

University of Alaska Fairbanks

Analysis of Fall 2011 to Fall 2012 Enrollment Trends

The student headcount for the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) as a whole decreased 3.1% from fall 2011 to fall 2012, a decrease of 350 students. The SCH decrease was the same (-3.1%), and full-time enrollment decreased only slightly more than part-time enrollment (-3.3% vs. -3.0%). However, the 2011 to 2012 trends were quite different among the campuses, and so each will be considered separately. Headcount at all of the rural campuses except Bristol Bay increased, but the two urban campuses (Fairbanks and the Community and Technical College) had decreases of 4.4% and 7.2%, respectively. At the rural campuses, excepting Chukchi Campus, SCH per student decreased, probably due to financial challenges faced by students. At the urban campuses, SCH per student stayed about the same or increased.

Trends in headcount varied with class standing. First-time freshman enrollment decreased sharply (-10.8%) for UAF, while continuing student enrollment actually increased (0.7%). There was a small decrease in graduate enrollment (-2.5%) and larger decreases in non-degree seeking students (-5.1%) and UA degree-seeking students (-22.4%). There has been a long term downward trend in non-degree seeking (NDS) students at UAF, which seems to be due to the increasing cost of attendance that may either cause NDS students to not attend or to become degree-seeking, because of better financial aid opportunities.

A major factor in the decreased enrollment for UAF as a whole is that a drop for non-pay (DNP) policy was reinstated in Fall 2012. That policy was not in force from Fall 2009 through Fall 2011. DNP means that students who do not pay their tuition and fees or establish a payment plan by the deadline are dropped from all of their classes, and must arrange to be reinstated if they want to continue to be enrolled. DNP was implemented because experience from 2009-2011 showed that most of the students who failed to pay were not attending class and had no intention of doing so, but had overlooked the need to formally withdraw. It was very difficult to collect tuition from these students and the effort to do so led to negative public relations. Often, the tuition was not collectable and so eventually was written off; in the meantime UAF enrollments and revenue were slightly overstated. The impact of DNP in Fall 2012 was a decrease of 184 students (-1.7%) for UAF as a whole, including 59 (-1.0%) students for Fairbanks campus, 56 students (-1.9%) for the UAF Community and Technical College (CTC), and 48 students (-1.7%) for eLearning and Distance Education classes.

A second important reason for decreased enrollments is the decreased number of high school graduates in Alaska, which reached a peak of 8245 in 2010. Although Alaska high school graduates declined in 2011, a slightly greater percentage (29.4% vs. 29.0%) chose to attend UA, meaning that the total number who enrolled was nearly equal to that in 2010. But in 2012 the percentage that enrolled in UA decreased, along with a further decrease in the number of high school graduates, leading to a 4.2% decrease in UA enrolled recent graduates. This trend explains the decrease of 39 (-6.1%) in first-time freshmen (FTF) at UAF Fairbanks Campus, since Fairbanks Northstar Borough School District graduates decreased slightly more (-5.7%) than the statewide average. High school graduates of rural high schools within the UAF region decreased 3.3% (State of Alaska, Department of Education and Early Development).

A third reason for decreased enrollments traces to economic conditions. Both nationally and for UAF CTC, postsecondary enrollment tends to decrease with decreasing unemployment. CTC FTF enrollment correlates best with the unemployment rate the previous year. Fairbanks September unemployment (6.1%) was the lowest rate since November of 2007 and was significantly less than that in September 2011 (6.8%). Fairbanks unemployment peaked in the period from December 2008 to April 2010 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). For Fall 2012 it is likely that some prospective students secured employment

and consequently chose not to enroll. This interpretation is consistent with the fact that FTF at Fairbanks campus decreased only 6.1%, while FTF at CTC decreased 21%. CTC headcount decreased by 7.2% but SCH decreased by only 4.6%, so SCH per student increased. CTC students are more likely to defer education plans if employment is available, since their reason for attending is often to get a job or a better job as quickly as possible. Employment opportunities are more limited in rural communities and other factors, discussed below, are more important in affecting rural campus enrollment.

Bristol Bay Campus (BBC) fall 2012 headcount is now at 712 students, a decrease of 20% relative to the fall 2011 closing enrollment of 889. SCH decreased even more (-27%). However, there has not been a real decrease in the number of students served. Fall 2011 enrollment included a series of one-time conferences that enrolled a total of 224 students: Youth Leadership Symposium, Western Alaska Interdisciplinary Science Conference, Gardening Symposium, and a series of burner maintenance and repair courses. Fall 2011 also included summer enrollment because BBC does not officially have a summer semester and typically only provides a few specialty courses. During the summer of 2012, the small staff that remained on the campus were able to provide training for 229 students, but unfortunately BBC was unable to include this enrollment in the fall 2012 numbers. The total of 682 (fall) and 229 (summer) is the highest headcount yet for this time and continues the BBC upward enrollment trend of the past 10 years.

Chukchi Campus (CC) has benefited from a strong partnership with the Northwest Arctic Borough School District. CC achieved a 20% headcount gain and 32% student credit hour gain from fall 2011 to fall 2012. They have been actively building their partnership with the NWABSD Magnet School and their Tech Prep courses, as well as the Collaborative Math project piloted last fall. The math collaboration is with developmental mathematics faculty in Fairbanks, and permits high school students to complete developmental math or college level math (for credit). CC has a strong partnership with NWABSD teacher/principal fall inservices. CC also has a valued partnership with the NANA Regional Corporation and has been able to stay closely connected to the villages with NANA Resource Technicians, who are funded by a sub-award to NANA.

At Interior Aleutians Campus (IAC) this semester more students said they could not take classes due to lack of funding, or needing to work later into the fall semester in order to support their family. Also, a few private employers/agencies were stricter in determining who they would fund and for what purpose. Nonetheless, IAC was able to increase headcount 14.5% through Tech Prep, dual credit courses, and using the 3% of tuition allotted to financial aid in order to recruit students or retain students. Student credit hours had a smaller increase (2.8%) than headcount. All IAC staff and faculty spent substantial time recruiting students and creating new partnerships in order to maintain and find new funding sources for students. Key academic programs such as Construction Trades Technology and Rural Human Services have had strong enrollment over the past few years.

At Kuskokwim Campus (KuC) headcount increased dramatically (40%) but SCH decreased (-6.1%). The greatest decrease in enrollment was among returning full-time students, with new high school graduates as the next largest decrease. KuC maintained numbers among part-time students. The most common reasons for non-return were unwillingness to take out a loan to cover both a balance and costs of a new semester and not having paperwork for scholarships, grants and other support in order. This was true particularly among potential male students who had just graduated from high school. Another reason for the decrease in SCH is students transferring to an urban campus in higher numbers before completing their Associate of Arts degree at KuC. This is attributed to more effective advising. Students are less willing to stay at KuC to take fewer classes and more electives, if more of their required classes are available at the urban campuses.

Northwest Campus (NWC) fall 2011 and 2012 semester enrollments increased (13.4% in headcount, 10.8% in SCH), but they reflect even greater changes to NWC's enrollment planning and effort. The largest headcount (169) and credit hour production (325) is from sponsored dual credit enrollment, which is a change from last fall and reflects the increased focus on working with school districts. The other area with a relatively large increase is in employer-supported professional development courses. These increases were counterbalanced by a decrease in enrollment in general interest courses that are more dependent on discretionary spending. NWC has begun offering more of this type of course as non-credit, which is lower cost to the student, to maintain their community outreach.

The Rural College headcount and SCH are dominated by eLearning and Distance Education students. Headcount was down 6.4% and SCH were down 2.4%. This was mainly due to a major course redesign effort focused on improving student success. Formerly, some courses had large enrollments with minimal student-faculty interaction. Success in those courses was substantially worse than in face-to-face courses, so the decision was made to phase them out in favor of courses with regular faculty-student interaction and enrollments limited to 30 students. Success in those courses is much improved, and the increased course quality should, in the long run, attract more students.

In summary, there are several factors responsible for UAF enrollment trends from fall 2011 to fall 2012, including administrative changes, declines in the population of recent high school graduates, increasing employment opportunities in Fairbanks, and continuing economic stress and uncertainty, especially in rural areas. In order to increase future enrollment despite these unfavorable conditions, UAF has been increasing effort on student retention with the intensive advising initiative and increasing efforts to recruit transfer students from western states. There is continued strong effort to recruit Alaskans, especially through dual credit and Tech Prep partnerships with high schools.