

at a glance

- 1 Modernize the student experience
- 2 Establish global leadership in Alaska Native and Indigenous programs
- 3 Achieve Tier 1 research status
- 4 Transform UAF's intellectual property development and commercialization
- 5 Embrace and grow a culture of respect, diversity, inclusion and caring
- 6 Revitalize key academic programs, from occupational endorsements to Ph.D.s

1 Modernize the student experience

Committee members: Alex Hirsch (chair), Madara Mason (2021 co-chair), Joe Alloway, Holly Beamon, Sydney Deering, Sarah Fowell, Karen Gaborik, Ginny Kinne, Orion Lawlor, Raymundo Lopez, Dawson Mann, Mathew Mund, Mark Oldmixon, Cody Rogers, Sterling Steward, Wanda Wahl

Who do we want to be?

Modernizing the student experience at the University of Alaska Fairbanks is essential as the university continues to pursue excellence, recruit and retain students of diverse backgrounds, and maintain its prominent status as a leading site-based research institution in the Arctic and beyond. Given the complex, multifaceted nature of the student experience, the Goal 1 strategic planning team fostered a vision of what a modern university is and allowed that vision to A) drive our process in establishing what the student experience ought to include, B) flesh out comprehensive metrics for student success, and C) foreground an understanding of how our suppositions connect to those of other teams participating in the strategic planning process. We concluded that a modern university is (at a minimum) a ...

- 1) Dynamic, cutting-edge and international institution.
- 2) Vital source of critical innovation and student engagement.
- 3) Leader in the realm of undergraduate and graduate student research.
- 4) Keystone of a caring, inclusive and well-connected community, convoked by a vibrant campus life.
- 5) Source for invoking modes of collaborative leadership and transformative responses to the intensifying threats that challenge humanity.

A modern university also enables equitable access to education, enhances global engagement, drives economic development and diversification within the state, promotes a sustainable future, and empowers students through forward-looking digital innovation.

Flowing from this foundational understanding of what the university is, our team established the following key strategic objectives as UAF strives to modernize the student experience. Rather than view them as isolated or detached, the committee views these areas of focus as a constellation of elements that are intrinsically interconnected and mutually reinforcing. A modern student experience:

- Actively hones interdisciplinary and integrative programming for undergraduate and graduate students, and provides ample opportunities for experiential education and professional development tied to impactful civic engagement.
- Provides students with robust residential programs that tie learning in the classroom to social experiences and community life on campus.

- Strongly supports students with families.
- Holistically supports students by nurturing and encouraging physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health.
- Ambitiously expands access to undergraduate research opportunities.

As UAF builds towards 2025, the vision for modernizing the student experience is not merely to capacitate students by endowing them with knowledge and understanding in the classroom but also to position students such that they can actively respond to stakeful problems that they care about, problems they are invested in and engaged by. In order to achieve this important goal, it is essential that students are empowered to become boundary spanners and change agents. Boundary spanners are visionaries. They see how traditional fields of knowledge can be integrated and transcended. Change agents are energetic innovators, and they set ideas in motion.

Who are we now?

UAF is a strong institution bearing exciting and, in some cases, unparalleled opportunities for its students. In particular, by virtue of its highly favorable faculty to student ratios (11:1), UAF provides a liberal arts educational experience that is uniquely complemented by the resources proffered by a (near) tier-1 research institution, at one of the lowest public university tuition rates in the country. UAF continues to provide an excellent, primarily traditional higher education to students who graduate and enter the workforce in a variety of fields that honorably serve the state of Alaska.

UAF's challenges include comparatively low graduation rates within 150% of "normal time." (In 2015, 33.5% of UAF undergraduates had graduated within six years.) A majority of UAF students never graduate (61.8% do not graduate within eight years). Of those who do not graduate, 44% transfer to a different institution, while roughly 50% drop out altogether. Retention of first-year students is relatively high at UAF (75%), but in recent years we have failed to recruit high numbers of high-performing Alaska high school students, as can be seen, for instance, in the declining numbers of UA Scholar students matriculating into our academic programs.

Driving these rates higher will also elevate UAF's institutional ranking and thus its reputation. U.S. News and World report uses 16 metrics to determine quality. More than one-third of a university's rankings come from retention and graduation rates. The other metrics focus on social mobility (Pell Grant eligibility) and graduation rate performance. These are all areas of great potential for UAF as it further focuses on modernizing the student experience.

Other conspicuous challenges include 1) Title IX compliance, 2) uneven quality and maintenance of university facilities, 3) a lacking feeling of galvanized collective identity amongst the student body, and 4) equity gaps that result from high fail-rate gateway courses and uneven access to professional advising.

It should be noted that due to improved stability amongst the core cabinet of campus leadership many of these issues are being presently addressed. It is our hope and expectation that modernizing the student experience will significantly contribute to this forward momentum.

Additionally, it should be noted that several units within the university landscape have engaged in high levels of paradigm-shifting innovation, including, for instance, eCampus, Honors, Student Support Services, the International Arctic Research Center, Upward Bound, Center ICE, One Health, and beyond. Within the academic colleges, there have been significant efforts to establish new programs, as well as new areas of collaboration emerging across disciplines and traditional fields of knowledge. The innovations that have been introduced through the Strategic Enrollment Planning initiatives have led to exciting improvements on campus as well.

How do we get there?

The modernizing the student experience team concluded that several key contributing factors will determine how we get from who we are to who we want to be. Some of these factors emphasize removing administrative barriers to student success, while others focus on establishing new intersectional hubs designed to streamline and reenergize students' experiences while strengthening academic rigor and depth. Still others focus on forward-looking shifts in university policy and campus culture.

In particular, modernizing the student experience at UAF by 2025 will rely on three major areas of growth. Those will provide ample opportunity for students to access 1) experiential learning, including faculty-led travel experiences, diverse internships (including, ideally, paid internships), pre-doctoral positions and field-based research experiences, 2) a vibrant culture of student innovation, research and active learning, including opportunities to become engaged at the research institutes and in programming that focuses on service learning, and 3) a campus environment that supports the student's holistic well-being.

Examples of opportunities for aspirational change

- Every academic program at UAF can develop its own robust low-residency program for online students interested in traveling to Alaska from all over the world throughout their online degree.
- Establish a Center for Teaching Excellence through which faculty can gain access to cutting-edge pedagogical techniques.
- Expand the Office of Undergraduate Research and Scholarly Activity to focus on guaranteeing that 100 percent of all students engage in research.
- Fold all UAF recreation, health and mental health services into a singular, dynamic center focusing on a holistic approach to student wellness.
- Establish the Center for Scholar Development, focusing on recruiting and improving student applications for highly prestigious national and international scholarships, such as Rhodes, Truman and Goldwater.
- Establish the UAF Student Success Center, bringing together comprehensive and highly coordinated academic advising, student support, course registration, supplemental instruction, career advising and peer mentorship in a single highly interactive, welcoming space.
- Revise the UAF policy regarding developmental education at UAF in order to maximize the potential for student success.
- Significantly reduce high fail-rate gateway courses by providing strong supplemental instruction and peer mentorship.
- Establish new and groundbreaking graduate education programs across a variety of interdisciplinary fields.
- Expand internship and leadership programming to establish a distinguishing reputation for service-based learning, experiential education and civic engagement.
- Further expand living-learning community residential programs on campus.
- Establish a modern, accessible day care facility for students with families. While students are in class, their children (of all ages) can be monitored in a safe, interactive and engaging environment.
- Establish a dog park on campus.
- Revitalize the library to feel like the town hall of campus — its center of gravity — such that curiosity and research remain at the core of UAF's shared purpose.
- Extend new programs to further interlink our campus and its students with rural Alaska and in particular the rural campuses.
- Following the lead of the State University of New York system, establish widely expanding public support for tuition relief for Alaska students whose family incomes fall under a given threshold.

Concluding remarks

The modernizing the student experience team was diversely constituted by participants hailing from all corners of campus — including academics, residence life, athletics, advising, recreation, and beyond. In addition to the staff and faculty who served on the committee, we also included several students, alumni and community partners. In addition to meeting regularly throughout the year, the team invited several administrators, staff leaders and stakeholders to conduct presentations. We also facilitated student focus groups, from which contributing data was drawn. We held a number of public forums in which our findings were presented and responses elicited. Lastly, while recognizing the unique character of UAF, our research process was comparative and promulgated by an interest in peer institutional planning processes.

We acknowledge that some of our proposed action items, owing to our vision regarding who we want to be, may be challenging to foreground, given the present fiscal climate. But we also recognize that it is precisely because of diminishing state support that bold proposals are especially needed. Our team was animated primarily by its regard for what modernizing the student experience objectively requires at UAF. Our expectation is that strategic investment in modernizing the student experience will not only benefit future generations of students, it will also establish new sources of revenue that will shore up the present generation.