STRATEGIC PLANNING GOALS 2019-2027

5 Embrace and grow a culture of respect, diversity, inclusion and caring

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Who do we want to be?

At UAF, we work every day to operationalize the equity and inclusion that we seek to advance in Alaska and beyond. Genuine equity requires continual transformation — a thorough and deep examination and shift when needed in organizational practices, norms, culture and composition.

At UAF, we deeply value a culture of respect, diversity, inclusion and caring. We are a positive, human-centric university focused on individual and community well-being. We celebrate the unique nature of our students and employees through strengths-based approaches.

Respect should not only imply tolerance but acceptance. A culture of respect at UAF would include honoring and valuing the individuals in our community. Members of our community would hold one another in an unconditional positive regard and appreciate one another for being unique individuals whose different experiences and perspectives contribute to a greater whole. As a result, UAF employees and students would all feel a sense of worth and value.

A culture that embraces **diversity** at UAF would include individuals representing a wide array of backgrounds. At UAF, the variety of community members would be respected and a source of pride. There would be representation that includes diversity within our leadership. With representation, there would be increased opportunities for mentorship. By embracing diversity, the UA population would reflect the state demographics.

An **inclusive** culture goes beyond embracing diversity to ensure all members of our community are welcomed and supported. In this environment all people can participate and succeed. A culture of inclusion at UAF would mean that our environment — from displayed artwork to marketing materials — would reflect our diverse community. Students would feel supported from their first day, and would be able to see themselves represented at all levels and in all positions at UAF, from the student body to faculty and administrative leadership.

In a culture of **caring**, each person would show kindness and compassion as part of daily life. In a culture of caring we would demonstrate care toward others and ourselves, and we would recognize one another as a "whole person." There would be a proactive and preventive focus on improving mental health and well-being.

At UAF, we embrace a culture of respect, diversity, inclusion and caring. We are the university and employer of choice for Alaskans, and we attract international talent. UAF is known as an institution that honors and is informed by Indigenous communities of Interior Alaska. We are the UA campus of choice for all students, including those who are underrepresented in higher education. Students and employees recognize that UAF is a positive, welcoming and accepting campus.

Who are we now?

The strengths of the University of Alaska Fairbanks may also be at the root of some of the challenges we face when we move forward as a productive, vibrant community with diverse voices and a clearly defined purpose. Our strengths are based in independence, individualism and self-sufficiency. These characteristics also pose challenges in creating a culture of diversity, caring and inclusion, as they can engender fragmentation across the campus and for individuals at all levels of UAF (students, staff, faculty, administration), low psychological safety and mental health support, a lack of initiatives to promote different people and voices, and a lack of unified and tangible purpose and structure to attain common goals. This leads to individuals feeling isolated, burned out and deficient in resources, clear pathways forward, and sufficient broad/cross-campus or specific support within units.

Overcoming challenges of who we are reside in our honest ability to be introspective in developing a purpose, path and vision toward an inclusive community that actively supports individuals of all kinds with the necessary structural and functional components for success.

To become a diverse, inclusive, human-centric university, people at all levels (student, staff, faculty, administrative) need opportunities to build connections with others and with the workplace, to feel heard and respected, and to be seen with unconditional positive regard. Psychological safety must be taken seriously, and toxic workplace behaviors must be managed.

Hiring issues

- Currently, faculty (particularly research faculty) are not hired into targeted positions, and few faculty are hired into teams with defined goals and stability. Research faculty tend to move around the university throughout their careers in search of stability, leading to a fractured sense of community, a limited sense of belonging, limited collaboration and high levels of burnout. Research and academic faculty often do not collaborate, particularly across disciplines.

- Hiring UAF graduate students and postdocs into research faculty positions is a common practice at UAF but not at most other universities. This is a strength and a weakness. The weakness is that toxic cultures and perspectives of some faculty are passed on to students who do not gain experience and perspectives from other lab cultures before becoming a faculty member at UAF. This creates inertia that can contribute to a fragmented and toxic culture. Providing funding opportunities for graduate students who are transitioning into faculty positions to work with labs outside of the UA system will help break this cycle, diversify the experiences of our researchers and improve the culture.

Leadership

- There is a lack of representation of different kinds of people across all levels at UAF, including leadership, middle management and faculty levels. This presents a challenge for people from underrepresented groups to be able to envision themselves achieving success and advancement at UAF. Hiring committees are currently not trained or required to minimize implicit bias or to prioritize improving diversity.

- Supporting employees, managing fragmentation, and supporting individual mental health and well-being requires leadership to reimagine the structure and vision of UAF. This includes developing a tangible set of visions that individuals at all levels within UAF can attain and working with employees to develop small, attainable goals to develop a sense of achievement and purpose. This also includes developing inclusive teams with clear purpose and vision, which can build a sense of belonging and achievement.

- The schools and colleges contribute to the idea of separateness. There is little opportunity for collaboration across campus departments or joint appointments due to administrative issues, like sharing overhead costs. There is also limited inherent mingling across departments and schools, further limiting opportunities for team building, collaboration and a broader student experience.

- Many leaders in mid-level management are part of the fragmentation and morale issue. Many must improve their inclusion and diversity actions by understanding the challenges that underrepresented groups face in the work environment. Lacking is systemic support for mid-level managers to take the time to be inclusive and engender a sense of belonging and respect among the staff and faculty. Individuals in these positions are also stretched thin, so they require support from higher levels of leadership to reduce workload or be given more resources to operate, and expectations must be clarified. There must be incentives for personal development for mid-management employees.

- The feeling of burnout and disconnection among employees is generally blamed on the individual, but leadership must take responsibility for this trend. There must be steps taken and incentives established to manage this epidemic.

- Building a psychologically safe workplace begins with the actions of leadership at all levels within UAF. They can set the stage for behaviors that are unacceptable and create a psychologically unsafe work environment.

- There is little to no accountability for poor leaders/managers, and there is no transparency in managing issues with supervisors. Managers that engender toxic workplaces must be held accountable and the process must be swift and transparent.

Mental health

- There is a feeling of fragmentation across all levels at UAF (students, staff, faculty, administration), wherein individuals do not feel a strong sense of community or belonging at UAF. This sense of fragmentation negatively impacts mental health and well-being, and ultimately the UAF campus climate and sense of psychological safety.

- There is a mental health crisis on campus at all levels (student, staff, faculty, administration). Mental health care is very limited on the UAF campus, with long wait lists and limited access to counseling services. The services on campus are primarily available for students but not staff and faculty. The available counseling services are often not culturally competent to serve the underrepresented groups on campus. Of the two primary sources for counseling on campus — the health clinic and the clinic run by the counseling students — the latter has lost funding and is not readily available to the campus community, and many people are unaware of its existence.

- There must be specialized, culturally competent mental health assistance for individuals from the Alaska Native and other rural communities.

- People in the campus community often do not feel they can ask for help and do not know who to ask. There is often a stigma for underrepresented groups, including women and people of color. Sometimes people just need someone to listen and feel safe in sharing life's challenges. A campuswide campaign and training about holding space for others and listening without blaming or giving advice can promote a culture of mental well-being and interpersonal support. There is a fear of repercussions when sharing feelings of stress with supervisors. There is also a fear of using the six free counseling sessions available to faculty and staff because it is unclear if this will be shared with the supervisor.

Employee support

- Staff and faculty (academic and research) are burned out, continuously doing more with less, and feel overworked. There is a general sense of hopelessness. While this is also a mental health issue, at the core of burnout — atop budgetary constraints — is a lack of institutional support and recognition that people are stretched to their limits.

- Staff and faculty feel that there is not a clear and transparent pathway for managing toxic workplace issues, including interpersonal and workplace grievances. They also feel there is not a clear and transparent way to manage issues with managers.

- Onboarding during the hiring process must be more than a single day. This is the time to start developing a shared language and ethical code for how we conduct ourselves in the workplace and with each other.

- The pathways for advancing within the university system are unclear, including getting regular pay raises. There should be career planning workshops that allow any/all employees to strategize their career pathways at UAF, including pathways to advancement and increased pay. This will create a long-term vision for employees so they don't view employment at UAF as temporary or stagnant. When the pathway is unclear, it leaves room for bias and favoritism among leadership, particularly mid-management.

- The current system requires individuals to advocate for themselves, particularly when requesting pay increases, which is not culturally appropriate for some individuals and favors the dominant culture.

- Some factors contributing to low employee morale include feeling stagnant and feeling that compensation does not match the increasing levels of work required from all employees.

Student support
- As part of the fragmentation issue, student identity at UAF is fractured, wherein all the campuses and the departments within each campus are more akin to islands than a unified system. Students do not feel a strong sense of cohesion and belonging to the larger UAF community. For example, a student may identify first as part of a lab within the Geophysical Institute (not normally identified as the UAF GI, just the GI) rather than first identifying as a UAF student.

- A limited sense of belonging can negatively impact student mental health, particularly during the winter months.

- Students from underrepresented backgrounds also struggle with the fragmentation and sense of belonging because they may not identify with the culture and individuals within departments, classes or UAF as a whole. The first point of contact for most students from underrepresented groups is not a faculty or staff from an underrepresented group.

- There is limited culturally appropriate support for students from underrepresented backgrounds; they do not have dedicated services and they are not represented in the faculty and staff at UAF.

- Student advising must consider the whole individual and focus on relationship-building between the advisee and advisor. Student well-being is eroded through lack of connection with and support from advisors.

- Graduate student pay is not standardized across campus and students have not had a pay increase in a long time. The cost of living in Fairbanks is very high and increasing. In order to improve morale and increase student enrollment (key to achieving Tier 1 research status), improving graduate student pay is necessary. The students feel they have no voice, as they are not unionized and have to advocate for themselves, often with long response times and/or without success.

Cultural respect
- As mentioned in other sections, there is little to no culturally appropriate (including gender-specific) mentorship, mental health care, support for people at all levels within UAF and training for leadership at all levels.

- Few partnerships between UAF and local Native communities/tribal entities currently exist, or are highlighted. UAF infrequently acknowledges traditional land ownership or emphasizes the importance of decolonization in research, education and service.

Mentorship
- There is little to no culturally appropriate mentorship for people at all levels at UAF. This impacts well-being, attrition and workplace culture.

Family-inclusive policies
- Parents (particularly new parents) do not feel supported at UAF due to the general lack of accessible lactation spaces, no paid parental leave and lack of child care availability. This can lead to a lack of incentive to take a position or remain in a position at UAF, when better and more supportive options exist elsewhere that place value on employees with families.

Harassment and safety
- The Title IX process is improving but still has a lot of problems. The process is needlessly slow, which often extends the time of personal stress for those who file complaints. Those who file complaints find that it is difficult to hold someone accountable after filing a report. Consequences for the perpetrator are not often clear. Complainants are often required to follow up and to advocate for themselves, increasing the burden on those who have endured a negative event.
- Given the new structure of the Office of Compliance and Center for Student Rights and Responsibilities, there must be recampaigning to teach people how to navigate the system, receive support and file complaints.

How do we get there?
The committee discussed concrete ways to move from where we are to where we want to be. Following is a list of specific recommended actions based on the committee discussion.

Hiring initiatives
- Initiate specific hires at UAF to increase diversity at all levels of the university and to reflect state demographics. Candidates should be diverse, qualified and have a demonstrated record of supporting diversity and inclusivity initiatives in previous work.
- Institute a policy to evaluate, hire, retain and promote people based on contributions to diversity, caring, respect, and inclusion.
- UAF leaders and individuals on hiring committees must demonstrate an in-depth understanding of the following topics to create an equitable work environment: implicit bias; stereotype threat; issues of favoritism (i.e. promoting and providing opportunities to the same people); recognition of systemic privilege and oppression.
- Hire a diversity officer (UAA is in the process of hiring such a position) at the vice chancellor level to establish direction, goals, strategies, and concrete actions on diversity and to demonstrate UAF's commitment to diversity and inclusivity initiatives.
- Hire a student affairs professional to coordinate diversity and inclusion programming (such as an additional staff member in the Nanook Diversity and Action Center) to increase diversity within student engagement.
- Establish a funded program that allows postdocs to develop a broader perspective on collaboration through working closely with non-UA faculty, preferably from outside Alaska, or with industry personnel in Alaska.
- Hire research faculty into teams with academic faculty with a central theme that guides research objectives, in order to improve the sense of belonging among faculty, and enhance student exposure to new ideas and ways of collaborating.
- Incorporate mandatory training on UAF community standards for all collaborators from outside institutions.

Leadership

- Initiate specific hires to diversify leadership at UAF, in order to increase perspective, bring new ideas from the academic and nonacademic realms, and provide visible role models for a diverse student body.

- Ensure that individuals in leadership positions lead by example, such as engaging in and supporting self-care among employees and students, promoting diversity and inclusivity in their work environments, and promoting a healthy environment that reduces toxic workplace culture and behaviors.

- Ensure that individuals hired into leadership positions have demonstrated skills in interpersonal communication, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution.

- Individuals in leadership must prioritize managing conflict among employees, and swiftly and unequivocally discipline individuals with a record of poor or unacceptable behavior towards other UAF community members.

Mental health

- Improve access to culturally competent mental health care for students, staff and faculty by increasing the number of counselors available at the health center, funding the counseling center run by the Counseling Program in the summer and academic year, and training employees on crisis management to support students to seek mental health care.

- Ensure culturally competent mental health support for Alaska Native students, staff and employees (such as a tribal counselor). Collaborate with and support Alaska Native employees to determine the type and format of mental health care that is culturally sensitive and competent.

Employee support

- Create nomination task force for such honors as the Emil Usibelli Distinguished Teaching, Research and Service Awards, in order to improve representation in nominees and awardees (similar to practices in professional organizations such as American Geophysical Union).

- Institute appropriate compensation for every employee. This includes step increases every year for all employees and graduate students, a campus-wide standardized and livable wage for adjunct professors, and transparent salary negotiations for new employees. This is crucial to making UAF the employer of choice for Alaskans, to creating a culture where all employees feel valued and respected, to improving employee morale, and to reducing administrator bias in promotion and pay for employees.

- Define mandatory benefits requirements for contractors at UAF (e.g. janitorial staff) to create a universitywide, equitable environment. Reinstate tuition waiver as a benefit for contractors at UAF.

- Create more physical spaces that allow for connection (e.g. coffee spots where people interact on a regular but informal basis to build collaboration in an organic way).

- Create and communicate clear pathways for employees at all levels and in all positions to advance in their careers and pay or make strategic lateral moves. This includes workshops and information meetings on career strategies, planning and pathways within the UAF system, assessments for identifying transferable skills among positions at UAF, and pathways for managing grievances with supervisors who are limiting an employee's growth potential.

- Change the evaluation systems of professional researchers, faculty and staff to factor in an individual's strength and experience in mentoring, outreach, teaching, creativity, diversity and collaboration.

- Designate one faculty workload unit to personal well-being, which can be fulfilled by providing proof of attendance of campus mental health/personal well-being initiatives, taking yoga or meditation classes, participating in physical activities (like training for and running/biking/skiing in a race), etc. Do the equivalent requirement for staff so as to create accountability for maintaining personal well-being.

Cultural respect

- As a symbol of traditional land ownership acknowledgment (and with direction from local tribal groups), consider including dual-language street and building signs, an Athabascan flag and an Athabascan art installation at the welcome/entrance points on the Fairbanks campus (similar to recent initiative at the University of British Columbia).

Mentorship

- Institute concrete mentorships and mentorship training at all levels (e.g. Biomedical Learning and Student Training model for undergraduate and graduate mentorship), peer coaching and hiring new faculty (academic and research) into teams with specific themes.

- Create a formalized mentorship program and additional training and resource materials for staff, faculty and students interested in pursuing leadership roles.

Family-inclusive policies

- Institute paid parental leave and the ability to share sick leave for parental leave among employees, as is standard at most U.S. higher learning institutions. This would ensure no one person's salary is disproportionately impacted by unpaid leave, would demonstrate that UAF values each employee as a "whole person" and would improve attraction and retention of quality UAF staff and faculty.

- Initiate a formal way to take birth and child care into account in undergraduate and graduate student timelines.

- Increase availability of on-site child care.

- Increase availability of breastfeeding rooms across campus. Current distribution requires walking up to half a mile to reach these rooms.

- Allow for flextime or job-share programs universitywide.

Harassment and safety

- Define harassment as research misconduct equivalent to fabrication, falsification and plagiarism (as done by the American Geophysical Union), and institute a process for reporting any misconduct to staff or faculty funding agencies.

- Create a policy addressing hiring or retaining faculty, staff or vendors with a history of sexual harassment, sexual assault, stalking, domestic violence, racial or religious discrimination, or misuse of funds.

- Continue to invest in streamlining and fixing processes for reporting and disciplining harassment, assault and bullying at UAF. Ensure clear measures for supporting victims throughout the processes of reporting and disciplinary action, with the goal of safeguarding against any victim carrying the additional burden of ensuring their own case is handled in a way that is fair, expedient and thorough.

UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA FAIRBANKS