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Interview Findings and Resources

Alaska College and Career Guidance



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary.....	1
Background.....	1
Findings and Recommendations.....	2
Background and Methodology	5
Background.....	5
Purpose and Methodology	7
Interview Findings	9
Key Findings.....	9
Elements of Successful Approaches.....	10
Gaps and Needs in Postsecondary Planning.....	20
Recommendations	24
Appendix 1: Interview List.....	26
Appendix 2: Postsecondary Data and Trends	27
Youth Disconnection.....	27
Postsecondary Enrollment Trends.....	28
Postsecondary Completion Rates.....	31
Postsecondary Attainment	31
Appendix 3: Select Resources	34
Data Resources	34
Alaska Resources.....	35
National Resources.....	35
Appendix 4: AASB Collaborative Documents	37

Executive Summary

Background

Value of Education and Training

Education and training are critical for improving Alaska's economy, boosting innovation, and helping Alaskans stay in Alaska. In addition to economic benefits, education and training provide young people with tools to contribute to their families and communities, giving them a sense of purpose and agency to fuel fulfilling lives.



Photo credit: UAS Collection

Context and Purpose

Alaska has among the lowest rates of postsecondary attainment in the nation and high rates of disconnected youth: one in five young adults in Alaska (ages 16-24) is not engaged in school or work.¹ Disparities in outcomes indicate that economically disadvantaged students, Alaska Native students, and rural Alaska students face steeper barriers in accessing postsecondary training and education than Alaskans as a whole.

Alaska has many strengths to draw on in addressing these challenges – such as tight-knit communities, strong cultural traditions, Tribes and Alaska Native entities, and a resourceful and resilient ethos. Alaskans also have relatively low-cost education and training opportunities, and potential access to significant untapped aid.

This report seeks to provide insight into the question: *How can we prepare all Alaskan students for meaningful employment and education opportunities after high school?*

¹ Youth disconnection rates are calculated from American Community Survey data and are considered underestimates. According to a 2019 Journal of the American Medical Association article, "These rates don't reflect young people who are homeless, incarcerated, or otherwise uncaptured in the ACS. Nor do they encompass the disconnection of young people who are working or in school, but marginally so."

Methodology

The project team interviewed 12 individuals associated with Alaska school districts, postsecondary institutions, Tribal entities, nonprofits, and government, and integrated perspectives shared via email from two additional sources. Secondary research included data collection and analysis and document review.

Findings and Recommendations

Below are key findings and recommendations for helping Alaska youth – particularly those who face economic and historic barriers – plan for success after high school.

Elements of Successful Approaches

- Early and consistent efforts
- Presenting a variety of options
- Experiential learning
- Culturally affirming approaches
- Understanding identity and intrinsic motivations
- Representation
- Integration of social-emotional skills
- Community partnerships
- Cohort models
- Dual enrollment opportunities.

Gaps and Needs

- Adequate and ongoing funding
- Cultural training
- Infrastructure needs
- FAFSA and paperwork support

“Ideally we’d be approaching counseling from the standpoint of how postsecondary success can uphold cultural values and help students fill roles in their communities.”

Recommendations

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS AND INVESTMENT

- Increase funding and staff for college and career guidance for Alaska youth.
- Integrate a sustained approach to helping students plan for life after high school.
- Build buy-in from school boards, families, teachers, and school leadership needed to create sustained cultural change.
- Ensure career guide programs are additive and do not replace existing resources such as certified school counselors.



Photo credit: Stacy Unzicker, Sealaska Heritage Institute

- Collaborate across communities and school districts to create and reinforce a statewide norm of planning for life after high school.
- Develop and maintain partnerships with groups like community organizations, Tribal entities, industry groups, and alumni to best support students and families.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

- Introduce postsecondary planning activities and messages in elementary school and deepen with age-appropriate activities throughout the middle and high school years.
- Integrate hands-on experiences, place-based learning, and real-life applications (e.g., internships or job shadowing) to help students envision possibilities for their future.
- Highlight connections between postsecondary education/training and opportunities in local industries.
- “Meet students where they’re at” with activities and approaches that reflect students’ values and interests and use accessible language.
- Offer emphasis, validation, and information on vocational and job training options equal to that offered for 4-year college programs.

“It’s beneficial to create opportunities for students to experiment with what they like and what they’re good at before the stakes are so high and expensive, as they are in college.”

- Use cohort and homeroom models to help students form stronger relationships with teachers, school staff, and peers.
- Provide concrete one-on-one help accessing and completing financial aid paperwork such as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), scholarship applications, and Tribal and Alaska Native corporation grant and scholarship enrollment and application forms.

CULTURE AND EQUITY

- Infuse cultural values and connections throughout postsecondary planning activities and conversations. Develop and use postsecondary planning materials and curriculum that reflect, affirm, and celebrate students' cultural foundations.
- Assess postsecondary planning activities and resources with an equity lens – consider who an activity or resource is designed for, and who might be left out.
- Hire and support career and college guidance staff who reflect the cultural backgrounds of students served.
- Provide school staff and career guides with high-quality training and support in social-emotional learning and restorative practice.
- Work to create equitable access to dual enrollment and postsecondary planning opportunities for all students.
- Focus on prioritizing individualized attention for underserved students.



Photo credit: Connor Meyer, AASB

"Whatever your pathway, if it's the right challenge for you, we celebrate your success."

Background and Methodology

Background

Benefits of Education and Training

Across the state, educators, policy makers, and business leaders understand that education and training are foundational for improving Alaska's economy, stemming outmigration, and boosting innovation.²

The research is clear. Data on the impact of postsecondary credentials on lifetime earnings indicates significant economic benefit.³ Studies find adults with higher educational attainment live healthier and longer lives than those with less education, and experience more economic freedom and happiness.⁴ These advantages to the individual lead to greater economic activity, fueling prosperity at the regional and state levels.⁵

Apart from economic impacts, education and training provide young people with tools to contribute to their families and communities, giving them a sense of purpose and agency to fuel fulfilling lives.

"Education provides us with tools and social capital to access immense opportunities. Necessary knowledge can be gained through education in order to be successful and fulfilled according to certain standards in today's society. Education provides access to positions of power that allow us to be involved in change-making and decision-making that affects all facets of life, even beyond education systems. Education is invaluable, yet so inaccessible to so many including Native peoples and communities."

Dannielle Carlson, Unangax (dissertation on reducing barriers to postsecondary education for Alaska Native students)

² See, for example: <https://alaskabeacon.com/2023/04/25/apu-president-says-the-school-can-help-address-alaskas-outmigration-woes/>

³ Daugherty, Lindsay. The Value of Education and Training After High School: How Postsecondary Credentials Impact Earnings. RAND Corporation. February 2022.

https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PEA1100/PEA1141-9/RAND_PEA1141-9.pdf

⁴ Zajacova A, Lawrence EM. The Relationship Between Education and Health: Reducing Disparities Through a Contextual Approach. *Annu Rev Public Health*. 2018 Apr 1;39:273-289. doi: 10.1146/annurev-publhealth-031816-044628. Epub 2018 Jan 12. PMID: 29328865; PMCID: PMC5880718. See also Stryzhak, Olena. (2020). The relationship between education, income, economic freedom and happiness. SHS Web of Conferences.

⁵ Rothwell, Jonathan. What do colleges do for local economies: A direct measure based on consumption. Brookings Institution. November 17, 2015.

Challenges and Strengths

Alaska has among the lowest rates of postsecondary attainment in the nation and high rates of disconnected youth – those ages 16 to 24 years old who are neither working nor attending school.⁶ One in five young adults in Alaska is not connected to school or work. Among young Native American males, that rate is 26%.⁷



Further, disparities in outcomes indicate that economically disadvantaged students, Alaska Native students, and rural Alaska students face steeper barriers in accessing postsecondary training and education than Alaskans as a whole. These challenges call for thoughtful and concerted efforts to help all Alaska youth chart a path for success after high school.

Alaska has many strengths to draw on in addressing these challenges – such as tight-knit communities, strong cultural traditions, Tribes and Alaska Native entities, and a resourceful and resilient ethos. These are foundational assets in improving postsecondary success in Alaska.



Photo credit: UAS Collection

⁶ Youth disconnection rates are calculated from American Community Survey data and are considered underestimates. According to a 2019 Journal of the American Medical Association article, “These rates don’t reflect young people who are homeless, incarcerated, or otherwise uncaptured in the ACS. Nor do they encompass the disconnection of young people who are working or in school, but marginally so.”

⁷ Measure of America. Youth Disconnection in America. 2022.

<https://www.measureofamerica.org/DYinteractive/#State>. See also WalletHub. 2023’s States with the Most At-Risk Youth. July 12, 2023. <https://wallethub.com/edu/states-with-the-most-at-risk-youth/37280>

Purpose and Methodology

This report seeks to provide insight into the question: *How can we prepare all Alaskan students for meaningful employment and education opportunities after high school?*

Research activities centered on interviews and secondary data collection and analysis. Additional resources are included as appendices, including select data and trends on postsecondary attainment.

Interviews

The project team interviewed 12 individuals associated with Alaska school districts, postsecondary institutions, Tribal entities, nonprofits, and government to gain insight into program implementation, outcomes, data, and lessons learned. Individuals were selected in collaboration with the Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB). See Appendix 1 for a list of interviewees. Additional insights were integrated from two individuals via email.

Interviews were designed to elicit perspectives on topics related to postsecondary readiness, Alaska's unique strengths and challenges, and culturally affirming college and career guidance. Interview questions included the following:

- What kinds of supports, programs, and/or initiatives work well in supporting students toward postsecondary planning and attainment?
- In your experience, what are some of the barriers or challenges to postsecondary attainment?
- With Alaska's high rates of youth disconnection, what are some ways we can support students with guidance, staffing, messaging, etc.?
- In your experience, what kinds of cultural connectivity supports students in college and career readiness?
- What could culturally affirming college and career advising look like? How do we make these opportunities more widely available across both urban and rural Alaska?
- How do we build on existing cultural strengths, resources, and community norms that support and celebrate postsecondary attainment?

Data Collection and Analysis

Key data sources include the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education, Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, National Student Clearinghouse, and local school districts. Where possible, data were compared for local, state, and national populations and trends over time were analyzed to inform this report. The project team also reviewed select documents and reports to help ground findings within broader research and theory.

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Interview Findings

Key Findings

Several themes emerged regarding how best to support high school students, particularly Alaska Native students and rural students, in planning for life after high school. The following lists summarize strengths and assets, barriers, and recommendations.

Strengths and Assets

- Individuals, school communities, Tribal entities, and education organizations across the state are actively working to increase postsecondary planning and attainment.
- Indigenous language and cultural revitalization efforts across the state contribute to overall wellness and resilience of students and communities.
- Alaska Native corporations and Tribes are investing significant resources in student success.
- Many of Alaska's school communities are already highly networked with industry groups and community leaders and are in a position to strengthen partnerships.
- An increasing focus on "growing our own" teachers is expected to reduce teacher turnover and improve student outcomes.
- Conversations around historic trauma and healing are happening more frequently around the state.
- According to several metrics, the average cost burden of postsecondary education in Alaska is low relative to other states.⁸ The cost burden could likely be further reduced if Alaska students made greater use of untapped aid.⁹



Photo credit: Stacy Unzicker, Sealaska Heritage Institute

⁸ The 2017 average net price of attendance at a public four-year university as a share of median household income was 15% in Alaska, lowest among all states and below the 23% national average, according to a Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2019 study. <https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/10-24-19sfp.pdf>
A 2020 study by the Texas Public Policy Foundation found Alaska ranked 4th among states in student earnings-to-debt ratio (i.e., Alaska graduates have relatively low student debt relative to their earnings after graduation). <https://www.texaspolicy.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Gillen-State-Rankings-of-Public-Higher-Ed1.pdf>

⁹ Alaska ranks last in the nation for completion rates of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), required to receive all federal and many other student grants and loans. <https://formyourfuture.org/fafsa-tracker/>

Barriers and Gaps

- K-12 and postsecondary schools struggle to fund adequate and consistent college and career guidance.
- Hiring and retention challenges, burnout, and high school counselor caseloads threaten quality and continuity of college and career guidance efforts – and K-12 schools more broadly.
- Alaska has the lowest rate of FAFSA completion, causing Alaska students to miss out on significant postsecondary aid.
- Postsecondary planning resources are often provided late and may be incomplete or inconsistent.
- A lack of continuity in postsecondary readiness programming, often resulting from funding cycles or changes in leadership, undermines success.
- Institutional racism, unconscious bias, and lack of cultural awareness in secondary and postsecondary school settings persist as insidious barriers.
- Lack of representation in postsecondary campaigns, messaging, and programming can reinforce self-limiting ideas for indigenous, low-income, and first-generation students.
- A lack of basic resources in some rural communities, such as high-speed internet or running water, make it harder to access information, submit applications, and realize opportunities.

Elements of Successful Approaches

Interviewees described the following elements of successful approaches to postsecondary readiness:



Photo credit: UAS Collection

- Early and consistent efforts
- Presenting a variety of options
- Experiential learning
- Culturally affirming approaches
- Understanding identity and intrinsic motivations
- Representation
- Integration of social-emotional skills
- Community partnerships
- Cohort models
- Dual enrollment opportunities.

Early and Ongoing Efforts

"It's important to me as a member of my community to show the youth some of the things that are options to them, and it's important to start at a young age."

Many interviewees stressed the importance of early and consistent conversations about life after high school. One said, "Starting younger, in 7th or 8th grade, having conversations about life after high school and making sure that's a consistent practice is important."

Several said students benefit from learning about postsecondary options as early as elementary school. When these messages come from people throughout school systems and communities, it helps establish

postsecondary planning as a community norm. Some college and career guidance programs encourage adults in a school to wear apparel from their postsecondary institution as part of creating this culture.

One interviewee described a layered approach to postsecondary readiness integrated into all grade levels at their school, as well as college and career exploration classes and curriculum built into school days. This programming encouraged students to talk about college and careers and "learn about the culture of a college or a job before they get there."

Presenting a Variety of Options

Interviewees emphasized the importance of embracing vocational training and certification programs as options that are valued equally with a 4-year college pathway. Inclusive messaging about postsecondary options gives all students a chance to imagine a future for themselves. As one interviewee said, "We need to create greater awareness and celebration of vocational options so that students see a broader range of options than the traditional high school to college pipeline."

Another said: "We were very successful in creating a culture of, 'Whatever your pathway, if it's the right challenge for you, we celebrate your success.'"

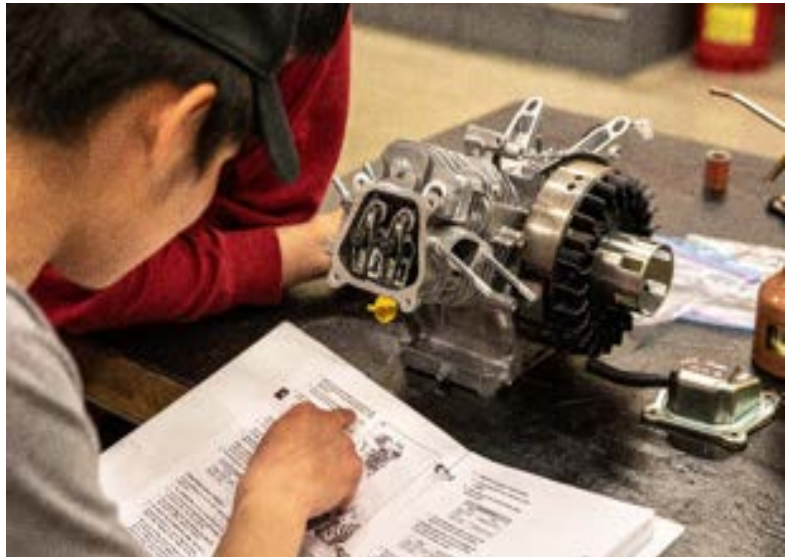


Photo credit: Connor Meyer, AASB

Spotlight on Postsecondary Tours

"I helped with a college tour program for Alaska Native sophomores and juniors. We took 19 students and visited 5 institutions including tech schools, a tribal college, and University of Washington. Now there is a group of Alaska Native sophomores and juniors who have a vision of themselves at these different types of institutions.

We really like to present these options as all valid. We know that a one-year option [such as a certificate program] has much better social and financial outcomes than no certificate at all."

Hands-on Experiences

Many interviewees stressed the impact of hands-on experiences such as summer camps, internships, job shadowing, and immersive hands-on programs. They noted the value of incorporating a diversity of community members (see also, representation) with a variety of backgrounds.

One said, "It's beneficial to create opportunities for students to experiment with what they like and what they're good at before the stakes are so high and expensive, as they are in college." Multiple interviewees mentioned the Alaskan Youth Stewards program, an Indigenous-led paid stewardship program that offers participants experiences aimed to develop them as future leaders in their own communities. An interviewee shared, "Early opportunities that are paid help [participants] understand the value of their time and help them see what a work setting is like."



Photo credit: UAS Collection

In another example, an interviewee said a local alternative high school offers two-week immersive career exploration workshops that include forays into the community as well as guest speakers:

"The students aren't sitting at a desk reading texts, they're out in the community and people come into the school and connect with them."

Spotlight on Alaskan Youth Stewards

Sustainable Southeast Partnership's describes the program:

Alaskan Youth Stewards (an umbrella title for Training Rural Alaskan Youth Leaders and Students (TRAYLS) and Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) programs in Southeast Alaska) strive to provide youth from rural Southeast Alaska with a well-supported pathway to becoming empowered, responsible, and productive leaders. These leaders contribute to the region's cultural vibrancy, ecological resilience, and economic prosperity. This program blends experiential education, on the job training, career counseling and job placement for youth in rural Southeast Alaska to get on the path to higher education and employment in natural resource stewardship.

The Alaskan Youth Stewards (AYS) partnership includes Tribal governments, Tribal corporations, conservation groups, federal and state agencies, not-for-profits, community entities, and committed individuals to deliver programs in rural communities of Southeast Alaska. Youth (ages 15-25) are recruited from throughout the region to gain experience in fisheries, forestry, engineering, recreation, community service and cultural stewardship.

Core partners include the US Forest Service, Sealaska Corporation, National Forest Foundation, Organized Village of Kake, Hoonah Indian Association, Chatham School District and the Prince of Wales Vocational & Technical Education Center.

The 2023 AYS Season

The Alaskan Youth Stewards is currently in its seventh season with crews based out of four communities: Angoon, Hoonah, Kake and on Prince of Wales Island. The crews are working on a great variety of projects including trail construction and maintenance, stream and ocean monitoring, traditional food harvests and community garden development.

Culturally Affirming Approaches

Professionals interviewed for this project all identified urgency and necessity in creating culturally affirming postsecondary readiness programs, materials, and school atmospheres. Further, interviewees noted the importance of acknowledging Alaska's education history and intergenerational trauma when addressing disparities in postsecondary access and attainment.

"Sealaska Heritage Institute's credit recovery programs that use Indigenous knowledge and science work well for students who want practical applications and want to see themselves in the curriculum. ...They want to learn things that are relevant and place-based, and also explore job opportunities."

Opportunities for healing and working to create trust between families and school staff may include acknowledgment of community celebrations and events, cultural summer programs, dedicated support staff in the school, trauma-informed advising, integration of Alaska Native culture bearers in postsecondary planning, and guest speakers from the community.

"We've heard many young people say they're expected to check their Native identity at the door. Ideally we'd be approaching counseling from the standpoint of how postsecondary success can uphold cultural values and help students fill roles in their communities."

But it needs to go deeper. Many interviewees shared that even in schools and districts actively working on culturally relevant education, implicit bias can manifest in the ways educators refer to postsecondary options, with value placed on "getting out of the village" and pursuing college. This value is often at odds with what is described as "traditional values of staying close to family and serving community."

One interviewee said: "We need to be the leaders in approaching [postsecondary planning] with a cultural lens. ... For years, districts have adopted outside models and applied them to Alaska Native communities, and then they're surprised when they don't work."

Another said, "What is working are programs like TCLL [Tlingit Culture and Language Literacy program in Juneau] and places that validate students' identity and cultural experiences."



Photo credit: Stacy Unzicker, Sealaska Heritage Institute

Understanding Identity and Intrinsic Motivations

One important aspect of culturally affirming approaches to life planning is recognizing that students have unique values and motivations. Several interviewees noted the importance of tapping into what really motivates students.

For example, one said conventional “interest inventories” and an emphasis on earnings potential of different professions does not resonate with all students: “I’ve found those kinds of activities are not actually that helpful to many of our students. It’s exploring their own identity, so they know who they are and what their true passions are. When we did some of this work we found that Native students are truly more interested in giving back to family or community.”

“Guest speakers would often emphasize that contributing to their community and culture was a factor in their success. The students were as interested in how they could contribute to their communities as what their financial futures would look like.”

Helping students understand their identity and their values can lead to richer conversations about what students hope to achieve – and can motivate them to make it happen.

High school college and career counseling in the U.S. typically draws on American values of individualism and economic reward – an emphasis that may be out of sync with Indigenous cultural values: Alaska Native leaders note that their traditions tend to value interdependence, relationships, and lifting up others, and many Alaska Native students are motivated by a desire to strengthen their families and home communities.

In addition, postsecondary application processes often expect students to tout personal achievements. Alaska Native cultures tend to frown upon elevating the self or boasting. “In Yup’ik any reference to ‘I’ is at the end,” explained Mary Nicolai of Lower Yukon School District. “We do not center ourselves in our language.”

These differences underscore the need for culturally affirming approaches to college and career guidance – approaches that are rooted in the values and communication norms of a student’s community.

Representation

All interviewees said students need to be able to envision themselves in the picture being painted of their future. Students’ views of their own potential expand when they see “someone like me” reflected in a positive light or achieving something special. Representation may mean seeing images of people like themselves on websites and brochures and connecting with

people from their community who have pursued a variety of paths. It can also come from subtle cues such as films and books that upend stereotypes.

One interviewee worked in a program that helped Alaska Native students cultivate “a vision of themselves” at different types of postsecondary institutions. Another said of their Alaska Native students, “I try to build them up to where they can see themselves going to college or a postsecondary program.”

Models of success within the community are also powerful, as one interviewee explained: “Building relationships with Native culture bearers and Elders and integrating them into postsecondary planning can be helpful for Indigenous youth. To see Elders who are respected and accomplished is valuable.”

Integration of Social-Emotional Skills

Social-emotional skills are a critical part of successful postsecondary planning, interviewees said. These skills include healthy strategies for coping with stress, self-knowledge, interpersonal communication, emotional self-regulation, and an ability to ask for help.

Integrating these skills helps create positive school cultures and student-staff relationships, mitigate effects of trauma, and give students the confidence and competence to make a plan for their future.

Many interviewees emphasized the impact of supportive relationships. One described an upcoming homeroom program in their local high school on social-emotional learning and how to process trauma. “We’re trying to make sure every student has someone they can reach out to.” One interviewee cited efforts at University of Alaska to strengthen relationships between students, families, and staff, noting, “It’s important to build individual relationships that go beyond academic success.”

Interviewees emphasized a need for more staff training in social-emotional learning. Several cited AASB’s work on social-emotional learning and restorative practices as helpful resources.



Photo credit: Stacy Unzicker, Sealaska Heritage Institute

Spotlight on Tlingit & Haida Navigators Program

Serving youth in Juneau, this program describes itself as follows:

The Navigators program helps youth in navigating through adolescence into adulthood. It is a relationship-based prevention and early-intervention program with a holistic and trauma informed approach that serves Native youth ages 13-24. Youth enrolled in the Navigators program are provided group and individual opportunities that intentionally help youth to navigate through adolescence into adulthood.

Participants answer four essential questions:

1. Who am I?
2. Where am I?
3. Where do I want to go?
4. How do I get there?

Navigators focuses on cultural connectedness, learning and practicing critical life skills, and providing academic support and leadership opportunities in a safe and engaging environment. To make this possible, staff coordinate with partners with Tlingit & Haida's departments and programs, the school district, and other agencies to connect students and their families with other resources.

Community Partnerships

The importance of community partnerships in enriching student perspectives and experiences was mentioned by many interviewees. Participants emphasized the value for students of real-world voices and diverse representation among adult role models. Interviewees also cited instances of partner organizations providing experiential learning opportunities, sponsorship, and professional connections for students.

One interviewee shared how impactful community partners are who reach out to schools and after-school programs to offer support and resources. This is particularly the case when partners offer specialized knowledge of specific jobs and workforce sectors.

"Industry investment in postsecondary planning is really important, especially when certain industries are heavily represented in the communities."

There is much more room for partnership, interviewees suggested. One suggested partners could be helpful in getting people to financial aid events: "We've historically had poor turnout

at FAFSA events, but I think partnering with Tribal organizations that are trusted and have expertise in these areas could really increase turnout.”

Tribes, private-sector employers, and nonprofit organizations that are trusted and connected in the community can help create community norms about planning for future success.

Interviewees also recommended partnering across communities. One noted that postsecondary planning opportunities for students in outlying villages are especially limited and suggested bringing hub community and rural students together virtually for postsecondary planning activities.

Cohort Models

Interviewees said cohort models of learning can foster social interaction, collaboration, and supportive connections among students and with staff. Interviewees described several types of cohort models. The Ilakucaraq (a Yugtun word meaning “being together”) program offers a year-long cohort that brings together rural and urban Alaska Native youth in grades 8-11 “to explore their heritages, share their cultures, and find strength in being Indigenous.” The program includes two 5-day immersion programs (one in a rural setting and one in an urban setting) and virtual sessions throughout the year.

Other cohort models include residential vocational and technical skills programs that create opportunities for students to connect with peers and return home with new skills. These programs may be one or two weeks, offering stepwise experiences with learning away from home. The Bristol Bay Regional Career and Technical Education Program uses a similar model.

Spotlight on Ilakucaraq Year-Long Cohort: Cultivating Connection

The Alaska Humanities Forum describes some of the benefits of the year-long program:

Connect with self: Reflect on what influences your identity and try new things to better understand yourself. This self-awareness opens the door for personal growth, leading to increased confidence and ability to step outside your comfort zone.

Connect with others: Develop meaningful relationships with cohort peers, immersion communities, and Culture Bearers that extend beyond the program. These connections strengthen your support network, build friendships, and deepen your respect for people different from yourself.

Connect with cultures: Share your own culture and learn about the cultures of others, discovering how culture shapes who you are. Consider what it means to be Indigenous in different settings and embrace your culture and community as a source of strength.

Dual Enrollment

Interviewees identified dual enrollment programs as an important way to give students opportunities to earn college credit in a supported environment. Dual enrollment is when a student enrolled in high school also takes college courses or earns college credit. There are various approaches including online and in-person; typically, dual enrollment programs provide college credit tuition-free.

Benefits of dual enrollment include:

“[Our principal] had all juniors and seniors take the college math placement test and start earning college credit for math. That gave them early success in college. Students realized that it was possible for them to earn college credit and it gave them confidence to take that step after high school.”

- Increased confidence, as students can envision themselves succeeding in a postsecondary setting.
- Reduced barriers to postsecondary education because students can finish high school with postsecondary credits. This head start reduces the time and money required to earn a degree or certificate.
- Discovery of a topic or area of interest students might not otherwise be exposed to.

One individual who attended high school in rural Alaska cautioned that in many rural communities, if dual enrollment classes are offered, options are very limited compared to those available to urban students.



Photo credit: UAS Collection

Gaps and Needs in Postsecondary Planning

Interviewees identified gaps and needs in postsecondary planning and attainment, notably:

- Adequate and ongoing funding
- Cultural training
- Infrastructure needs
- FAFSA and paperwork support

Adequate and Ongoing Funding

More staff and funding are needed to truly move the needle on postsecondary planning, interviewees said.

Particular need was noted for staff time dedicated to postsecondary support for students. This includes more opportunity to provide one-on-one time help to students completing program applications, financial forms, and scholarship applications. Many college counselors are

"We need more elbow-to-elbow time with students."

swamped with large caseloads. One younger interviewee reflected on their experience in rural Alaska schools: "Growing up, we didn't have a very available college counselor. ... [Change] starts with having dedicated staff in the high schools."

Interviewees said school counselors often have very high student-to-staff ratios and heavy workloads. Providing practical support with forms makes a big difference but is very labor intensive. Many students come to school with trauma and deep emotional needs. The volume and complexity of students' needs places strain on school counselors trying to meet so many unmet needs.

Resources are also needed to ensure equity, several interviewees said. Postsecondary enrichment activities should be part of the school day, as some students have job or family obligations after school, and some struggle to find rides for activities that take place outside the school day. One interviewee noted, "Particularly as they relate to 'work readiness,' these activities need to be integrated into the school day so that all students



Photo credit: UAS Collection

can participate.” If activities take place outside the school day, transportation should be provided.

Resources to provide continuity of support after graduation would also be helpful, interviewees said. That could include systems to track and contact students and more fundamentally, opportunities to extend a supportive relationship. Several mentioned the outsize role schools play in students’ lives and a sense that the connection is abruptly cut off when students graduate.

Inconsistent funding is a major barrier to the goal of building a culture of postsecondary readiness, interviewees said. They described gaining traction with schools, communities, and students for the life of grant programs, then experiencing setbacks, disruption of activities, inefficiencies, and even discontinuation of programs when grant cycles ended. Funding that is part of districts’ core budgets would provide the consistency needed to achieve lasting change.

Cultural Training

Teachers and staff in rural Alaska schools often come from Lower 48 communities and often cycle in and out of villages, interviewees noted. Many have limited understanding of the role of subsistence and intergenerational ties and the attendant values of sharing, of practical skills for survival, and the role of Elders and ancestors in forging identity.

“Students have shown that they want adults to understand issues around historical trauma and Alaska history - they’ve told us this will help them feel safe so they can be successful in academics.”

“We need rural and cultural training for university staff and other out-of-town people working with students so they understand rural mannerisms, customs, and what life is like,” one interviewee said. Others noted it is important for teachers and school staff to understand the history of education in Alaska, how it impacts students and families today, and how to identify and avoid implicit bias.

Lack of understanding can lead to harm, as one interviewee explained: “When some students are treated like they’ve been irreparably damaged or are approached with deficit thinking, that harms them.”

High-quality training is needed to ensure that, as one interviewee said, “It’s not just someone clocking in and out where the student is just seen as someone receiving services.”

Infrastructure Needs

In rural Alaska in particular, many families and communities have inconsistent or limited access to internet - critical for researching options and submitting applications. On a more basic level, some rural communities lack water and sanitation systems, have limited availability of fresh food,

and limited transportation options. These gaps in services impact students' ability to thrive. Addressing basic needs in rural Alaska is a prerequisite to building equitable access to opportunity for all students.

FAFSA and Paperwork Support

Spotlight on Untapped Aid

The Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education reports that Alaskans miss out on an estimated \$15.7 million annually by not completing the FAFSA. This includes \$6.9 million in federal Pell grants, \$4.8 million in Alaska Performance Scholarship awards, and \$4 million in Alaska Education Grant awards.

More direct support for families in filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and other forms is needed, many interviewees said. As one noted, "FAFSA completion is a huge indicator for postsecondary attainment." With Alaska lowest in the nation for FAFSA completion rates, Alaskans are missing out on millions of dollars of student aid. One-on-one support is needed to help families complete what can be daunting paperwork. FAFSA completion is also required for students to receive state grants including merit-based Alaska

Performance Scholarships and need-based Alaska Education Grants.¹⁰

One interviewee said many students are not sure of their Tribal and Alaska Native shareholder status. Helping students determine their status could help them access funding and other valuable supports for postsecondary training and education.



Photo credit: UAS Collection

¹⁰ The Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education and partners launched the Alaska FAFSA Completion Initiative (AFCI). Information and resources can be found here: <https://acpe.alaska.gov/FINANCIAL-AID/The-FAFSA>

Spotlight on Alaska College and Career Guides: Targeted Supplemental Support

Several Alaska school districts participated in a federally funded Alaska College and Career Guides program administered by the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education (ACPE). ACPE hired and trained guides, who were meant to supplement, not replace, existing staff resources. The ACAC program as originally conceived ended when grant funding expired in 2016.

One community where the program appeared to have success was Bethel. In 2016, the fifth year of program implementation, 65% of Bethel Regional High School graduates enrolled in college the fall following graduation – more than 20 percentage points above college-going rates before and after program implementation, according to National Student Clearinghouse data. While this study was not able to obtain sufficient data to support statistically significant conclusions, those involved with the program believe the impact was real. A former Bethel guide recalled:

We were an ambassador to the school and an employee that was expected to be an asset that was well-defined, and meant to supplement, not replace, school counseling services. All of us had some kind of connection to our region; I'd been a student in the district. This was an inclusive college concept that defined college as any postsecondary program like AVTEC, Job Corps, Northern Industrial Training program.

It was a sandwich approach where on one side there was extraordinary effort placed on celebrating college and careers in the school with posters and campaigns and events and class presentations, lecture series highlighting a range of postsecondary options, bringing in community members to highlight their processes. And then on the other side, we had a strong focus on meeting with the students individually.

ACPE developed a database that fit in with school district information systems like PowerSchool so we could get lists of actively enrolled students, and the district provided a great deal of data about test scores and academic records so I could have intensive discussions with students, track these students, and follow up with these students on a case-by-case basis while they were in high school.

Several people involved with the Guides program in Bethel and elsewhere cautioned that, given staffing shortages in many schools, it is important that schools refrain from pulling guides into other tasks such as substitute teaching or staff support. Interviewees also pointed to the value of the program's being run by a third-party – rather than the local school district – in building trust and community relationships as well as maintaining independence and program integrity.

Recommendations

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS AND INVESTMENT

- Increase funding and staff for college and career guidance for Alaska youth.
- Integrate a sustained approach to helping students plan for life after high school.
- Build buy-in from school boards, families, teachers, and school leadership needed to create sustained cultural change.
- Ensure career guide programs are additive and do not replace existing resources such as certified school counselors.
- Collaborate across communities and school districts to create and reinforce a statewide norm of planning for life after high school.



Photo credit: UAS Collection

- Develop and maintain partnerships with groups like community organizations, Tribal entities, industry groups, and alumni to best support students and families.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

- Introduce postsecondary planning activities and messages in elementary school and deepen with age-appropriate activities throughout the middle and high school years.
- Integrate hands-on experiences, place-based learning, and real-life applications (e.g., internships or job shadowing) to help students envision possibilities for their future.
- Highlight connections between postsecondary education/training and opportunities in local industries.
- “Meet students where they’re at” with activities and approaches that reflect students’ values and interests and use accessible language.
- Offer emphasis, validation, and information on vocational and job training options equal to that offered for 4-year college programs.
- Use cohort and homeroom models to help students form stronger relationships with teachers, school staff, and peers.
- Provide concrete one-on-one help accessing and completing financial aid paperwork such as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), scholarship applications, and Tribal and Alaska Native corporation grant and scholarship enrollment and application forms.

CULTURE AND EQUITY

- Infuse cultural values and connections throughout postsecondary planning activities and conversations. Develop and use postsecondary planning materials and curriculum that reflect, affirm, and celebrate students' cultural foundations.
- Assess postsecondary planning activities and resources with an equity lens – consider who an activity or resource is designed for, and who might be left out.
- Hire and support career and college guidance staff who reflect the cultural backgrounds of students and families served.
- Provide school staff and career guides with high-quality training and support in social-emotional learning and restorative practice.
- Work to create equitable access to dual enrollment and postsecondary planning opportunities for all students.
- Focus on prioritizing individualized attention for underserved students.



Photo credit: UAS Collection

Appendix 1: Interview List

The following Alaska education stakeholders, listed alphabetically by first name, were interviewed for this project. Interview participants do not necessarily endorse all findings and recommendations in this report.

- Alicia Maryott, former Sealaska Heritage Institute cultural wellness program staff
- Alicia Miner, Principal, Bethel Regional High School
- Amanda Triplett, University of Alaska Southeast
- Hilary Nutting, Youth Program Manager, Sitka Tribe of Alaska
- Janelle Vanasse, President, Alaska Pacific University; former Superintendent, Mt. Edgecumbe High School
- Jessica Dean, Career and College Advisor, Juneau Douglas High School
- Kolene James, Student Equity and Multicultural Services Manager, University of Alaska Southeast
- Kyle Khaayák'w Worl, Wellness Coordinator and Coach, Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska
- Michael Mausbach, Regional Catalyst and Program Manager, Spruce Root, Inc.
- Nathaniel Betz, former college and career guide, Bethel Regional High School
- Rylee Johnson, Student, University of Alaska Southeast
- Sarah Ferrency, Deputy Education Director, Sitka Tribe of Alaska

In addition, the following individuals provided helpful input via email:

- Robyn Callahan, High School Initiatives Coordinator, Kodiak College, University of Alaska Anchorage
- Greg Monrad, former coordinator, Alaska College & Career Guides Program

Appendix 2: Postsecondary Data and Trends

This appendix provides select data and trends to help contextualize discussions around college and career guidance in Alaska.

Youth Disconnection

Youth ages 16 to 24 years old who are neither working nor attending school may be said to be “disconnected.”¹¹ A 2021 analysis found Alaska had the highest rate of disconnected youth in the nation, at 20%. Nationally, Native American youth have the highest rates of disconnection by race, at 23%. For young Native American men, the rate is 26%.¹²

National data indicate disconnected youth are nearly twice as likely to live in poverty (30.9%) as their “connected” peers (16.5%).¹³ In Alaska and nationally, rural youth and youth in high-poverty areas have higher rates of disconnection. It is important to note that some rural Alaska youth who are not working or in school may be engaged in subsistence activities to support their families and communities.

Experts say disconnection from school and work puts youth at risk.¹⁴ By contrast, youth who engage in education or training during the critical transition to adulthood have better mental health and higher lifetime earnings, among other benefits, than their peers who do not:

“Young adulthood is when people develop many of the capabilities required to live a good life: knowledge and credentials, social skills and networks, a sense of mastery and agency, an understanding of one’s strengths and preferences, and the ability to handle stressful events and regulate one’s emotions, to name just a few.”¹⁵

¹¹ Youth disconnection rates are calculated from American Community Survey data and are considered underestimates. According to a 2019 Journal of the American Medical Association article, “These rates don’t reflect young people who are homeless, incarcerated, or otherwise uncounted in the ACS. Nor do they encompass the disconnection of young people who are working or in school, but marginally so.”

¹² Measure of America. Youth Disconnection in America. 2022.

<https://www.measureofamerica.org/DYinteractive/#State>. See also WalletHub. 2023’s States with the Most At-Risk Youth. July 12, 2023. <https://wallethub.com/edu/states-with-the-most-at-risk-youth/37280>

¹³ Lewis, Kristin. A Decade Undone: 2021 Update. The Measure of America Youth Disconnection Series. Social Science Research Council, 2021. <https://ssrc-static.s3.amazonaws.com/moa/ADecadeUndone2021Update.pdf>

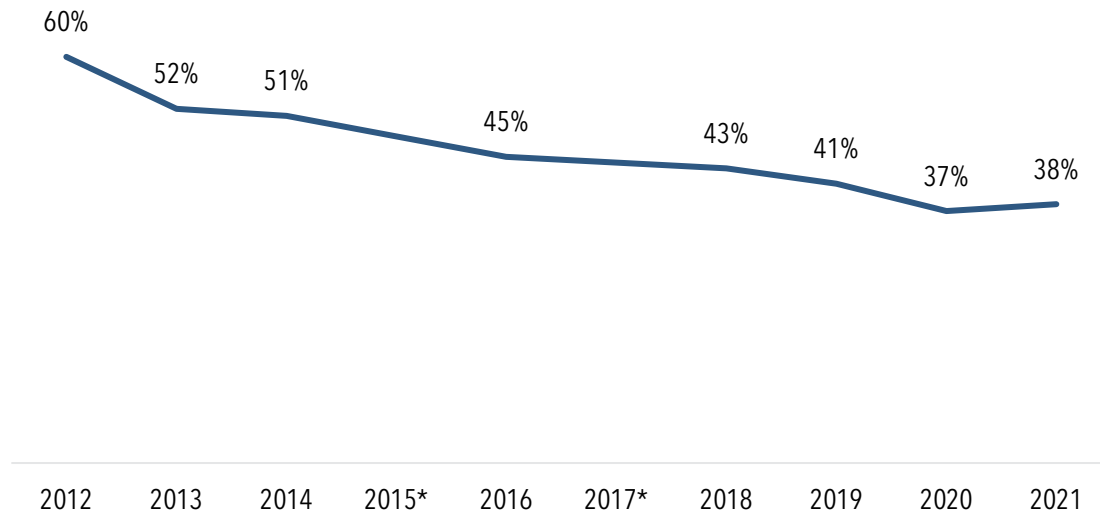
¹⁴ Mason, Diana. Engaging ‘Disconnected’ Youths to Prevent Lives of Isolation, Poverty, and Ill Health. JAMA Forum Archive. March 14, 2019. doi:10.1001/jamahealthforum.2019.0011

¹⁵ Measure of America. Youth Disconnection in America. 2022. <https://www.measureofamerica.org/>

Postsecondary Enrollment Trends

In Alaska, postsecondary enrollment has declined steadily over the past decade. Participation peaked in 2012 when 60% of high school graduates enrolled at a two- or four-year postsecondary education institution within the year following their high school graduation. In 2021, that figure was 38%.

Figure 1. Postsecondary Enrollment Rates, All Alaska Schools, 2012 – 2021



Sources: Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (2012, 2018 through 2021), Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education (2013, 2014, and 2016)

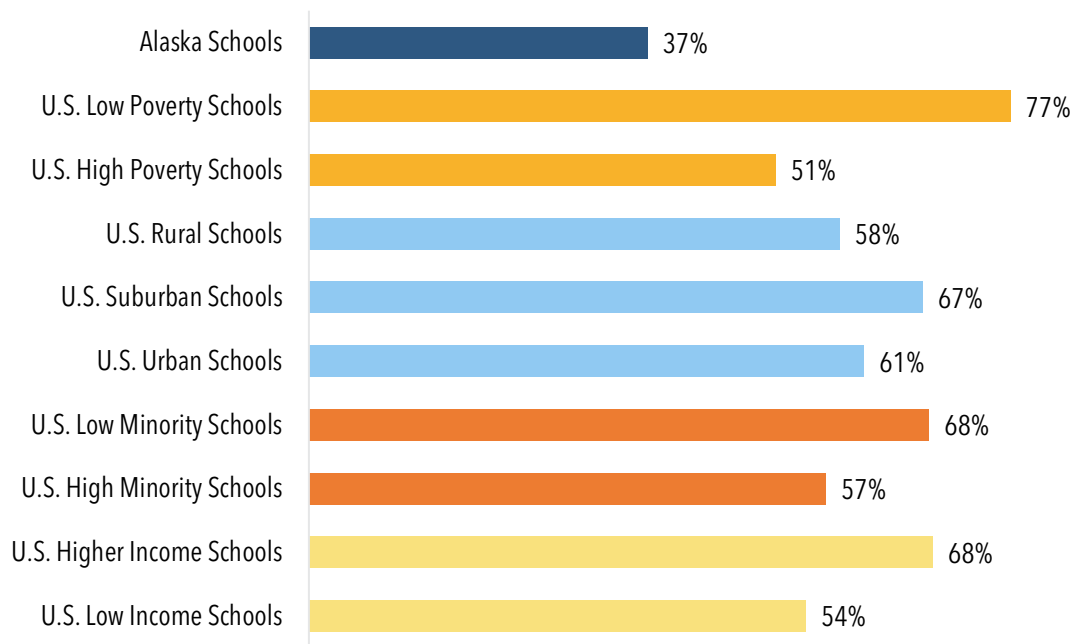
Note: Data for 2015 and 2017 unavailable.

Alaska's postsecondary enrollment rates are lower than all national subgroups broken out by the National Student Clearinghouse.

National data is broken out by income, minority status, geography, and poverty levels. Of these categories, data by poverty level has the largest difference between subgroups. In the graduating class of 2020, 77% of students from schools with low poverty rates enrolled in postsecondary education in the year following graduation compared to only 51% of students from schools with high poverty rates.

National subgroups with the lowest rates of postsecondary education enrollment were students from schools with high poverty rates (51%), rural schools (58%), schools with high minority populations (57%), and schools categorized as serving low-income populations (54%). Alaska's postsecondary enrollment rate was lower than any of these subgroups, at only 37%.

Figure 2. Postsecondary Enrollment Rates, Graduating Class of 2020

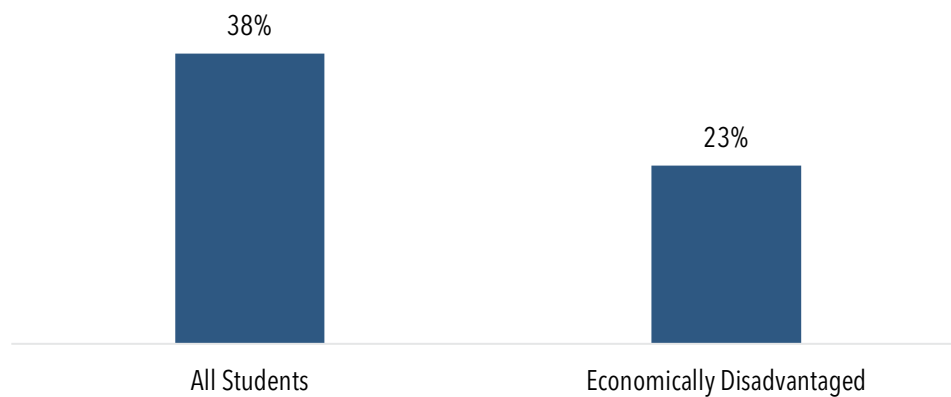


Sources: Alaska Department of Education and Early Development; National Student Clearinghouse
Note: Data is for enrollment within 12 months following high school graduation.

The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development tracks the postsecondary enrollment rates of economically disadvantaged Alaskan students, defined as students who meet eligibility requirements to qualify for free or reduced-price school meals.

As seen nationally, there are significant correlations between family income and postsecondary enrollment. In the graduating class of 2021, only 23% of economically disadvantaged Alaskan students enrolled in a postsecondary education program within 12 months of graduation.

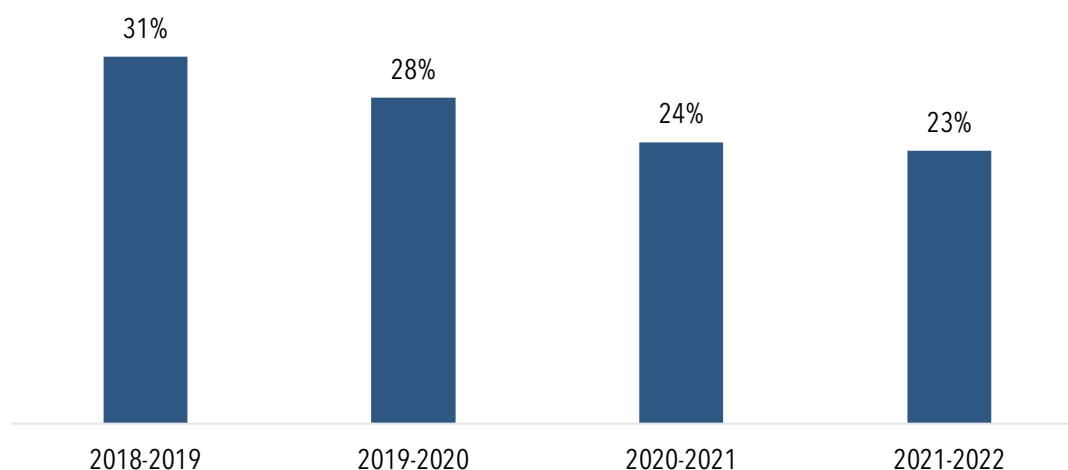
Figure 3. Postsecondary Enrollment Rates, Economically Disadvantaged Students, All Alaska Schools, Graduating Class of 2021



Source: Alaska Department of Education and Early Development

Further, postsecondary enrollment rates of economically disadvantaged students declined by 8 percentage points between 2018 and 2021. The postsecondary enrollment rate of Alaska students declined by 5 percentage points during this period.

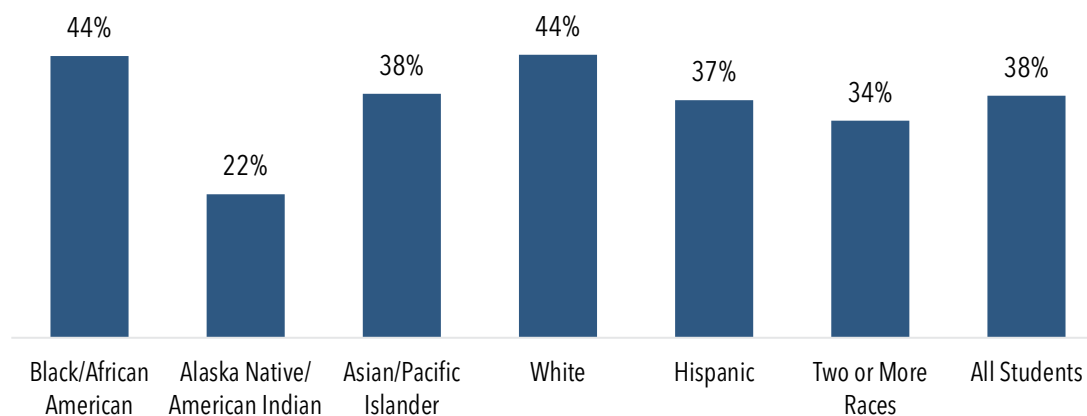
Figure 4. Postsecondary Enrollment Rates, Economically Disadvantaged Students, All Alaska Schools, Graduating Classes of 2018 through 2021



Source: Alaska Department of Education and Early Development

Alaska postsecondary enrollment rates vary widely by race and ethnicity. In 2022, 22% of Alaska Native and American Indian high school graduates enrolled in a postsecondary education program within a year of graduation. Comparatively, 44% of Black graduates and 44% of White graduates enrolled in postsecondary education programs. Statewide, 38% of students enrolled in postsecondary education programs.

Figure 5. Postsecondary Enrollment Rates by Race and Ethnicity, Alaska High School Graduating Class of 2021



Source: Alaska Department of Education and Early Development

Postsecondary Completion Rates

The National Student Clearinghouse tracks data on the completion rates of four-year degrees within six years. This data shows the completion or enrollment status of students that enrolled in college at some point in the six years after high school graduation.

Of the Alaska high school graduates in classes 2013 through 2016 who enrolled in college, half did not get a degree and are no longer enrolled in classes in the six years following graduation. Only 34% have completed a degree program within this period. The U.S. completion rate is 62%, nearly double the completion rate of Alaska high school graduates.

Table 1. Six-Year Completion Rates, High School Graduating Classes of 2013-2016

	Alaska	United States
Total Completion	34%	62%
Still Enrolled	16%	10%
No Longer Enrolled	50%	29%

Source: National Student Clearinghouse

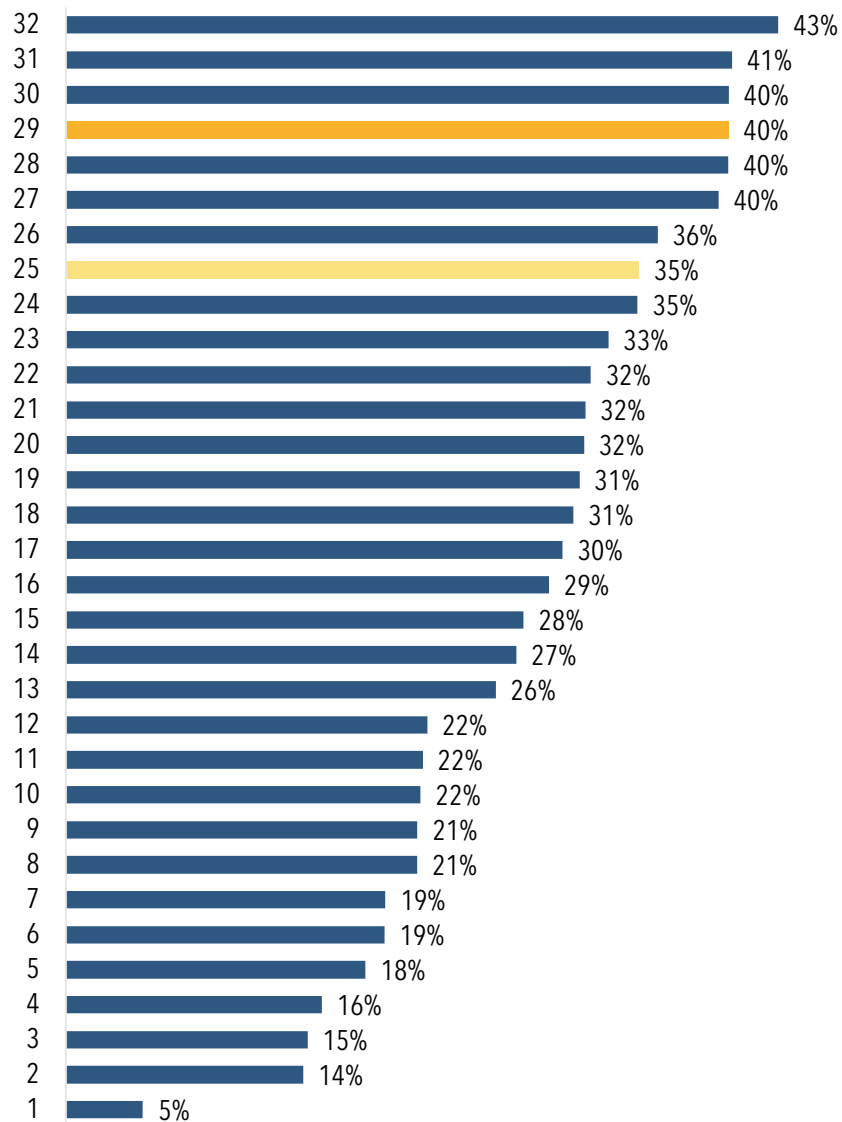
Note: Completion is defined as completing a four-year degree (i.e., bachelor's degree).

Postsecondary Attainment

As of 2021, 35% of all Alaskan residents aged 25 to 64 had postsecondary education credentials, excluding residents with non-degree short-term credentials or certificates. This proportion is 5% lower than the national rate. As shown in the chart on the following page, postsecondary attainment rates vary widely among boroughs and census areas in Alaska.

The City and Borough of Juneau (43%), Chugach Census Area (41%), and Denali Borough (40%) have higher rates than the U.S. average. Seven boroughs and census areas have attainment rates below 20%. The Kusilvak Census Area has the lowest postsecondary education attainment rate in the state at 5%.

Figure 6. Postsecondary Education Attainment Rates of Residents 25 to 64, 2021



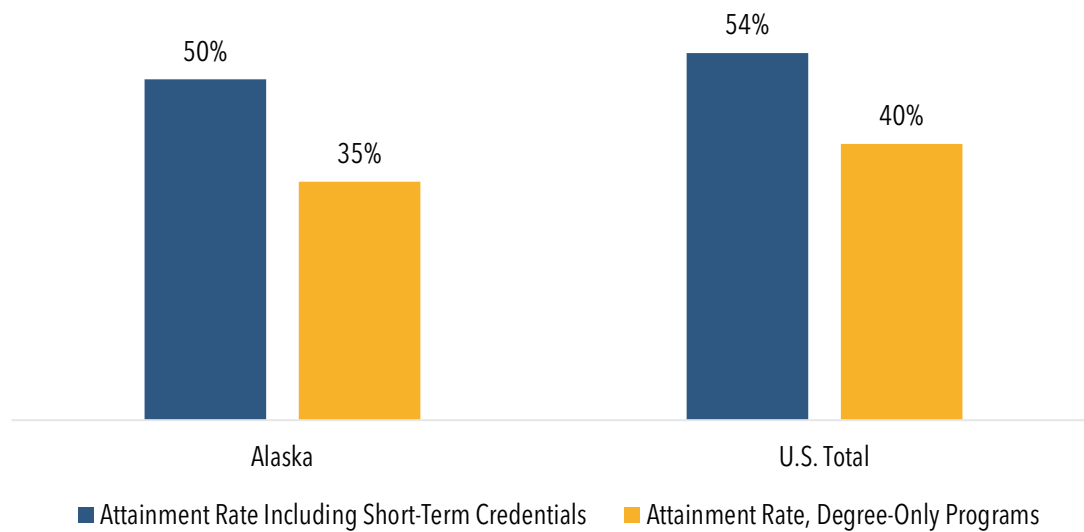
Source: United States Census Bureau, American Community Survey

Note: Excludes short-term credentials. Postsecondary educational attainment defined as associate degree or higher.

Postsecondary Completion Including Credentials

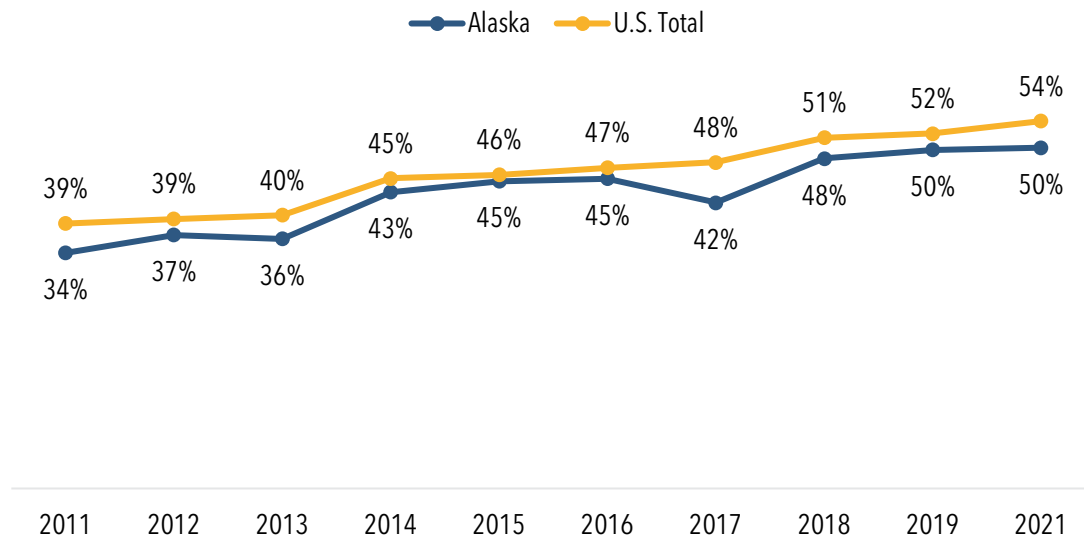
In 2021, the Lumina Foundation estimated that 50% of Alaska residents ages 25 to 64 had a postsecondary degree or short-term credential. Short-term credentials are defined as college-level certificates and industry-recognized certifications, including all non-degree award programs for training and education. This suggests that 15% of Alaskan residents who do not have a degree have a short-term credential.

Figure 7. Postsecondary Education Attainment Rate of Residents 25 to 64 Including Short-Term Credentials, U.S. and Alaska, 2021



Source: Lumina Foundation, National and State Attainment; U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey
 Note: Attainment includes short-term credentials as well as associate degrees or higher.

Figure 8. Postsecondary Education Attainment Rate of Residents 25 to 64 Including Short-Term Credentials, U.S. and Alaska, 2012 – 2021



Source: Lumina Foundation, National and State Attainment. Attainment includes short-term credentials as well as associate degrees or higher.

Appendix 3: Select Resources

Below is an annotated list of select resources for postsecondary data and state and national resources of interest to Alaska college and career guidance.

Data Resources

Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education, Higher Education Almanac 2022. This report, produced annually since 2017, provides data and trends about Alaska's postsecondary institutions, financial aid programs, educational attainment, and workforce needs.

<https://acpe.alaska.gov/Portals/3/OTHER/Pubs/Almanac2022.pdf>

Alaska Postsecondary Access and Completion Network (AlaskaCAN). AlaskaCAN "builds and strengthens partnerships to increase the number of Alaskans who pursue postsecondary workforce development pathways, particularly relevant to a robust Alaskan economy."

<https://65by2025.org/>

FAFSA Tracker. This online dashboard is a project of the National College Attainment Network. The dashboard tracks high school seniors' rates of completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) by state. FAFSA completion is required to receive any federal student grants and loans as well as many state and private scholarships and grants.

Alaska ranks last in the nation for completion, with 27% of high school seniors completing the FAFSA. Data can be searched by school income level, concentration of students of color, and geographic location. <https://formyourfuture.org/fafsa-tracker/>

Lumina Foundation. Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all.

A Stronger Nation: Learning Beyond High School Builds American Talent is a Lumina publication that presents postsecondary attainment data by state, including certifications as well as degrees. Alaska data: <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/#/progress/state/AK>

National Student Clearinghouse. This nonprofit non-government organization describes itself as the leading provider of educational reporting, data exchange, verification, and research services. <https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/>

NORC at the University of Chicago, National Education and Attainment Survey 2019. NORC conducted several studies for Lumina Foundation to assess the educational attainment of adults in the U.S. "The goal of these studies was to determine the percentage of adults who

hold high quality certificates, licenses, and certifications.” Lumina Foundation used this data to estimate the percentage of adults by state who hold such certifications.

<https://norc.org/content/dam/norc-org/pdfs/NEAS%20Methodology%20Report%202019%20and%20Appendices%20Public.pdf>

Alaska Resources

Becoming Aware: Rethinking College Readiness for Alaska Native Students (website). This initiative grew out of Janelle Vanasse’s dissertation project. Vanasse, who currently serves as president of Alaska Pacific University, explains:

Most models for building college-going cultures do not consider the unique experiences of Alaska Native youth. This project is designed to consider this population specifically and help schools develop opportunities for cultural responsiveness in college preparation.

The Rethinking Readiness website provides specific tools to guide schools through a process of improvement in this area. <https://www.rethinkingreadiness.com/>

Carlson, Dannielle. *Identifying and Lessening Barriers for Alaska Native Students Pursuing a Postsecondary Education: A Guide for Educators*. A project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Rural Development. University of Alaska Fairbanks. May 2022. Carlson, who is Unangax and grew up in rural Alaska, writes:

[T]he ultimate goal in doing this research is to make education more accessible, safe and culturally responsive so that Native students can stop needing “grit” to get by – so we can see more and more Indigenous people succeeding (and hopefully thriving) in education systems that were systematically built against them. ... Recommendations are provided with the hope and goal to implement change and lessen barriers for Native students.

Recommendations are provided for primary and secondary education, postsecondary institutions, and tribal organizations and Alaska Native corporations. Carlson currently serves as University of Alaska Southeast Alaska Native Student Success Specialist.

National Resources

rootEd Alliance. This nonprofit organization focuses on increasing postsecondary attainment in rural communities. Its mission: “Every student should graduate high school on a path to achieve career success and economic stability.” <https://rootedalliance.org/>

The Washington Post highlighted the program's impact in Tennessee in a December 4, 2020 article, *How to Raise Rural Enrollment in Higher Education? Go Local*. Excerpt below:

It starts with putting a counselor – someone raised rural and connected to the community – in a local high school to help every student craft a career plan and then guide them through the tasks required to apply for – and pay for – a postsecondary degree. ... The goal is for everyone to have a path.

Students may aim for a four-year university. They may attend a local community college or technical school. They may choose the military.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/colleges-rural-education/2020/12/02/6c802148-2f6a-11eb-96c2-aac3f162215d_story.html

Savitz-Romer, Mandy and Bouffard, Suzanne. *Ready, Willing, and Able: A Developmental Approach to College Access and Success*. Harvard Education Press. 2012. This book describes strategies and practices to support first-generation college-goers. The authors write:

During adolescence, young people are constantly asking questions such as “Who am I?” “Where do I fit in?” “What do I want to do with my life?” These questions, and their ever-evolving answers, shape everything that young people do. ...

Our goal here is to shine light on and demystify the concept of identity and the specific salience it has for adolescents in developing a college-going identity. We describe not only how identity development matters but how practitioners can support it.

Ginwright, Shawn PhD. *The Future of Healing: Shifting From Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement*. Medium. May 31, 2018. Ginwright, an author and associate professor of Education and African American Studies at San Francisco State University, coined the term “healing centered engagement” to describe an asset-based and culturally rooted approach to healing and wellbeing for young people of color and their adult allies. He explains:

A healing centered approach to addressing trauma requires a different question that moves beyond “what happened to you” to “what’s right with you” and views those exposed to trauma as agents in the creation of their own well-being rather than victims of traumatic events. Healing centered engagement is akin to the South African term “Ubuntu” meaning that humanness is found through our interdependence, collective engagement and service to others.

<https://ginwright.medium.com/the-future-of-healing-shifting-from-trauma-informed-care-to-healing-centered-engagement-634f557ce69c>

Appendix 4: AASB Collaborative Documents

The documents on the following pages were provided by AASB:

1. The Bridging to the Future Framework was compiled by AASB. Members of the Southeast Network of the Alaska Postsecondary Completion and Access Network (Alaska CAN) worked together to develop the framework based on insights from students, school staff, and Alaska Native serving organizations. The framework builds on *Becoming Aware: Rethinking College Readiness for Alaska Native Students*, an initiative developed by Janelle Vanasse, and draws from *Ready Willing & Able: A Developmental Approach to College Readiness* by Mandy Savitz-Romer and Suzanne Bouffard.
2. The Now for Next Workshop Recommendations, compiled by AASB, were developed at a fall 2022 gathering of more than 100 Alaskans exploring how to improve Alaska's postsecondary outcomes.

Bridging to the Future Framework

How Alaska's Schools Can Help Students Prepare for Life After High School

The Bridging Framework is a tool to understand where, when & how students receive support to prepare for the future. Students have better postsecondary outcomes when they have access to **systemic** and **holistic** planning throughout their school careers. Schools can use this tool as a guide to inventory and enhance the spectrum of support for students.

Systemic

Students are prepared for life after high school when they receive consistent and ongoing guidance from late elementary through the end of high school. And it works best when the messages are reinforced in a variety of settings:

Advisory: Career counseling & personal plans

Families: Conversations with parents, aunties, uncles, etc.

Classroom: Teacher-led, curriculum connected to the real world

Community: Opportunities with employers and Tribes

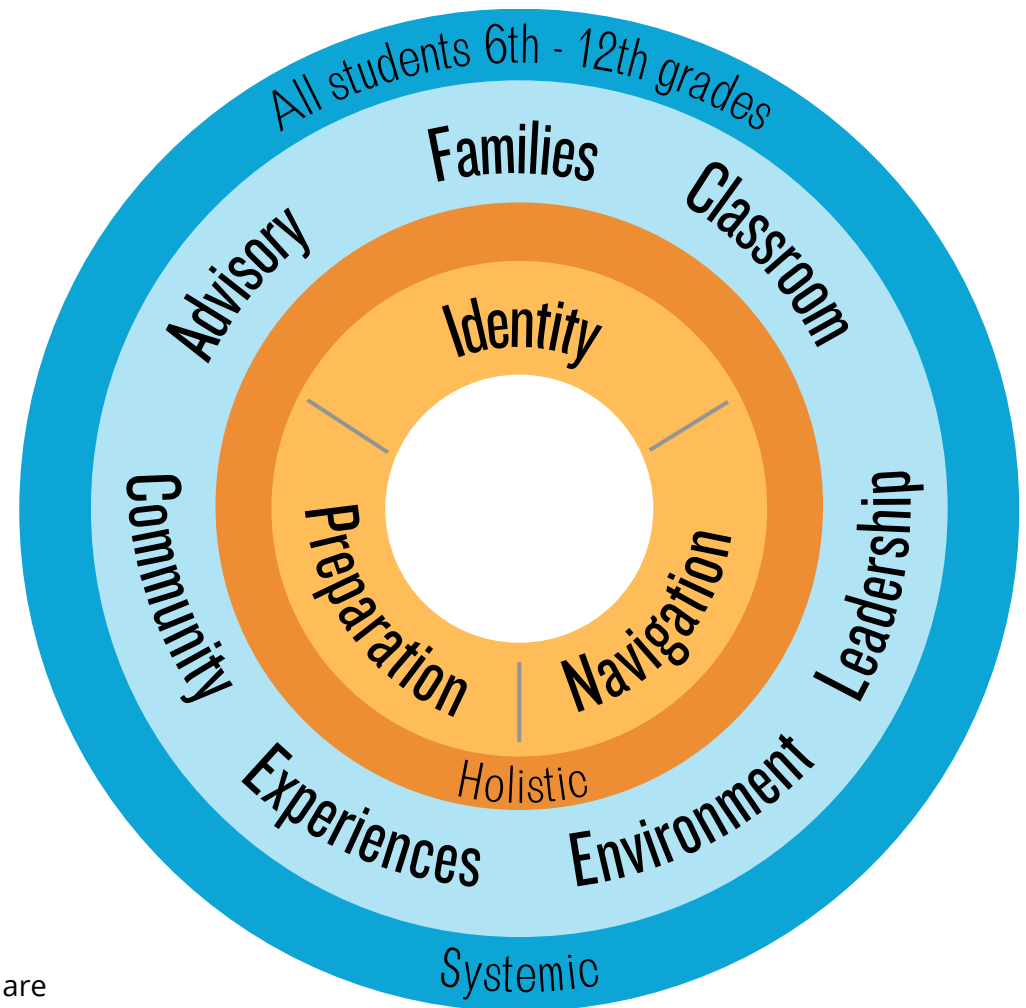
Experiences: Hands-on projects, internships, dual enrollment

Environment: School-based messages and near-peer examples

Leadership: School leaders setting goals & monitoring progress

Holistic

Research finds that students who know who they are and why they are pursuing a goal like a certificate or a college degree are much more likely to achieve that goal. Schools can help students prepare for life after high school by fostering **academic preparation, postsecondary and life navigation skills**, and **cultural and self identity**.



Bridging to the Future Framework

A New Map for Alaskan Students

The right experiences at the right time can help students prepare for the next step in their journey. A student has to envision a future before they can achieve it. And a student who knows who they are, where they are from, and has built confidence through past experiences is better positioned to achieve their goals. This map illustrates a suggested sequence of support so that it is systemic and holistic. See the Background section for more on how the Framework was developed.



Preparing for life after high school is like running a race. Students need preparation, practice and to know where the finish line is. The trail may be different for each student, but all students can benefit from signposts, arrows, aid stations, practice sessions, coaches, cheerleaders, and a supportive team.



Rethinking Readiness Framework, Janelle Vanasse *Ready, Willing & Able Developmental Framework, Mandy Savitz-Romer & Suzanne Bouffard*

Bridging to the Future Inventory

	Advisory Counselors, Teachers	Classroom Teachers, Embedded	Family Aunties, Uncles	Environment Walls & Halls, Near Peers	Experience Internship, Dual enroll	Community Tribes, Employers	Leadership School Admin & Boards
Areas of Strength 							
Areas of Growth 							

Preparing students academically	(Not yet)	1	2	3	4	5 (We got this)
Providing navigation skills	(Not yet)	1	2	3	4	5 (We got this)
Fostering cultural identity	(Not yet)	1	2	3	4	5 (We got this)

Bridging to the Future Inventory

The Inventory is a tool that schools and communities can use to identify current strengths and opportunities for growth.

Tips for Using the Inventory

- Gather a team with a variety of perspectives (school leaders, teachers, families, students, employers, Tribal members, etc.).
- Consider the programs, policies, and practices that help students in your school or community prepare for life after high school.
- Reflect on areas of strength.
 - What is going well?
 - What do you want to keep doing?
- Reflect on opportunities for growth.
 - Who are you *not* reaching? Who is underrepresented in programs or outcomes?
 - Where else can you foster support for students? Are there strategies in place for all locations & grade levels?
 - How well do the strategies promote academic preparation, navigation skills, AND cultural identity?

Taking it Further

- Consider how the team's findings can be linked to other school improvement initiatives like family partnership, culturally responsive teaching, or social & emotional learning. (Hint: they are all connected!)
- Assess your cultural competency with the tools available at [Rethinking Readiness](#).

Data to Consider

Before diving into the conversation, you may want to take a look at the data for your school or district.

Sources of information include:

- **Your families, students & community members.** Family dialogues and focus groups with students can provide insights that may be hard to capture in numbers.
- **Postsecondary enrollment rates.** Summaries for each school are provided in the Alaska Department of Education's [Report Card to the Public](#). In-depth reports, including postsecondary completion rates, are available from the [National Student Clearinghouse](#).
- **Financial aid completion rates.** [Form Your Future](#) tracks real-time Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion rates by high school. The [Alaska Performance Scholarship](#) annual report also provides school district-level data.
- **Surveys.** The [Alaska School Climate & Connectedness Survey](#) asks middle & high school students & their families about their plans to get more education after high school.

Cultural Identity

Students with a strong cultural identity have a sense of self grounded in their own cultural background, (Vanasse, 2021) Indigenous identity consists of multiple elements, including identification (e.g., tribe, self-perception), connection (e.g., kinship, ancestors, and land), and culture/spirituality (e.g., language, values, worldview, and practices) (Buckingham, 2021).

All students have an identity that impacts their goals. Research consistently finds that a strong sense of cultural identity promotes academic success, mental health, and contributes to overall well-being.

Hallmarks of Culturally Affirming Career Guidance

Build on traditional knowledge & values Alequutet, Ineruutet, Piciryarat Reflect local / community values Build on life lessons, traditional teachings & values from elders Ask about/write about your culture	Incorporate cultural ways of learning & teaching Learn by doing / observing Include experiences: local, sports, programs Build trusting relationships Learn as a community Make it creative: storytelling, song & humor	Approach students with unconditional regard Be compassionate & caring Take a strengths-based approach Be patient & open-hearted Practice lateral kindness Instruct in a loving way Let students know:	Make it personalized & holistic Plan for well-being & lifestyle Create space to explore values & connect to future dreams Customize Foster a growth-mindset Cultivate cultural identity as a strength	Cultivate cultural humility Be aware of your own culture, assumptions & expectation of "success" Refrain from judgement Have curiosity Be flexibility Listen & respect needs
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These hallmarks were identified during a convening of elders and career guide at Alaska Pacific University in 2023.

Tips & Tools for Creating a Culturally Affirming Environment

Partner to integrate home knowledge and ways of knowing.

- ✂ Local Tribes, cultural organizations, & families
- ✂ Stronger Together Family Partnership Framework

Implement programs & curriculum that encourage students & families to explore their cultural identity.

- ✂ Alaska Cultural Identity Project
- ✂ Finding Your Future Family Workshop

Assess the school culture for opportunities to increase culturally affirming approaches.

- ✂ Rethinking Readiness for Alaska Native students
- ✂ Alaska Cultural Standards

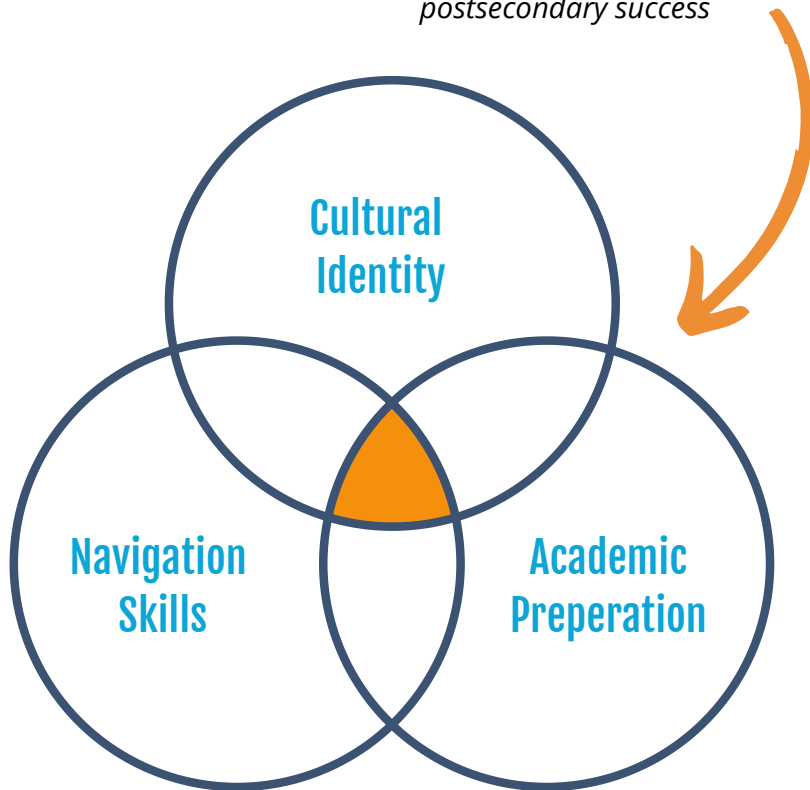
Academic Preparation

When schools have high expectations they provide students with a solid academic foundation. Rigorous and meaningful course work also helps students build the confidence they need to take on new challenges after high school.

Navigation Skills

Navigation skills include knowing how and when to apply for internships, jobs, training programs and college. Navigation skills also include how to finance postsecondary education, from applying for financial aid to managing personal finances. These skills also include when to ask for help and how to advocate for oneself.

Fostering all 3 factors is the key to postsecondary success



Tips & Tools to Promote Preparation & Navigation

In addition to rigorous and meaningful coursework, schools can provide access to dual enrollment courses & early exposure experiences. Examples include:

- ✂ University of Alaska's [Alaska Advantage](#)
- ✂ Alaska Pacific University's [Early Honors program](#)
- ✂ Bristol Bay Region [Career & Technical Education](#)

Explicitly teach navigation skills & help students make a personal plan. Free resources include:

- ✂ [Native Pathways to College Guidebook](#)
- ✂ [Alaska Career Information System \(AKCIS\)](#)

Support families & students in accessing financial aid:

- ✂ Align course offerings with [Alaska Performance Scholarship](#) eligibility criteria & inform students & families early & often
- ✂ Provide [Free Application for Federal Student Aid \(FAFSA\)](#) completion support
- ✂ Share [scholarship opportunities](#) with older students.
- ✂ Help families with younger students save for education after high school with programs like [Alaska 529](#)

Bridging to the Future: Background

How the Bridging Framework was Developed

The Framework builds on *Becoming Aware: Rethinking College Readiness for Alaska Native Students*, an initiative developed by Janelle Vanasse, which emphasizes the importance of fostering academic preparation, navigation skills, and cultural identity. And it draws from *Ready, Willing & Able: A Developmental Approach to College Readiness* by Mandy Savitz-Romer and Suzanne Bouffard which outlines the process of supporting students to envision, believe, aim, plan, and marshal the resources needed to transition to postsecondary opportunities.

Members of the Southeast Network of the Alaska Postsecondary Completion and Access Network (Alaska CAN) worked together to develop the framework based on insights from students, school staff, and Alaska Native serving organizations.

This document was compiled by the AASB with deep gratitude to the individuals & organizations who contributed, including:

- Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education
- Alaska Humanities Forum
- Alaska Pacific University
- Chatham School District
- Central Council Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribe of Alaska
- Hoonah City School District
- Hydaburg City School District
- Goldbelt Heritage Institute
- Juneau School District
- Mt. Edgecumbe High School
- Sealaska Corporation
- Sealaska Heritage Institute
- SERRC
- Sitka School District
- Sitka Tribe of Alaska
- University of Alaska Southeast
- Yakutat School District



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Recommended Reading

Carlson, Dannielle. Identifying & Lessening Barriers for Alaska Native Students Pursuing Postsecondary Education; A guide for Educators, 2022.

John-Sheilds, Agatha. "Tangerqungiaraucaraq (Being Present)," 2018.

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Perna, Mark. *Answering Why: Unleashing Passion, Purpose, & Performance in Younger Generations*. Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2018.

Savitz-Romer, Mandy and Bouffard, Suzanne. *Ready, Willing & Able; A Developmental Approach to College Readiness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2012.

Vanasse, Janelle. "Becoming Aware; Rethinking College Readiness for Alaska Native Students," 2020.

Now for Next Workshop Recommendations

Over one hundred Alaskans from top university officials to rural school board members gathered in the fall of 2022 at the Now for Next workshop to explore how to turn the curve on Alaska's postsecondary outcomes. Alaska currently ranks last in the nation on enrollment & graduation rates.

Now for Next participants envisioned a future where each student has a plan for their future, families feel supported and valued, communities have the leaders they need, and employers have the Alaskan workforce they desire.

The diverse group developed the following Seven Recommended Actions:

1. Identity and Motivation: **Foster motivation and life skills** by embedding culturally affirming social & emotional learning in all curricula. Provide culturally responsive training for all staff (K-12, Higher Ed, Department of Labor, etc).
2. Families and Communities: **Identify key timelines and milestones for families**. Build on parent expertise & storytelling & create toolkits for wide distribution and engagement.
3. Preparation: **Start planning for the future by middle school**. Include community-connected events and experiences.
4. Costs: **Host financial literacy community nights** starting with the basics for younger children/families (i.e. opening a bank account). Make the FAFSA easier to access/complete.

The Now for Next workshop was organized in partnership between the Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB) and the Alaska Postsecondary Access & Completion Network (AlaskaCAN). Sponsors included the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education, Alaska Pacific University, Bristol Bay Native Corporation, Sealaska Corporation, and the University of Alaska. See the [report here](#).



5. Navigation: **Fund career guides** to assist students and families with plans for their future linked to their goals and values as well as tactical steps like accessing financial aid.
6. Community Supports: **Foster mentorships** by helping students define what "success" looks like for themselves and matching them with mentors.
7. Sense of Belonging: **Build cohorts & mentorship** on campus by inventorying and building on what is working.

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