

INTRODUCTION

- One of the main contributing factors for rural student success is **cultural community and mental health**. Supporting rural students includes **not only culturally based programming** but also workshops that involve **recognizing & healing generational trauma**. (Buckingham et al., 2023).
- For Alaska Native college students, **quality of life seems to be rooted in cultural, spiritual and traditional values**. Achieving a good life at college requires **a blend of traditional and Western ways** toward learning, relaxing, social connection, and maintaining health. (Sharma et al et al., 2013)
- **Rural Student Services (RSS)** at UAF is committed to responding to student needs by providing quality services to Native and rural students who expend positive effort in the pursuit of higher education and its opportunities.
- **The Indigenous and Rural Student Center (IRSC)** at UAA, formerly Native Student Services, provides culturally grounded support for Alaska Native, Indigenous, Native American, and rural students throughout their college experience

Buckingham, S. L., Schroeder, T. U., & Hutchinson, J. R. (2023). Knowing who you are (Becoming): Effects of a university-based elder-led cultural identity program on Alaska Native students' identity development, cultural strengths, sense of community, and behavioral health. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 93(5). <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000683>

Sharma, D. K. B., Lopez, E. D. S., Mekiana, D., Ctibor, A., & Church, C. (2013). "What makes life good?" Developing a culturally grounded quality of life measure for Alaska Native college students. *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, 72(1). <https://doi.org/10.3402/ijch.v72i0.21180>

AIMS

- To understand how rural student success is impacted by the transition from a rural community to the college setting
- To explore how RSS and IRSC supports student success
- To provide rural student centers and UA as a whole more information on how they can help their rural and Indigenous student population

PARTNERSHIPS

Rural Student Services (RSS) at UAF and the Indigenous & Rural Student Center (IRSC) at UAA guided this project, ensuring the research was relevant, useful, and culturally appropriate through offering their feedback throughout the process.



METHODS

Collaboration and Recruitment

We recruited participants with the help of RSS and IRSC through:

- Flyers
- IRSC events
- RSS clubs
- IRSC/RSS outreach in newsletters



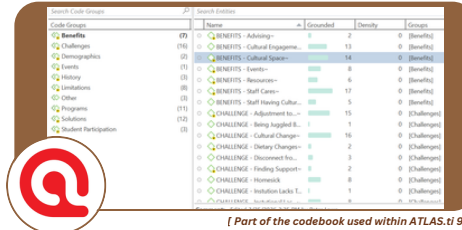
Interviews with Participants

We conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with 5 students and 6 staff across UAA & UAF. Interviews focused on...

- RSS and IRSC's impact
- student's challenges
- support structures
- cultural inclusion
- institutional gaps,
- structural limitations
- events, clubs, and activities

Analysis of Data

- We examined themes that emerged from interviews
- Data was coded through ATLAS.ti



Data Interpretation

- The team engaged in interpretive meetings to ensure validity of found meanings within the data
- Team established common themes and connections between themes across interviews and sites.
- Themes were grouped into **student challenges, limitations program staff faced, benefits of the rural programs, and solutions for student challenges.**

"I think the Western expectation of how we communicate—how we have eye contact, how we do things in the city—is quite a bit different than the communication style back in the rural communities. And I think that's another really challenging area that students really try to adjust to." -IRSC Staff

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

The authors come from rural Indigenous perspectives, both raised in rural Alaska and used services and support from RSS. Their connection and cultural background influence the author's ability to connect meanings to the data, giving them context for more informed and respectful representations.

"A lot of students are some of the only ones out of their communities that are being brave enough to come to school; and it's very difficult to feel like you're alone in that way, and isolated, and don't have people around you that understands or supports you, or are going through similar things that you're going through." -RSS Staff

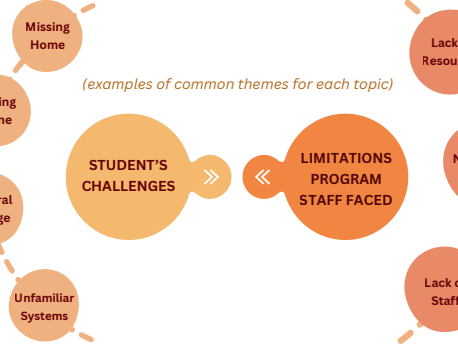
FINDINGS

"I have friends who, they lost their traditions or their cultural way of life and they don't know as much as they used to and I think that like keeping that up and having access to like cultural and Native traditions like that, it's just important!" -UAF Student

"Really, it was just the isolation and not having a friend group. You gotta go out, you gotta find people yourself." -UAF Student

"I think there's a huge pressure on Indigenous and rural students to come and fit into this idea of how you should be, how you should talk, how you should think, when they come into college." -UAF Student

"It's just crazy it took me a good year and a half to like really adjust to be in the city and even now I still feel like I'm not like fully adapted to be like here but I make do with what I can." -UAF Student



"[The] constriction of resources, and it's not just financial resources, makes it difficult for everyone to provide services to all students equally. I feel like we've been hamstrung with the lack of resources, it's really difficult." -IRSC Staff

"One gap is just time. There's always more that we would like to do that we don't have time to do, or you might see students who could do with some very intensive advising support, especially when they first get to campus." -RSS Staff

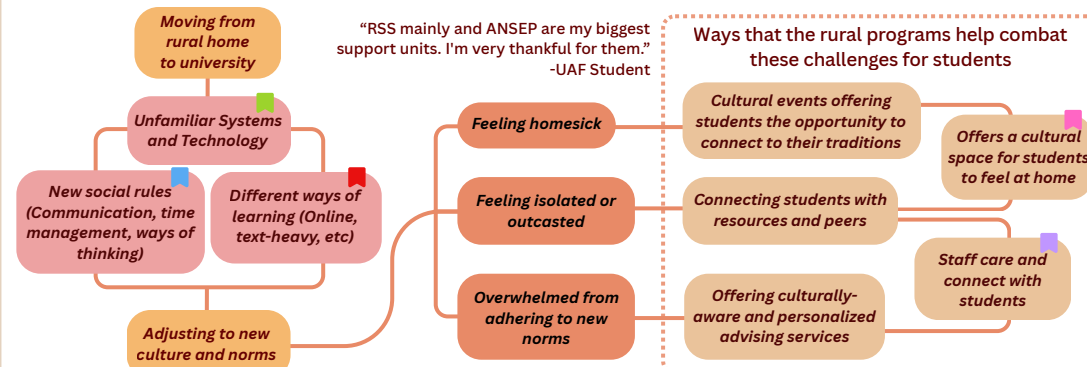
"I would say, just in general, we're extremely under-resourced here. There just isn't enough of us to support the number of students and the level of connection and support each student needs." -IRSC Staff

Rural and Indigenous students' transition to university brings unique challenges that impact their success. Many challenges stem from the cultural shift from a rural setting to an urban setting.

"With Anchorage it was just how un-pedestrian friendly it is. ... I'd never had difficulty getting around before, right? Because I could probably almost walk anywhere that wasn't out of town. And then [another challenge was] not having all of those community members that I grew up with my whole life." -UAA Student

"Interacting with the right people [is a challenge] because I don't know Fairbanks. The community here, it's very diverse so there's like a status quo, different group dynamics. Interacting with different people could be sort of a challenge." -UAF Student

"A lot of traditional teaching is more hands-on or oral, and the classroom structure can be quite different from that. ... That big lecture hall- I'd never experienced anything like that. The professor was this little tiny figure, probably about an inch tall. There's no building relationships there." -UAA Student



"[IRSC] definitely helps me feel connected with my culture, and I find that's really rare being in the city and not being as close to family as I once was. So it's nice just having that sense of home." -UAA Student

"When students come here and they don't know anyone from their village or from their community, they feel disconnected and they have no one to connect to. That's a big part of what we try to do here, is develop that sense of home... we are trying to create that sense of community and sense of belonging." -IRSC Staff

"[NET] is a program specifically for first year students and transfer students, and it is meant for Indigenous students and rural students to participate in. ... Once [students] even start that process, we're able to reach out to them and support them through all of these different steps-- making sure that they have taken their placement tests, or if they haven't, where they can go to do that and what that's like; connecting them with one of our mentors here; making sure they apply for housing. ...Throughout that first year, we continue to check in on them and try to support them academically and in their finding a community and hopefully a sense of belonging on campus." -IRSC Staff

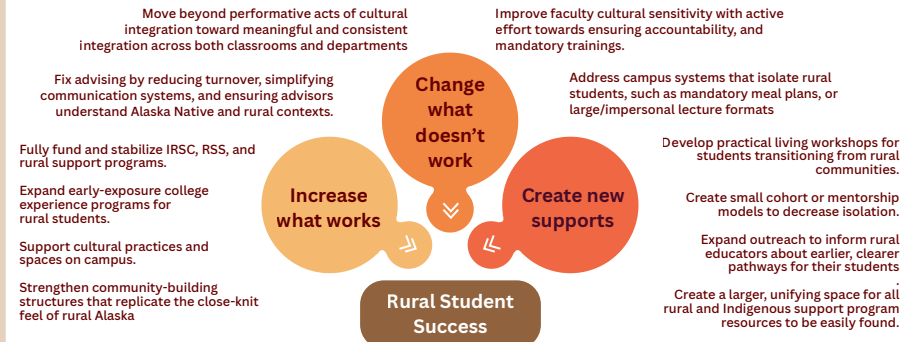
Students have stated that self advocacy has played a big role in their college life, most find it to be a necessity amid the current systems that don't center Indigenous voices.

"I think that made a really big positive difference is to just speak up, right? Because you really do have to advocate for yourself. And it's not something that anyone really talks about." -UAF Student

"Our messages. No one else can articulate our struggles more than us, and I find that the university tends to overlook that a lot." -UAA Student

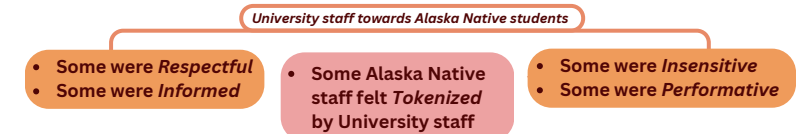
RECOMMENDATIONS

Students and staff shared thoughts and opinions on what changes they would make to the university system and rural program changes to better support rural and Indigenous students.



"I think there's a lot of ways the university could improve, and it's not just UAF, I think it's all universities. ...In an ideal world, I think the university itself will change to reflect [Native] students and reflect other ways of being, those other ways of teaching, you know." -RSS Staff

The university system needs to implement a strengthened, mandatory cultural sensitivity training program for all faculty, staff, and administrators. Students and staff consistently described wide variation in professors' cultural awareness.



"I would ensure that culturally sensitive training was more prominent, because I know in ANSI [Alaska Native Success Initiative] that the university has, that there's mandatory training, but they don't really keep a close eye on that, and students suffer because of it. I've suffered because of it, and students that I've mentored only this year have suffered from it." -UAA Student

- A more robust training program should move beyond basic overviews and instead emphasize **accountability, practical application, and aspects of Indigenous culture affecting the college experience** including:
 - Communication styles, learning styles, and ways respect is communicated
 - How growing up in a small community affects students' knowledge coming into college such as **online university systems** (housing, homework, class resources, and transportation), **road/city safety**, **understanding official documents**, and **knowing how to contact professors or find resources.**
- This training needs to be **recuring, and incorporate real student experiences** to highlight the impact on cultural misunderstandings on academic success and belonging. By grounding the curriculum in authentic voices AND requiring active engagement, the university can shift away from symbolic inclusion and towards meaningful, everyday respect.

"You're [Board of Regents] doing this because you care about education, we're doing this as an act of healing." - IRSC Staff

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