

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

January 24, 2022

9:04 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Roger Holland, Chair
Senator Gary Stevens, Vice Chair
Senator Peter Micciche
Senator Tom Begich

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Shelley Hughes

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

UPDATE FROM UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

PAT PITNEY, Interim President
University of Alaska System
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Offered an update on the University of Alaska.

SEAN PARNELL, Chancellor
University of Alaska Anchorage
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented University of Alaska updates and answered questions.

DANIEL WHITE, Ph.D., Chancellor
University of Alaska Fairbanks
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented University of Alaska updates and answered questions.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[9:04:30 AM](#)

CHAIR ROGER HOLLAND called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 9:04 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Begich, Stevens, and Chair Holland. Senator Micciche arrived thereafter.

UPDATE FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA

[9:05:07 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND announced the committee would hear a University of Alaska update by President Pat Pitney.

[9:05:35 AM](#)

PAT PITNEY, Interim President, University of Alaska System, Fairbanks, Alaska, stated the update would focus on the workforce. Alaska has three universities with diverse missions. University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) focuses on research; the University of Anchorage (UAA) is open access and comprehensive; and the University of Alaska Southeast (UAS) is regional. Each university is associated with in-state community colleges. Each university provides unique experiences that serve the community workforce, businesses, and industries.

[9:07:28 AM](#)

PRESIDENT PITNEY moved to slide 2 and stated the University of Alaska is essential to the state's economic recovery, diversity, and growth. The University of Alaska is focused on workforce, competitive research, and cost-effective operation. The university needs financial and programmatic stability to create statewide trust.

[9:08:15 AM](#)

PRESIDENT PITNEY moved to slide 3 and said university budget reductions over the past eight years are equivalent to one-third of its base funding. Since FY19, the university's unrestricted funding has been down over \$70 million. Although the university has cut fifty programs, it has kept the programs that address Alaska's competitive advantages and priority workforce needs. The university footprint has been reduced by selling twenty-five facilities, demolishing twenty-four old facilities, and leasing space to third parties. There are 2,400 fewer faculty and staff.

SENATOR STEVENS asked for the reduced faculty percentage.

[9:09:52 AM](#)

PRESIDENT PITNEY estimated that the reduction in faculty is around 15 percent.

SENATOR BEGICH stated that one of the highest costs in Alaska is energy. He asked what the university is doing to capitalize on the shift to alternative energy.

[9:11:24 AM](#)

PRESIDENT PITNEY said that UAF's Alaska Center for Energy and Power collaborates with UAA engineering on multi-source optimization of microgrids. Multi-source maximization of renewable energy studies includes wind-diesel, solar-diesel, hydro-wind, tidal, and in-stream river. There is also a focus on bringing self-contained nuclear battery power sources into Alaska. The Alaska Center for Energy and Power is willing to present more details on its research.

[9:13:13 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH opined that the university is key in planning the state's renewable energy course. He asked if the university could partner with private companies to aid Alaska's transition. He stated Santos has five hubs worldwide and fears Alaska will not be a hub. Partnering with Santos at the university level could be advantageous.

PRESIDENT PITNEY replied yes.

CHAIR HOLLAND inquired about the Sustainable Village Cold Climate Housing Research Center project.

PRESIDENT PITNEY replied that center is not a UAF program even though it is located on campus property. The university leased a highly efficient small housing operation to the center who does the monitoring. The project is focused on residential housing efficiency and not energy.

[9:15:12 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND acknowledged Senator Micciche joined the meeting.

[9:15:19 AM](#)

PRESIDENT PITNEY turned to slide 5 and expressed appreciation to Senator Murkowski and the Alaska State Legislature for establishing a federal land grant with the Bureau of Land Management for UA. The grant would allow up to 360,000 acres to be identified and conveyed to UA for use. Alaska has the largest landmass and smallest land grant in the nation.

[9:16:20 AM](#)

The University of Texas (UT) and the University of Alaska received land grants in the 1980s. UT received a 2.1 million acre land grant that has generated \$21.4 billion as of 2019. The University of Alaska received 150,000 acres and has generated \$6.8 million as of 2019. In contrast, the Mental Health Trust Authority has 1 million acres and has generated \$10.6 million since 2019. Although the land grant does not replace other funding, it adds stability to the university.

CHAIR HOLLAND asked if Texas's land revenue of \$21.4 billion came from oil. He wondered what the significant land revenues were for Alaska.

PRESIDENT PITNEY replied that major land revenues in Alaska include timber, gravel, subdivisions, and mining.

[9:18:35 AM](#)

PRESIDENT PITNEY said that full-time employees had been reduced by 22percent, part-time employees are down 35percent, students are down 36.5percent, and graduates are down 18.6percent. She deduced that students are graduating at a higher proportion. Also, the programs the university kept are those that produce more graduates.

[9:19:36 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH commented that UAA's contact tracers were included in the number of part-time employees, so the part-time employee reduction percentage is greater than 35percent. He asked what the future bodes for a student body decreased by a third.

PRESIDENT PITNEY replied that with stability, the future bodes well. The turmoil of budget reductions and Covid are in the past. The university is positioned to highlight the strength of its programs. Student reduction would have been about twenty-five percent without Covid. UAA was impacted by the rapid budget changes and switch to online learning. UAF and UAS were less affected because they were online-centric before the pandemic.

[9:21:37 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS commented that nationwide college enrollment is down because many students are opting to work. Still, statistics show that higher education leads to better-paying jobs and happiness in life. He asked how the trend can be reversed so that students choose to become more accomplished.

[9:23:01 AM](#)

PRESIDENT PITNEY replied that it takes everybody to express the importance of education, whether a two-year technical degree, associate's, or bachelor's degree. It needs to be part of the state's culture. Middle college is helping to show the path to higher education. Working closer with industries also helps students see direct connections to jobs. Alaska's problem is not the number of students going out of state to college. It is the number of students not going to college. It has been a chronic problem for Alaska.

SENATOR STEVENS stated UA faced many reductions. He appreciates that its future looks bright.

[9:25:11 AM](#)

SENATOR MICCICHE asked if exit cards were sent to the 11,000 non-returning students to determine their reasons for leaving.

PRESIDENT PITNEY deferred the question to Chancellor Parnell.

SEAN PARNELL, Chancellor, University of Alaska Anchorage, Anchorage, Alaska, replied that a blitz was done by the administration and faculty to determine why students were not returning for the Fall semester. Life adjustments were cited. Similar adjustments have been seen with adults in the workplace.

[9:28:14 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND stated he knows students who quit attending UA and started working due to the educational disruptions caused by Covid. They have not returned to school but plan to.

SENATOR MICCICHE stated he worked in an industry that partnered with the university to provide process technology and other programs to prepare new employees. The programs saved the employer \$90,000 in training costs. He asked if the university has an outreach team to partner with industries and discuss job training needs. For example, the mining industry uses Mine Awareness Training (MATS).

PRESIDENT PITNEY replied that outreach is done on a case-by-case basis. When state funding was available, the university expanded process technology programs and doubled the nursing and engineering programs. These programs have helped lessen Covid's negative impact on graduation rates. There will be some outreach through the infrastructure bill, but the universities focus is stability.

[9:30:58 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH stated Senate Bill 10 would provide monetary resources to students. It would be a way to get federal Covid funds into Alaska's university system, increase enrollment, and get students into partnership programs at the university.

[9:32:14 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS requested the university investigate the training required to operate automatic baiting equipment and whether it could offer the training.

PRESIDENT PITNEY accepted the request and moved to slide 8 to discuss signs of hope in student enrollment. Students enrolled exclusively at community colleges increased in 2021. UAA's academic units, Kodiak and Prince William Sound Colleges saw increased enrollment, as did UAS's School of Career Education. UAF's academic units saw increased enrollment, and graduation increased 5percent. Graduation rates for UA are at an all-time high. UA's focus on Alaska Native enrollment, recruitment, and retention has had positive signs.

[9:35:33 AM](#)

DANIEL WHITE, Chancellor, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Fairbanks, Alaska, said that edX is a free platform where students can take courses. The cost of a certificate is about \$200. There are approximately 20,000 students worldwide taking edX courses from UAF. He anticipated that by 2024, there would be 100,000 students taking the classes. The amount of money earned from the platform is small. The benefit is worldwide exposure to the opportunities available at UAF. It is believed that all students enrolled in the One Health master's degree program either came into the program through edX or had an affiliation with a person who entered through edX.

[9:37:34 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH suggested UAF be deliberate in collecting data to solidify the connection between edX users and increased enrollment because affirmation would garner support from the legislature.

PRESIDENT PITNEY noted that UA served Alaskans by running a Covid contact tracing team and offering training. It has shared its epidemiology experts, worked with small businesses, and assisted with mental health emergency response.

[9:39:32 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked what UA has done to protect students and faculty from Covid.

PRESIDENT PITNEY replied that the university uses a three-layered approach that includes masking, social distancing, and vaccination. Vaccination is required in school dormitories since there is not enough space for social distancing. UAF has research contract agreements of \$100 million that require vaccination. Therefore, vaccination is required within the UAF campus proper. Some class sizes have been limited, and protection barriers have been placed where needed. Contact tracing is also being done.

[9:42:03 AM](#)

PRESIDENT PITNEY moved to slide 10 to discuss middle college programs. Middle college programs exist in Anchorage, Mat-Su, Kenai, Fairbanks, online and within the Alaska Native STEM Program (ANSEP). The Alaska Advantage program is Alaska's virtual middle college which opened the Fall semester before Covid. The program was developed in response to Arizona State offering Alaskan students participation in its' virtual program. UAF and UAS successfully run the program. UA and secondary schools are focused on increasing enrollment.

[9:43:51 AM](#)

PRESIDENT PITNEY stated that actions were taken to address Alaska's need for trained teachers. Since each university has a teaching program, a board-approved Alaska Education Consortium was established to build a team of faculty and leadership to work on pathways. Anchorage has a 2+2 program, and other UA programs have teacher mentoring. The website teachalaska.org was launched to highlight UA's teaching programs and pathways. The site allows people with various backgrounds and interests to quickly determine which teaching program best serves their purpose. UA is also running advertisement campaigns to capture student interest and promote teaching as a worthwhile occupation.

[9:46:15 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH requested a graphic update on the number of students enrolled in teacher education programs compared to previous years. Last year's graphic showed a significant decline in teacher enrollment. He opined that having the visual aide helps facilitate important recruitment and retention dialogue. He mentioned the role of Western Governors University (WGU) in augmenting teachers for Alaska in the 1990s. He suggested that the state consider partnering with WGU again.

[9:48:01 AM](#)

PRESIDENT PITNEY replied that the graphic is part of a required biennial education report. Still, she would provide the committee with the graphic.

SENATOR STEVENS asked how Alaska can help place-based residents to become certified teachers.

[9:49:00 AM](#)

PRESIDENT PITNEY replied that UA has partnered with school districts to assist teacher aides in determining the best pathway to become certified teachers. Many of the programs are available entirely through distance learning. The online availability of a program can be ascertained by visiting teachalaska.org.

PRESIDENT PITNEY advanced to slide 12 and reiterated that UA is interested in meeting the workforce needs of Alaska. Last year, UA studied industry sectors to determine the number of graduates working in Alaska and their yearly earnings. From UA's oil and gas process technology programs, there were 790 students who graduated over a ten-year lookback in two locations. Almost 700 are employed in Alaska, and the average wage after five years of employment is \$130,000. The program is a tremendous benefit to both the industry and the graduate. She noted that the industry sector reports are available online.

PRESIDENT PITNEY said she would be talking with the Labor and Commerce Committee regarding the workforce needs that will result from the federal infrastructure bill. Alaska is in an interesting position because the number of working-age adults has declined by 30,000 over the last several years. The wage differential Alaska once had no longer exists in its industries. Alaska's ability to meet its economic opportunities depends on building the workforce from within the state.

[9:52:56 AM](#)

PRESIDENT PITNEY advanced to slide 14 and stated that UA offers many programs that would help meet the tremendous workforce needs that the infrastructure bill would create.

[9:53:30 AM](#)

MR. PARNELL stated that UAA is aware of its key role in Alaska's economic comeback. Alaska's comprehensive university offers more programs than many residences realize. He began a calling initiative to address the workforce demands of the state. He

speaks with Alaska Native corporation and tribal leaders, oil and gas executives, telecom, healthcare, and financial institutions. He stated that the university's chancellors and president interact to ensure that university programs match workforce needs.

[9:55:07 AM](#)

MR. PARNELL stated his appreciation for the suggestion of partnering with Western Governors University (WGU). UAA spoke with WGU, and ways to partner are being considered. UAA is open to suggestions that create more opportunities for students. UAA is Alaska's largest workforce provider and offers master, bachelor, and associate degrees and occupational endorsement certificates. UAA takes the lead for UA's health programs and offers 45 programs, such as surgery technician, stenographer, and medical assistant. The demand for UAA's healthcare programs exceeds its capacity, so it is looking to expand.

UAA's College of Engineering is poised to meet the increased needs of the workforce from the infrastructure bill. Employers need bookkeepers, accountants, and quantitative analysts. The College of Business and Public Policy can meet employers' needs for bookkeepers, accountants, and analysts and is prepared to help students transfer into the programs. He commented that students could begin a career and work towards a bachelor's degree through the certificate and pathway programs.

[9:58:39 AM](#)

SENATOR MICCICHE asked if UAA is pursuing true program partnerships, as was done with the process technology program, where a company heavily subsidizes program costs. He suggested there could be opportunities in the seafood and medicine industries.

MR. PARNELL responded yes; for example, Providence Alaska Medical Center has a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the College of Health. He recently learned that there are hundreds of active MOUs that need attention. He visited the Kenai Process Technology facility and saw its cutting-edge training. At the tip of UAA's strategy are more partnerships like the Process Technology program has with the oil industry.

[10:01:46 AM](#)

SENATOR MICCICHE asked if the effectiveness of state funding can be increased by promoting its high-quality programs to institutions that have inferior programs.

[10:02:59 AM](#)

PRESIDENT PITNEY replied that effectiveness is program dependent. UA's fully online emergency management degree is highly effective and was made popular outside of the state by word of mouth. On the other hand, equipment-heavy programs, like process technology, which are already at capacity, are not made more effective through promotion. Out-of-state tuition never covers the total cost of a program. Therefore, it is better to focus on promotion in-state, where workforce retention is likely.

[10:04:54 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS stated it was a shock to Alaska when UAA lost its accreditation for its teaching program. He asked what is being done to ensure students receive the education needed for certification and whether the university intends to apply for accreditation.

MR. PARNELL replied that UAA is fully accredited. If a student wants to become a teacher, there are pathways at Alaska's universities. He deferred further explanation to President Pitney.

[10:06:28 AM](#)

PRESIDENT PITNEY added that the Board of Regents passed a comprehensive reporting system centered on accreditation in November. All of UA's institutions have strong accreditation. Many individual programs, such as business, engineering, and chemistry, have additional certification. The focus of the accreditation policy is on early indicators, monitoring, and oversight.

PRESIDENT PITNEY said that UA has pathways and education leadership programs at UAA and is adding a PreK - 3 Early Childhood bachelor's program. She stated that when she became the interim president, the university faced an additional reduction of \$20 million. Therefore, any additional programs needed to be cost-neutral. Since UAA already had a two-year program, creating a four-year program would be a cost-neutral way of attracting more students.

[10:09:08 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS opined that the largest campus in the state needs to have a school of education with an accredited teaching program. He stated his concern that UAA provides students with certifiable teacher education programs. He asked if the university would be seeking accreditation.

[10:10:21 AM](#)

PRESIDENT PITNEY replied that the university is in a downsizing environment. Each program within the school of education must be accredited. The process needs to be done in steps, and the first step for UAA is the Early Childhood program. The other step is a seamless pathway through TeachAlaska.org. Two years of study are done at UAA followed by two years at UAF to obtain a BA in elementary education.

MR. PARNELL stated that UAA's School of Education graduate programs had accreditations reaffirmed in August. The associate degree in Early Childhood Education is accredited. UAA has sixty-seven accreditation bodies and reviews. Accreditation is essential, and steps are being taken so that UA does not experience the revoking of a program's accreditation again.

SENATOR BEGICH expressed appreciation and joshed that Mr. Parnell would be under pressure because all members of the Senate Education Committee are from UAA's south-central region.

[10:13:26 AM](#)

MR. WHITE said that at UAF workforce is discussed from the level of GED support to graduate degrees because all programs contribute to Alaska's workforce.

UAF is Alaska's research university. It creates new jobs and career paths through research and new technologies. For example, UAF's Alaska Center for Energy and Power is working on new energies. It is a place where people get trained for tomorrow's jobs.

UAF developed a four-year financial aid program to help bachelor's degree students get into the workforce quickly. It provides a four-year commitment of financial assistance to students. Hence, they are confident of the cost and affordability of their chosen program. The intent is to prevent students from interrupting their studies to earn money.

[10:15:40 AM](#)

UAF has 45 online degree programs designed to meet the needs of working Alaskans. Online programs allow students to take courses where and when they need them. It also offers micro-credentialing that enables students to take classes that have value in the workforce, such as social media marketing, small business development, and entrepreneurship.

[10:18:05 AM](#)

UAF also offers traditional workforce programs, such as fire, paramedicine, mining, and oil and gas. UAF operates an underground mine and partners with petroleum companies to train in the Kenai peninsula region. When students graduate from a program, they are ready to be employed. Tribal management and rural human services are offered to prepare students to work in rural native communities.

[10:19:34 AM](#)

PRESIDENT PITNEY moved to slide 17 and stated Juneau, Sitka, and Ketchikan are integrated to form the University of Alaska Southeast (UAS). The Ketchikan campus is focused on maritime education. Its maritime training center has a state-of-the-art simulator to train boat captains, and it is closely aligned with the Alaska Vocational Technical Center (AVTECH) in Seward, Alaska. Juneau's power technology program focuses on the mining workforce. Juneau's education programs are offered statewide online. UAS also offers a one-year intensive teacher certificate program.

[10:20:57 AM](#)

PRESIDENT PITNEY stated that Anchorage's college of health provides nursing cohorts in Juneau. In addition, UAS offers two shorter programs, medtech and certified nursing assistant (CNA). An area of significant focus at the board level is increasing the presence of fisheries and ocean sciences through a partnership with UAS and UAF. UAF has a research facility at Lena Point, Juneau. The fisheries and ocean science program has expanded by combining UAF's research and graduate programs with UAS's undergraduate program, creating a pathway into the graduate program for undergraduates. Also, Sitka has a strong fisheries tech program.

[10:22:15 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS stated he is impressed with Juneau's teacher education program. He asked how many students are enrolled in UAS's education programs.

PRESIDENT PITNEY replied that she would report back.

[10:23:12 AM](#)

PRESIDENT PITNEY moved to slide 18 and stated that the Board of Regents approved an \$8 million operating budget increase, making the FY23 budget \$280 million. The budget amount in FY14 was \$379 million. The university wants to achieve fiscal stability and

grow by working with industries. This takes time so modest increments to the budget help. The university will focus on targeted programmatic areas. She noted that faculty contracts are still being negotiated and are not included in the FY22 budget of \$280 million.

PRESIDENT PITNEY advanced to slide 19 and commented that a priority project for the capital budget is modernizing student IT infrastructure. The current Enterprise data system was installed in 1995 and interfaces poorly with more modern technology. Federal or state funds can be used for the upgrade as it is a long-term investment central to UA's future.

PRESIDENT PITNEY stated that there was \$31 million in the legislature's budget last year that was vetoed. The previous year's deferred maintenance projects need to be addressed. Deferred maintenance is \$1.4 billion. An annual deferred maintenance budget of \$50 million would keep the university on track. A long-term deferred maintenance strategy needs to be figured out.

[10:26:00 AM](#)

PRESIDENT PITNEY stated that areas of economic impact for Alaska that were presented to the Board of Regents include drones, critical minerals, enhanced oil recovery, alternative energy, mariculture, and health care programs. The university is excited to request state discretionary federal funds for use in these projects because it advances the initiatives faster. The expansion of the Health Care program is a base request.

PRESIDENT PITNEY said UA's drone program is one of seven in the nation. Alaska is a perfect testbed for commercialized flights. Faculty serve on committees with the Federal Aviation Association (FAA) to determine how to have safe flights. Drones could be a game-changer for monitoring the pipeline, sending freight to small communities, counting fish and game, or monitoring coastal land and water. Once more test facility setup and pilot training are arranged, these opportunities could exist for Alaska.

[10:28:39 AM](#)

PRESIDENT PITNEY said that Alaska has the elements for a green economy and could sustainably mine rare earth minerals. Research is needed to make mining economical. This research would give the United States independence from China. UA plans to meet with industries, environmentalists, and state and federal governments in August to discuss unlocking critical minerals in Alaska. UA

would work with the Department of Natural Resources and the Division of Geological and Geophysical Surveys.

PRESIDENT PITNEY mentioned that the state is waiting for a judgment regarding whether the Higher Education Investment Fund (HEIF) can be swept into the Constitutional Budget Reserve (CBR). If the lawsuit does not prevail, the university will need legislative assistance to restore the fund.

[10:31:05 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH asked about the status of the UA President search.

PRESIDENT PITNEY replied that the board would decide in February.

[10:31:52 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Holland adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 10:31 a.m.