**Modernize the student experience**

Committee: Alex Hirsch (chair), Orion Lawlor, Cody Rogers, Wanda Wahl, Holly Beamon, Sterling Steward, Mark Oldmixon, Joe Alloway, Mathew Mund, Sydney Deering, Ginny Kinne, Dawson Mann, Raymundo Lopez, Sarah Fowell, Karen Gaborik (external member, Fairbanks North Star Borough School District)

**Who do we want to be?**

Modernizing the student experience at UAF is essential as the university continues to pursue excellence, recruit and retain students, 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, this team fostered a vision of what a modern university is. The team allowed that vision to drive our process in establishing what the student experience ought to include, flesh out comprehensive metrics for student success and 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 least) a …

1) Dynamic, cutting-edge and international institution.
2) Vital source of critical innovation and student engagement.
3) Leader in the realm of trailblazing research.
4) Keystone of a caring, inclusive and well-connected community.
5) Vibrant campus that is diverse and inclusive.

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

- Actively hones cutting-edge interdisciplinary and integrative education 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.

**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 ratio (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. The greater the number of high performing students UAF can recruit in the coming years, the more its retention and graduation rates will improve.

Driving these rates higher will also elevate UAF’s institutional ranking, and thus its perceived quality overall. 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, and 3) a lack of galvanized collective identity felt by the student body. 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.

**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 re-energize students’ experiences while strengthening academic rigor and depth. Still others focus on forward-looking shifts in university policy.

**Action items:**

- Expand the Undergraduate Research and Scholarly Activity program to foster a series of student research journals focused on a diverse set of intellectual themes connected to the university’s core mission. In collaboration with eCampus, URSA should also become a pivotal resource for organizing new undergraduate research conferences (and e-conferences) that strengthen relationships with peer institutions in the Arctic and all over the world.
- Fold all UAF recreation, health and mental health services into a singular, dynamic center focusing on a holistic approach to student wellness.
- Within the UAF Honors Program, 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 academic advising, student support, course registration, supplemental instruction, career advising and peer mentorship in a single highly interactive, welcoming space.
- Invite clusters of faculty to form focus groups charged with establishing fine-grained cutting-edge interdisciplinary and integrative academic programming.
- Revise the UAF policy regarding developmental education at UAF, based upon California State University’s recent groundbreaking research regarding college-readiness for first-year student placement in writing and mathematics courses. CSU retired entry-level assessment exams used for course placement and bolstered its Early Start Program by giving students an opportunity to earn college credit in the summer before their first term. Finally, it eliminated the use of stand-alone developmental education prerequisites and called for alternative instructional models to support students in credit-bearing courses.
- Expand load-bearing internship and leadership programming to establish a distinguishing reputation for service-based learning, experiential education, and civic engagement. Examples can include new internal internship programs within the University of Alaska Press, the International Arctic Research Center, One Health and beyond.
• Expand living-learning community residential programs on campus. LLCs are high-impact residential programs where students of all majors can create a flourishing community, in a neighborhood atmosphere, rooted in a thematic identity. Four new LLCs have been established for fall 2019 – with themes including engineering, honors, outdoor recreation and gender inclusion. Others are still needed.
• 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.
• 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 eCampus to provide de-isolating intercampus undergraduate research and webinar opportunities. In particular, this should further interlink our campus and its students with rural Alaska.
• Reanimate professional development for faculty to include a robust concern for improving teaching in all disciplines and at all levels.
• 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, we included several students, alumni and community partners. The team met regularly throughout the semester and 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 but also establish new sources of revenue that will shore up the present generation.