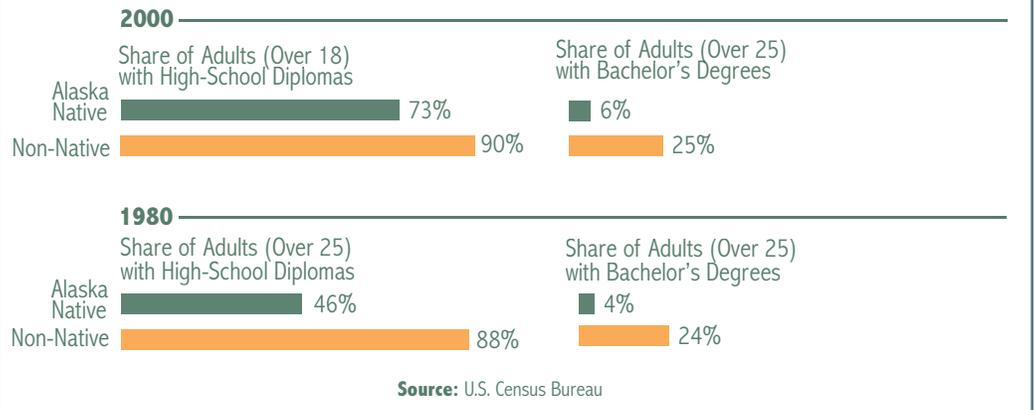
Between 1980 and 2000 educational levels among Alaska Natives jumped—partly because of the village high schools but also because thousands of Alaska Natives had moved from rural to urban areas, improving their access to both high school and college. Between 1970 and 2000 tens of thousands of Alaska Natives left rural areas, and by 2000 more than 40% of Alaska Natives lived in the state's largest urban places, especially Anchorage.²

Nearly 75% of Alaska Natives 18 and older were high-school graduates in 2000, and about 6% held bachelor's degrees—still a small percentage, but 50% higher than it had been in 1980 (Figure 2). Nearly a third of Alaska Native adults had spent at least a year in college by 2000.

Alaska Native enrollment on the Anchorage campus has, as we said earlier, increased rapidly—up more than 40% from 2000 to 2007. Overall enrollment in Anchorage was up about 18% during that period—mostly because of fast growth not only among Alaska Native students but among all minorities, especially Asian and Hispanic.

Still, despite substantial progress, Alaska Natives who enroll at UAA are still far less likely than other students to stay in college and to earn bachelor's degrees. The reasons why are not entirely clear, but students from small Alaska Native communities certainly face major cultural and other adjustments to attending a large institution in a city. Many Native students, including those now living in urban areas, are also still the first in their families to attend college—and first-generation college students also face extra hurdles.

Figure 2. Changing High-School and College Education Among Alaskans



ALASKA NATIVES AT UAA

Alaska Natives today make up 9% of UAA enrollment, up from about 7% in 2000. They are the largest minority group (Figure 3) but also, as described in a 2001 UAA report, “the most at risk.”³

Graduation rates at the University of Alaska overall are among the lowest at public universities nationwide—but Alaska Native graduation rates are less than half that already low overall rate.⁴

Among all degree-seeking freshmen at UAA, about 7% to 8% earn their bachelor's degrees in four years, and about 25% earn them within six years. Nationwide, an average of 56% earn bachelor's degrees in six years.

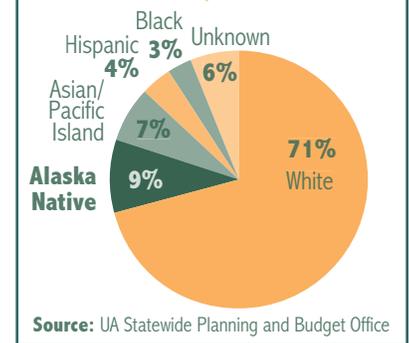
Among degree-seeking Alaska Native freshmen at UAA, the percentage earning bachelor's degrees in four years is very small (varying from none to 3% in recent years) and 11% to 12% within six years.⁵ It was this persistently low graduation rate that prompted us to ask Alaska Native graduates what had contributed to their success, what made it difficult to keep going, and what they would recommend to help current and future Alaska Native students at UAA.

PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

Figure 4 shows the characteristics of the 23 Alaska Native UAA graduates we were able to interview. We want to emphasize that this is not a random sample. UAA does not have a complete list of Alaska Native graduates, nor information on their characteristics. Also, we recognize that this is a small sample. If we had been able to contact more graduates, the overall picture of their characteristics would be different from what Figure 4 shows. But we believe their descriptions of the difficulties they faced and the factors that helped them succeed do reflect the broad range of experiences among Alaska Native students.

We were able to find a number of graduates from the 1980s, 1990s, and the current decade, but only one from the 1970s—which makes sense, since there were so few Alaska Native students then. All the study participants were the first in their families to graduate from college.

Figure 3. Ethnicity of UAA Students, Fall 2007



Most started working on their bachelor's degrees when they were just out of high school or in their 20s, but a few started in their 30s. And most earned their degree while they were in their 20s, but a handful were in their 40s. A third went on to earn master's degrees and one a PhD.

The participants represented Alaska Native groups from around the state, including Inupiat and Yupik people from northern and western Alaska, Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimpsian people from southeast Alaska, Athabaskan people from the interior, and Alutiiq and Aleut people from the Alaska Peninsula and Aleutian Islands.

BROAD CHALLENGES IN ATTENDING COLLEGE

Alaska Native graduates we interviewed said they faced some broad challenges in attending college, whether at UAA or any other school.

- *Paying for college.* Like most college students, the study participants said just getting enough money to pay for college was a big challenge. Some worked, some took out loans, and some got scholarships or Pell grants—or some combination of those. Some said their Alaska Native corporations also helped them pay for school, but a few said staff at the corporations didn't always seem to be familiar with the processes for awarding funds to students.
- *Overcoming pressure to use alcohol or drugs.* A number of our study participants described the challenges presented by a personal or family history of drug or alcohol abuse. Some also said they had to withstand peer pressure to abuse alcohol or drugs.
- *Balancing work, family, and school* was difficult for students who started when they were older.
- *Finding role models in their families or communities.* Several participants said that as first-generation students, they had no one to turn to for help in applying for college, understanding college culture, or learning the processes of higher education.
- *Meeting the academic challenges of college.* Some participants found it very challenging to meet the academic standards required in college classes. This is not surprising, given a recent study reporting that as many as two-thirds of incoming freshmen at the University of Alaska—including not only Alaska Native but UA students in general—don't have adequate preparation to do college-level math or English.⁶
- *Facing feelings of dislocation.* Some graduates reported feeling dislocated as they attended and after they competed college—that they didn't belong in either the Western world or the Alaska Native world.

CHALLENGES IN ATTENDING UAA

Our study participants included graduates from every decade since the 1970s—but they reported facing remarkably similar challenges at UAA across several decades.

- *Difficulty with admission and enrollment procedures.* Almost all graduates we interviewed said UAA staff failed to provide the help they needed as they navigated admission and enrollment requirements. A number described some UAA staff as “unfriendly” and not always well-informed about current policies.

- *Lack of help finding financial aid.* Many graduates said that it would have been very helpful if UAA registration staff had known more about available scholarship programs, particularly ones those specifically targeted at Alaska Native students.

- *Inadequate information from UAA advisors.* Another problem the study participants frequently described was getting inadequate information about UAA's course-level structure, prerequisites, degree requirements, and policies for dropping or adding classes. Some said that at times staff and faculty themselves seemed to be unfamiliar with all the prerequisites and degree requirements.

OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES

Given the many kinds of challenges the study participants faced—financial, personal, and administrative—how did they all succeed in earning bachelor's degrees at UAA? No one factor was the key to their success, but they described several general factors that helped them.

- *Participating in a broad range of activities.* The graduates described taking part in many activities, both as they grew up and after they started college. Those included being involved in sports, joining school clubs or student councils, becoming exchange students or interns, having summer or after-school jobs, attending church, and taking part in cultural activities. The study participants felt these experiences broadened their world-view, helped them develop leadership skills, increased their confidence, built a sense of community or teamwork, and strengthened their connections to their Alaska Native culture. All those benefits in turn provided a foundation that helped them succeed in college.
- *Having support of family, teachers, and employers.* Many kinds of relationships helped students. Several said that as they were growing up their parents or other family members emphasized that they would need higher education to adapt to a changing world. One said that a teacher who let her come early or stay late after school to escape an abusive home made her want to be a teacher herself. Another said that a hospital stay when she was a child inspired her to become a nurse.
- *Never giving up.* This was the common thread in all our interviews: the study participants were all determined to succeed and kept going no matter what barriers they faced. The quotations in the box on the last page show that determination better than any description of ours could.

WHAT HAS UAA DONE TO HELP?

UAA has done a number of things to help Alaska Native students succeed, beginning in 1975 with establishment of a support center for Alaska Native students and continuing today with the recent opening of a new building specifically for the Alaska Native Students in Engineering program.

Figure 4. Profile of Alaska Native Study Participants

When graduated	Age when started bachelor's degree		Age when completed bachelor's degree		Highest degree held ^b		Ethnicity		
	Decade	Number	Age	Number	Degree	Number	Group	Number	
1970s	1	18	9	20s	15	Bachelor's	14	Inupiat	7
1980s	8	20s	5	30s	4	Master's	8	Yupik	5
1990s	8	30s	4	40s	4	PhD	1	Tlingit, Haida, or Tsimpsian	4
2000-05	6							Other (Aleut, Alutiiq, Athabaskan)	7

^a Only 18 respondents answered this question.

^b All bachelor's degrees and three masters from UAA; five master's and one PhD from other schools.

Other initiatives over the years have included pre-college and bridging programs like the Della Keats/UDOC program for Alaska Native students interested in careers in health care, as well as programs that provide academic and support services for Alaska Native students in some degree programs. Those include the Recruitment and Retention of Alaska Natives in Nursing program and the Alaska Natives into Psychology program. The Office of Native Student Services is centrally located on the UAA campus to provide a point of consistent support and guidance.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF ALASKA NATIVE GRADUATES

Our study participants acknowledged these initiatives, and some said they had benefited from them. But they believe more should be done to help Alaska Native students at UAA—and it's not only UAA itself that could help. Their recommendations are for the entire education system—and for communities, families, and students.

These recommendations come from a heart-felt interest in helping other Alaska Native students succeed, but they could also help all students. They may sound familiar, because most have been made at various times before—but they bear repeating:

- *Offer high-quality programs*, from elementary school on, that prepare students for college and for later entry into their chosen careers. Hold all students to high standards. Don't expect less from Alaska Native students, but do teach them how to succeed.
- *Reach out and provide support to parents*. Help them understand the value of college and how to help prepare students for college.
- *Emphasize the connections between education, occupations, and expected earnings*. Show students the pathways to jobs that may be available in their home communities when they graduate.
- *Pay attention to all students, not just the cream of the crop*. Teach them that they can succeed at college if they work hard. Take time to build relationships with students.
- *Help students understand that college is an investment* now that will pay off in a much bigger way in the long run—versus a minimum-wage job that puts money in your pocket now.
- *Make UAA degree programs more responsive to the needs of rural communities*—including economic, human service, health care, and civic needs. That means taking those needs into account in offering and delivering programs; making it easier for people who can't leave their communities to get degrees; and advising rural students about degrees that could help qualify them for available jobs in their home communities.
- *Help young people find more role models* who have successfully bridged the Alaska Native world and the Western world—who can, in the words of one graduate, “wear the traditional dress but also the professional dress for working in this world.” Families and communities especially need to help boys and young men identify such role models, the study participants said. It's important to convey that college graduates can be strong, accomplished men who have not given up traditional ways.
- *Take responsibility for your own success* is the recommendation for students themselves—build study skills, ask for help when you need it, have high expectations for yourself, and surround yourself with people who have similar expectations. And some study participants said that given the changing world, Alaska Native students should aim beyond bachelor's degrees and go on to earn master's degrees or doctorates.

CONCLUSION: WHAT NEXT?

It's clear that no single entity can improve college success among Alaska Native students. It will have to be a joint effort involving students, their families and communities, and the entire education system. But UAA could add to what it's already doing.

The study participants generously gave us their time because they hoped it would help future students—but some were skeptical about whether their observations would really affect university policy. We can't say how UAA will respond. But for a start, policymakers could look at what graduates from across several decades said about admission and enrollment policies—could the system be made more informative, welcoming, and easier to navigate? Should staff and faculty be better informed about scholarships and other possibilities for financial aid? How could degree-seeking students get better advice about structuring their course loads?

Policymakers could also take the idea behind this research and expand it, getting more alumni and students systematically involved in looking at what's working at UAA and what needs improvement. Graduation rates among Alaska Native students are especially low, but the overall graduation rate at the university is also among the lowest in the U.S., despite recent improvements. It would benefit not only students but also the university to find ways of helping more students get the education they need.

ENDNOTES

1. “Changes in Rural Alaska Settlement Patterns,” by Jack Kruse and Karen Foster, in *Alaska Review of Social and Economic Conditions*, ISER, March 1986.
2. *The Status of Alaska Natives Report 2004*, by Scott Goldsmith, Jane Angvik, Lance Howe, Alexandra Hill, and Linda Leask, ISER, May 2004.
3. *Student Persistence at UAA*, Paper 2001-04, by Gary Rice, UAA Institutional Planning, Research, and Assessment, 2001.
4. See “The University of Alaska: How Is It Doing?” By Theodore Kassier and Alexandra Hill, *Understanding Alaska Research Summary 11*, ISER, pending, March 2008.
5. Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange, cited in *UA Performance Measure: Student Success, First-Time, Full-Time Undergraduate Retention, UA Statewide Planning and Budget Development, July 2005*.
6. *Report of Statewide Task Force to Assure Readiness of Students*, prepared by Dave Veazey, UA assistant vice president for academic affairs, May 2006.

For whatever reason there was something inside of me that, not only in this case but in all other cases, I just refused to quit and I hate to lose For my parents and family I hope the degree would mean it's my way of showing respect for them, for giving me the tools and the setting, and the opportunity to go to school.

John, 1997 graduate

No matter what, I wasn't going to stop. I went to school because I wanted to go to school. No matter what, I wasn't going to quit.

Teresa, 1990 graduate

For me [the degree] was a physical symbol. A lot of times employers dismiss Native hirings by saying these guys aren't qualified. . . I had a degree so that wouldn't be an excuse . . . I'm as qualified as the next guy with a bachelor's degree. I was proud of that.

Sam, 1984 graduate

Diane Erickson is an assistant professor of adult education at UAA. Diane Hirshberg is an assistant professor of education policy at the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER). Suzanne Sharp of ISER also made important contributions to the research. Copies of this paper are available at www.iser.uaa.alaska.edu or from ISER in Anchorage (907-786-7710).