

Accreditation and Student Success

Dr. Jennifer Brock, Professor, Mechanical Engineering

Dr. Maria Williams, Professor, Alaska Native Studies

Prepared Opening Statement:

Dr. Jennifer McFerran Brock, Professor of Mechanical Engineering.

To the chair, my name is Dr. Jennifer McFerran Brock. I am a Professor of Mechanical Engineering in UAA's College of Engineering. For years, I have been heavily involved in accreditation – as an outside examiner for ABET, the accrediting body for engineering and technology programs, as an engineering faculty member and department chair undergoing ABET review, and as one of three co-chairs of UAA's Self-Study Committee, which prepared us for reaffirmation of accreditation with the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (the NWCCU) in 2018.

Due to accreditations' importance to our system, the proposal to consolidate our three universities into one, singly-accredited university is a high risk venture. Separate accreditations and greater decentralization are more appropriate for UAA, UAF, and UAS, given that they are truly regional institutions who draw most of their students from their own communities.

The two types of accreditation essential to our system are regional and specialized. Regional accreditation refers to the recognition granted to U.S. institutions by one of seven regional accreditation bodies (the NWCCU is ours). Regional accreditors are nongovernmental bodies recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. Within accredited universities, individual programs may also achieve specialized accreditation for degrees offered in certain areas or professions. Specialized accreditation is essential for licensure in many professions. There are approximately 48 programs at UAA which carry specialized accreditation, and they include programs from art and automotive & diesel technology to social work and surgical technology. ABET accredits six baccalaureate engineering programs at UAA.

In fact, we have already had a taste of what greater centralization under Statewide control would bring. In recent years, Statewide administration attempted to reorganize UAA's, UAF's, and UAS's Colleges and Schools of Education into the Alaska College of Education. A planning document from 2017 prepared by President Johnsen for the Board of Regents¹ reveals a long list of concerns raised by the NWCCU, including questions about faculty governance input, on whether the change was financially sustainable and cost effective, and others. The NWCCU's president characterized the plan as unusually complex, expecting the review process to take "significant time (multiple years) and effort."

Pres. Johnsen concluded that "a difficult, time consuming, and uncertain accreditation process creates major challenges to our ability to successfully recruit students, engage our faculty, build on our strengths, and deliver programs while we go through the process." He ended up proposing that the affected programs remain affiliated with their

¹ "Update on Planning for the Alaska College of Education," September 1, 2017

home campuses but be administered by a single Executive Dean at UAS, in part to "avoid accreditation concerns altogether."

The centralized Statewide structure and its removal from the day-to-day operation of our programs makes it structurally incapable of managing the level of detail required to make these types of mergers successful, even as it resists delegating that control to those who are well-positioned to manage those details. Following the loss of specialized accreditation by UAA's initial licensure programs by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) the Regents voted to abruptly discontinue the initial licensure programs at UAA in 2018 after an expedited program review similar to what it just ordered at its September 12th meeting. The wishes of UAA School of Education's local constituencies were ignored² and principled dissent from the Chancellors was actively suppressed³. An internal planning document⁴ reveals that of UAA's 474 education majors, 27% graduated last year, 17% transferred to other majors within UAA, 13% transferred to UAF, 11% transferred to UAS, and 32% "did not complete, [were not] retained." So 150 students dropped out of school. As a result of this rushed and ill-considered consolidation, students were harmed. This is indicative of a fundamental problem with our over-centralized model, and will not be solved by greater consolidation under single accreditation.

The concerns raised by President Johnsen in the 2017 document about delivering programs while undergoing a major accreditation process remain valid. In fact, the system has considered this possibility before. The 2016 Dana Thomas report commissioned by President Johnsen on the prospects for single accreditation⁵, concluded that single accreditation was not recommended. According to the NWCCU's Substantive Change Manual⁶, the proposed changes will have to be considered by the full Commission, which meets only twice a year in January and June, with proposals requested at least six months in advance of planned implementation. This explains President Johnsen's aggressive proposed timeline⁷, but it is highly unlikely that a proposal detailed enough to satisfy the NWCCU can be completed on this timeline, given that preparation for UAA's recent successful review occurred over 18 months.

By contrast, separate accreditations allow us to evolve according to the needs of our communities without precluding our ability to agree to work together when it makes sense to do so. Accreditation is built on mission. Separate accreditation allows UAA, UAF, and UAS to emphasize their distinct missions, which have grown up in response to the differing needs of their communities, and which are appended as Exhibit A. The

² See for example "030119-2 Resolution in Support of the School of Education Reapplying for Accreditation" and "040519-2 "Response to President Johnsen's Recommendations on UAA School of Education"

³ See President Johnsen's February 18, 2018 memo, Subject: Communications

⁴ "Update on UAA School of Education Transition," September 5, 2019

⁵ "An Assessment of Single Accreditation versus Three Separate Accreditations for the University of Alaska's Three Universities," Dana Thomas, PhD, July 26, 2016

⁶ Substantive Change Manual: A Guide to Substantive Change, NWCCU, May 2018

⁷ See "A Strategic Approach to University Integration," September 12, 2019, slide 22

heart and soul of accreditation is assessment, which is the act of regularly reviewing data and student assignments for evidence of performance and continuously making plans for improvement. This is why accreditation and assessment work best at the ground level, where the results of assessment can be plugged directly into a continuous improvement process that is personalized to the needs of the local student body.

UAA, UAF, and UAS have different demographics and have developed their curricula, majors, and missions in response to their unique needs. For example, 96% of students at UAA are commuters, 48% are of nontraditional age, and our students are more likely than college students in general to be working while going to school or to be caregivers for dependents. In order to be successful, any initiatives aimed at increasing retention and graduation rates for this student body will have to take all this into account. UAA had long known that its 6-year graduation rate, which hovered around an average of 26% for most of the last seven-year review cycle, was a problem. Two years ago, thanks to a series of local initiatives that UAA has been implementing to address this problem, our 6-year graduation rate increased 6 percentage points⁸, and last year it increased another. It is a local, community-oriented connection between students, mission and improvement that produced this result.

In closing, the decentralization that we are advocating is certainly not the status quo, and in fact it offers truly exciting opportunities for our public university system to grow into what our state's diverse communities need in the years to come. If we can accomplish a 7% increase in graduation rates in 2 years, despite the limitations of central control, think about what we might do with a university with its own Board of Trustees, responsive to the market forces of the communities we serve and empowered to pursue opportunities that make the most sense for our communities, and our state. Let us show you what we can become.

⁸ "Response to the NWCCU Student Achievement Data," September 2018, University of Alaska Anchorage

EXHIBIT A: The distinct institutional mission statements of UAA, UAF, and UAS

UAA: The mission of the University of Alaska Anchorage is to discover and disseminate knowledge through teaching, research, engagement and creative expression. Located in Anchorage and on community campuses in Southcentral Alaska, UAA is committed to serving the higher education needs of the state, its communities and its diverse peoples. UAA is an open-access university with academic programs leading to occupational endorsements; undergraduate and graduate certificates; and associate, baccalaureate and graduate degrees in a rich, diverse and inclusive environment.

UAF: The University of Alaska Fairbanks is a Land, Sea, and Space Grant university and an international center for research, education, and the arts, emphasizing the circumpolar North and its diverse peoples. UAF integrates teaching, research, and public service as it educates students for active citizenship and prepares them for lifelong learning and careers.

UAS: The mission of the University of Alaska Southeast is student learning enhanced by faculty scholarship, undergraduate research and creative activities, community engagement, and the cultures and environment of Southeast Alaska.

Prepared Opening Statement:

Dr. Maria Williams, Professor, Alaska Native Studies.

To the chair, my name is Maria Williams. I am a professor in Alaska Native Studies and Music. I am past President of the UAA Senate and current Chair of Faculty Alliance, which consists of the faculty senate leaders of UAA, UAF and UAS. I have been teaching at UAA since 2011.

Senator Shower, welcome and thank you for having your legislative hearing on the UAA Campus! ARTS 150 is the Music Department's main performance hall. Having you all here on our campus opens doors, and I am a supporter of 'opening doors.'

Last year, I served as President of the UAA Faculty Senate. I know that a great many of our faculty, students, staff and administration are grateful for your presence here today on our campus. For years our faculty have felt frustrated and ignored. Thank you for coming and listening to our testimony.

I will be addressing the topic of accreditation and how it relates to the Universities' mission, and how a consolidated University re-structure will impact and affect the mission and thus, accreditation. First, just a few basic facts. Accreditation is absolutely essential to any university – without accreditation our degrees would be worthless, students could not obtain financial aid, grants and research funds would be forfeited – we would be nothing.

UAA, UAS and UAF are separately accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. This is a good thing. The NWCCU has a rigorous process and all three of our universities have earned this status. The accreditation cycle is seven years – so every seven years each of our respective universities goes through an intense reaffirmation process – which is the combined efforts of faculty and administrative staff. UAA received its reaffirmation of accreditation last year, UAS just received theirs, and UAF, which was planning on their NWCCU site visit this fall, deferred one year due to the possibility of restructuring to a single accredited university. My colleague, Dr. Brock, was one of the faculty involved in the recent UAA reaffirmation of accreditation, which took over 18 months to collect data, file reports, and ensure that UAA was achieving goals established in our mission statement.

UAA's mission includes being an OPEN ACCESS university – so we admit all students who meet the minimum requirement of a high school diploma or GED. For a 4 year degree program the minimum GPA is 2.5; for an AA or certificate, there is no minimum GPA. UAF and UAS have different mission statements and different application requirements.

For example UAF has a research-focused mission, and with more rigorous application requirements, do not have open access (i.e. minimum SAT Test scores of 970 and

minimum HS GPA of 3.0, etc.). UAS requires a minimum HS GPA of 3.0 and an ACT or SAT score; for their AA degree it is open access with a minimum GPA of 2.0.

If UAA is merged or consolidated, our mission would change to reflect UAF and UAS admission requirements, and we might lose our open access mission, thus not serving a significant population of students.

ACCESS and an open door mission to this population are very important to me and are personal. My father is a UAA Alum. My father is a poster child for 'open door access'. He was born in a rural interior part of southeastern Alaska where his first language was Tlingit. He was forced to go to a boarding school for 4 years, punished and starved for speaking his language, a legacy of the 'kill the Indian to save the child' policies common during this time period. He somehow survived the boarding school, made it to the 6th grade, and then volunteered to serve in the Army in WWII—and was a machine gun instructor; he always told me that is where he learned to speak English. He met and married my mother and both worked at the old ANMC on 3rd and Gambell, where he was a cook. My mother believed in education and made my Dad get his GED. He then received an AA degree from UAA, in culinary arts. My father was the first member of my very large, extended family to get a college degree. An example of 'Door opening'.

If UAA, UAS and UAF are moved to a single accredited university – the open access aspect of UAA's mission might disappear.

I believe that Alaska should be celebrating that we have THREE accredited universities, that each have unique profiles and community campuses that reflect the needs of local communities. If we have one accredited university, then UAS and UAA forfeit their hard-won reaffirmation of accreditation status to a single accredited university - which would leave us vulnerable. Imagine if the one university lost its accreditation.

My vision for the future is a sustainable Alaska – with locally educated teachers, veterinarians, artists, business people, mechanics, cooks (!), nurses, pharmacists, and entrepreneurs. Education is a door opener – please do not allow that door to be shut for many.