



2023 State of the University Address

February 21, 2023 | President Pat Pitney
Greater Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce

Fairbanks Chamber – thank You for the opportunity to present the State of the University.

I want to acknowledge that across the state, our universities reside on the ancestral homelands of Alaska’s many and diverse Indigenous nations, who have been stewards of this land for time immemorial.

I’d like to recognize Regents, Foundation Directors, and local elected officials who are here today. Thank you for your support.

I especially want to recognize UA’s faculty and staff across the state for their hard work and tenacity. You’ve been flexible and innovative. You’ve found new ways of reaching and engaging our students to deliver high-quality education. Students, employers, and communities across Alaska appreciate your passion – as do I.

To all of you watching: whether you realize it or not, you are our partners. You live here. You work here. You want the best for your community. In doing so you’re investing in future generations of Alaskans. We all want a prosperous and vibrant state. And your support – directly and indirectly – helps us empower Alaska. **Thank you.**

I’m honored to lead the University of Alaska – our state’s public higher education system. That’s our three universities – UAA, UAF, and UAS – and their associated community campuses, serving our state from Ketchikan to Kotzebue.

Each university is unique:

- UAF is Alaska’s premier Research University.
- UAA is our comprehensive university, and the primary healthcare workforce provider for the state.
- And UAS is our regional university in a remarkable location, with a growing emphasis on undergraduate ocean science, mariculture, and maritime workforce that serves the Southeast economy.

Each university provides a valuable and distinct student experience. Every campus is a crucial part of its home community, supporting local economic and workforce needs.



Our programs stretch from short-term workforce development certificates to Ph.D. programs recognized as best in class globally. That breadth and depth across the state are necessary to meet Alaska’s needs.

THE STATE OF THE UNIVERSITY

I am thrilled to share that the University of Alaska has turned the corner.

We have fiscal stability for the first time in 9 years, and this spring - a growing student body.

And, very exciting news - last year we reached the highest-ever level of externally funded research. We are about to eclipse that record again this year.

We are focused on our communities and partners to meet the broad challenges and opportunities for the state.

We are Empowering Alaska – focusing on a strong workforce and a vibrant economic future.

Fiscal stability is the foundation for these successes.

EMPOWERING ALASKA’S ECONOMY AND WORKFORCE

Speaking of stable foundations – After decades without the Land for our land grant university – at the end of last session, Lisa Murkowski masterfully got Congress to pass the University of Alaska Fiscal Foundation Act. As a result, UA can now work with DNR and BLM to triple our current land holdings to over 500,000 acres. We won’t be able to monetize that land overnight. It will take years. But we finally have the path.

A huge thank you to Senator Murkowski for her tireless work on this. And to our entire Congressional Delegation and the Governor for their support of this land grant process.

Our universities provide Alaska with the highest impact strategy to attract and retain a quality workforce. Our highly capable graduates stay in state, and contribute to our communities.

National statistics show that 80% of graduates settle within 100 miles of where they go to college. Specific to Alaska, our department of labor statistics show that only 25% of students who go out of state for college come back and stay in Alaska long-term.



Today, we have 25,000 fewer working-age adults in Alaska compared to 2013. We are facing **acute** shortages in key sectors of our communities – teaching, healthcare, CPAs, and construction workers to name a few.

Our universities are a big part of the solution to meet those workforce needs.

Over the last 10 years, we've awarded over 44,000 degrees and certificates – 72% of them in Alaska's highest-demand employment fields. 80% of our graduates are working **here in Alaska** within a year after graduating.

Let's take construction as an example:

The Associated General Contractors forecast that construction spending in Alaska will exceed \$5.5 billion this year. That's up almost \$1 billion over last year.

In the last 3 years, the number of job openings in the construction industry has jumped by 40%.

Across our system, there are more than 40 programs linked directly to the construction industry – from carpentry certificates to engineering to project and construction management.

Since 2011, across the UA system, over 3,600 students have graduated from those programs linked to the construction industry. And more than three-quarters of them are living and working right here in Alaska.

UAA and UAF both offer two-year Construction Management degrees and we are partnering with Industry to make sure programs meet their needs. Thanks to Meg Nordale for participating in that process. Graduates will have the skills to contribute to construction businesses across the state. And working with UAS - it will be available in southeast locations as well.

We also have pathways to award credit toward degrees for those who went through trade apprenticeships. This is a fast way to do a mid-career change for the construction opportunities ahead.

Now, let's look at healthcare.



There were some very smart decisions made during our rough fiscal times that allowed us to maintain our healthcare program.

But maintenance is not enough – there is an estimated need for 6,000 healthcare workers across the state.

The legislature and governor approved a \$3.5 million investment in UAA’s health programs. That allowed UAA to fill and retain its nursing faculty in the most competitive career field that we’ve ever seen.

At the same time, they’re hiring faculty to expand other critical allied health programs, such as medical technicians.

Through federal support, UAA is remodeling space and adding simulation equipment to reduce the time to degree for health occupations.

To help with the dire need here in Fairbanks, the cohort of nursing students was expanded from 16 to 24. And UAF’s CTC is starting a one-year licensed practical nurse program. Our Board has that program up for approval later this week.

Investments and strategies like these are absolutely necessary to retain and grow our needed workforce.

I know some of you are frustrated about our ability to respond in a timely manner to your workforce needs. I hear you.

Keep in mind, this current fiscal year is the first time in nine years that UA has NOT had to manage a substantial funding reduction from the state.

Fiscal stability is fundamental to respond to the desperate needs our state is facing. I know we must do more – and we can...and we will.

EMPOWERING STUDENT ACCESSIBILITY

Each student’s success is Alaska’s success, and that’s why we are re-doubling our efforts to make college more accessible. Financial resources shouldn’t be the reason people don’t go to college.



One of the largest untapped sources of aid for our students is Pell Grants. They're available to anyone of any age to help with degree completion. But because barely 1/3 of eligible Alaskans complete the FAFSA, nearly \$13 million of aid has gone unused the last 2 years.

We have transformative, vibrant on-campus experiences. At the same time, for those working or taking care of kids, there are degree programs fully online. Providing access and choice, meeting people where they are in-life stage and academically – that is what will keep students in-state and get them qualified for the jobs Alaska needs.

A key way to lower costs is dual enrollment. When high-school students take college credits, they reduce the time it takes to complete a degree and start working. In partnership with school districts, we operate middle colleges in Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Mat-Su, with more on the horizon. Via distance, the Alaska Advantage Program provides dual enrollment options for students totally online – and is available to students in most school districts across the state.

Laci Andrews started at UAF in Dillingham high school as a dual enrollment student. She's now a Climate Scholar here in Fairbanks - part of a cohort of students working with experts on climate research. She recently met with US Secretary of Transportation Buttigieg to talk about sustainable infrastructure in rural Alaska.

Incidentally - the UAF Climate scholars' program is an example of retaining our own. And because of its quality experience, it attracts students from out of state and internationally. There are 350 applicants for the program now, and roughly half of the incoming class is anticipated to come from out of state. Many of these talented students will stay here and work here.

We're also using technology to make college more accessible. During the pandemic, faculty at UAA's Simulation Center innovated so students could have clinical experiences from the safety of their homes. Nursing student participation increased 2.5 times, expanding to include students from all of the School of Nursing's 15 sites.

Innovation and flexibility mean accessibility. And so does financial support. We are using expanded scholarships, grants, and other aid to lower the financial burdens for our students.



The Alaska Performance Scholarship, the state's four-year merit scholarship, is vital to keeping our high-achieving high-school students in Alaska - and thus for your workforce.

APS was threatened legislatively for several years, shattering the confidence of the high schoolers. The summer before last, I had to promise to fund those scholarships out of University money until a fix to the Higher Education Fund was found. I'm incredibly thankful to the Legislature for enacting a solution last spring and restoring the stability of the Alaska Performance Scholarships. It is the pathway for hundreds of our Alaska students to be our workforce and future leaders.

If you know someone in high school, ask them if they are on track for an Alaska performance scholarship.

The UA System, UA Foundation, and each of our universities provide scholarships. Last year, Systemwide, we provided over \$112 million in student aid. Nearly \$79 million of that was straight-up grants and scholarships – NOT loans.

UAF alone processes over \$20 million in aid for students annually. Through strategic financial aid awards - such as the 4-year Nanook Pledge - UAF has been able to lower the average cost of tuition to students, AND lower the average student debt even while tuition increased.

At UAA, the 49th Finisher's Scholarship program has helped more than 200 students get that final step to graduation. This program supports those who started their degree program but never completed it.

At UAS, there is a scholarship focused on preparing Indigenous teachers and administrators for Alaska schools. Since 2000, more than 150 Alaska Native students have received scholarship support. Today, more than half of Alaska's school districts employ graduates who were recipients of that scholarship.

We are also breaking down financial barriers for required student teaching and clinical internships. Both require full-time scheduled on-site training – making it impossible to complete a degree while working.

This year, we launched the UA Teacher Internship Scholarship as a pilot. It will provide tuition support and a stipend to students in their final year of their teacher licensure program.



Alaska needs teachers, and through this pilot, advanced education training at all three of our universities will become more affordable and accessible.

In the health occupations, there's a similar stipend for clinical programs. My thanks to the legislature for adding these two programs to the budget last year.

Just an aside: UA-educated teachers go on to do amazing things. Alaska's 2023 Teacher of the year and UAF Alum, Harlee Harvey, is one of five finalists for the national teacher of the year award.

Much of the support that makes stories like Harlee's possible comes from donations from organizations, community members, and alumni – all investing to educate Alaskans

And that support has kept growing. Supported by the University of Alaska Foundation, our “for Alaska” campaign has exceeded \$200 million in contributions from more than 18,000 donors. More than half of those were first-time donors. Over 300 new scholarship funds and endowments have been established.

We're grateful for every single dollar that comes in – because each one has the potential to change lives.

I'd like to tell you about Carl Douth. He started at UAS as a dual enrollment high school senior - with a scholarship from Hecla Greens Creek Mine. He took an introductory course on Mining Occupations and Operations that included a tour of Greens Creek and a comprehensive overview of Alaska's mining industry. He then enrolled in UAS' Mine Mechanic Associates program and secured an internship at Greens Creek for the summer of 2021. He graduated from UAS last year, and now works full-time at the mine. Carl was almost fully supported during his time at UAS – thanks to the industry.

I love these kinds of stories.

Philanthropy is powerful, and intersects with workforce development and community engagement. Whether it's a major gift like Kinross' million dollar donation to boost the Troth Yeddha' Indigenous Study Center here in Fairbanks (thank you, Anna), or a small pledge to support a program close to your heart - each dollar makes a difference.



Speaking of philanthropy – our third annual UA Giving Day begins tomorrow.

If you're an alum of any of our institutions, I'd ask you today to consider donating - at a level that's meaningful to you. The dollar amount doesn't matter as much as the demonstration that you think the university is important to the future of our state. The easy button is at givingday.alaska.edu.

Thank you to those who have already participated – I see many of you in the room today.

EMPOWERING WORLD-CLASS RESEARCH

Earlier, I celebrated reaching a record for externally funded research. Last year, UA's research in total was \$182 million. UAF accounts for 89% of that. This funding is largely competitive. It comes to Alaska because of the quality faculty, and the focus and infrastructure built over decades. Our research strength is also key to diversifying our economy.

In a few short years, I believe Alaska is positioned to be the first state in the nation to have a commercial drone industry. That's because of UAF's Center for Unmanned Aircraft Systems, ACUASI. Imagine what that could mean for shipping to villages or remote mines, or wildlife management? Or monitoring coastal erosion, the pipeline or wildfires?

Under competitive federal programs, ACUASI has been focusing on these issues for more than a decade and it is paying off. For the military, they have developed drone defense protocols that helped Ukraine against Russia. They are working with the FAA to test civilian airspace safety protocols. They recently tested a drone flight from Fairbanks International – communicating with the airport's air traffic controllers just like any other pilot would. This is a first.

We're also developing programs to educate the first generation of drone pilots.

Another example. With Alaska's extensive coastlines and the decades-long partnerships with the Mariculture Alliance, the state's goal for a \$100 million Mariculture industry is within reach. UAS' Applied Fisheries program, UAF's College of Fisheries, and Ocean Science and Sea Grant programs are all instrumental in supporting Alaska's growing mariculture and aquaculture industries.



I could share many more stories about our research, recent graduates, and the amazing work they're doing to support our communities, but I know I'm running short on time.

Our universities empower individuals and communities. And that's why supporting and investing in our universities - and the breadth of programs they offer - is more critical now than ever.

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Many of you know that I am a UAF Alum, and so are my three children – one each from UAA, UAF, and UAS. So I've seen first-hand the positive impact our universities have and can have on families. But what you might not know is that I'm also the grandmother of 3 amazing kids.

So, when I talk about Alaska's Future...

I'm speaking as someone who wants to see my grandkids have the same and better opportunities to live, play, work, and lead this great state.

I want all Alaskans to have these opportunities. So, please. Support your local campus. Be proud of your University - UAA, UAF, or UAS. Encourage your kids, employees, or neighbors to look to our universities to pursue their education – to complete that degree that's almost finished or start the next.

The University of Alaska is the engine that empowers Alaska's future. **Let's build that future together. Thank you.**