

**Testimony of**  
**University of Alaska President Mark Hamilton**  
**Before The**  
**United States Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee**  
**November 15, 2008**  
**Anchorage, Alaska**

Senator Murkowski, guests, and distinguished leaders.

Thank you for your time and for the opportunity to testify before you today. As President of the University of Alaska, I am deeply concerned with the success of students' at all educational levels – K12 and post-secondary. In many ways the educational success of our students is a bell-weather for how well prepared the state of Alaska will be able to meet the economic challenges of the future.

My purpose before you today is three-fold – first to help define the problems associated with Alaska's high school and/or postsecondary drop-out rate; two, to suggest solutions; and three to describe how the federal government can help.

Defining the problems...

First, some good news: the University of Alaska now attracts 63 percent of our state's college-bound high school graduates. This was unheard of a dozen years ago, when only 44 percent chose to stay inside Alaska for vocational and career training, community college or a university education. Back then, the majority of our college-bound high school graduates opted for schools '*Outside*'. That meant Alaska lost out on keeping its own talent while Alaska businesses had to import workers, driving up costs.

The increase to 63 percent indicates we are moving in the right direction, however the important part of that metric is described by the words *high school graduates*. Realize that there is a cohort of students out there whom, for innumerable reasons, are not completing their secondary education. It is that cohort that we turn our collective attention to through this hearing and our future efforts. Let me be clear: we are not simply looking to produce more high school graduates to look better statistically, we should be producing more high school graduates because in doing so we set in motion a cascade of positive events that would go something like this:

- Graduating from high school leads to;
- Attendance in a post-secondary program in the state which leads to;
- Working in the state;
- This in turn helps the state meet its future work force and economic challenges.

This is a future we must commit to.

But let's not deceive ourselves. The challenge before us is great. Nationally, we rank eighth from the bottom for high school graduation. Less than a third of those graduates continue to postsecondary education, here or elsewhere. It is from that small pool, that the University of Alaska draws the 63 percent.

This must change. Alaska is not in danger of falling behind. *We are behind* and the distance we must make-up grows each day, month and year that we fail to act.

As we look to the future, I can tell you the University is fully committed to increasing the retention of not only our own university students but to helping our colleagues in K12 find success in retaining their students as well. The commitment to work with K-12 on this, and other, issues is reinforced by the strong leadership of our Regents, three of whom have their teaching credential and a strong foundation in the K-12 system.

K12 is not alone in their struggle to produce graduates. Alaska finds itself in the unenviable position of *last* place when it comes to producing baccalaureate graduates in six years. The next

closest state, Nevada, is 16 percentage points above Alaska. No doubt we have our work cut out for us.

### Solutions...

Where to begin? Perhaps the question is not where but rather *when* to begin? To that I say, early, as early as possible.

In Alaska and across the country we need to promote a culture that values learning – that continuous learning is a quality of life issue and not simply a means to an end. When we look at the students who are deficient the skills necessary to succeed in K-12 it is strikingly obvious that the challenge began at an early age for many of them. The answer is not to delay their learning and put up additional humiliating hurdles in their academic memory, but to engage them at an earlier and earlier age when they are developmentally absorbing the educational tenets they can rely on and will need for future success. Reaching Alaska's youth early with productive enrichment opportunities will help these students enter education and be successful from grade school through high school graduation and consequently will help them to be successful in their post-secondary careers as well.

Let me continue on this theme of culture. Our statistics indicate Alaska does not have a culture that fully values education. We don't even have a culture that values a high school diploma at the same level that other states enjoy.

Perhaps this is because our past provided plentiful jobs in construction, oil, fishing, mining, timber and other blue-collar sectors. Those jobs are still out there, but many of them are changing. Technology used across all sectors requires more training, not less.

A recent report for the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education (ACPE) offers five recommendations:

- Create a statewide college-going culture
- Establish kindergarten through college partnerships

- Establish peer mentoring programs
- Build up financial aid awareness and opportunity
- Focus attention on college access by creating a governor's K-16 council

The university supports the recommendations of ACPE. The university, in partnership with ACPE, starts its outreach efforts in second grade, with a colorful book called "I Know I Can." In sixth grade, we send a fun poster to every child, noting what they have to do to be successful after high school. In ninth grade, we reinforce that message with a colorful brochure, packed with tips and advice. We've pumped up financial aid informational campaigns. We offer bridging programs, to rural youth especially. And we're now offering high schools e-transcripts, so their graduates can submit transcripts to the university campus of their choice online.

Partnerships such as this are critical if we are to substantially change the college going culture in the state. There are great people at the State and within our UA system whose job involves partnerships with K-12, and other the state agencies such DOL, Health, and EED. These partnerships have gone far beyond MOA's and a hand-shake and include:

- Work on affordability (with the Alaska Commissions on Post Secondary Education)
- The Alaska Mentor Project
- K12 Outreach (Alaska Teacher Placement, Future Teachers of Alaska, Preparing Indigenous Teachers and Administrations for Alaska Schools-called PITAAS)
- Alaska Workforce programs

We will continue to work and collaborate with all stakeholders who have a vested interest in helping students find success in their educational pathways.

Together we must do a better job of adequately preparing our young people for college *and* work. We must encourage more of them to not only finish high school, but do very well in high school. They must reach beyond the "exit exam," which is a floor, not a ceiling. At the university, we must do more to support our students who come to us, with better academic and financial aid counseling. To this let me add comments that my colleague Doug North, President at Alaska Pacific University sent me recently for his recommendations for improving High School Graduation and Postsecondary success. Dr. North believes we must:

- Reduce class sizes;

- De-emphasize testing except as a diagnostic;
- Emphasize stand-and-deliver forms of education;
- Increase project-based and other creative teaching strategies to engage and enhances student curiosity and learning;
- Reverse the ethic, especially among males, that it is not cool to be smart or achieve academically;
- Increase both challenge and support of students;
- Measure school success in part by how many students want to, and love to, go to their schools.

I agree with his points and would only add that his recommendation regarding reaching males is poignant and one that we all should be concerned with as the number of males that seek post-secondary education continues to decline in Alaska. Perhaps the tattered argument, “not everybody’s college material” is partly to blame. I suggest let’s rid of that term. The term “college” means far more than four-year degrees, especially in Alaska. A good portion of what the University of Alaska provides is vocational and career education, typical of a community college. These include one- and two-year programs, plus certificates that can be earned within months.

We must make success in K12 and post-secondary a top priority for our state. The nation’s secretary of labor has predicted two-thirds of all new jobs in the next 10 years will require some level of training and education beyond high school, or considerable on-the-job training. Talk to employers. They’re hard-pressed to find qualified people to hire from within our state.

Finally, the University is so committed to our partnership and support of K12 we have made K12 Outreach our top budget priority for FY10. Last year we requested funding from the state for some of these things we believe would positively impact student success, but didn’t get it. That’s hard to understand, when you know Alaska’s rather alarming statistics. We’re trying again this year.

*How the federal government can help...*

Just as I am convinced that earlier is key to reaching Alaska's youth, I am equally convinced that unfunded mandates are not effective. Unfunded mandates often force good people and even better programs to cease, as institutions reorganize around the mandate. What is needed is both sound policy and adequate funding.

Senator Murkowski, I would like you and the Senate Committee to look at establishing a program and funding stream through the No Child Left Behind Act- to encourage and assist post secondary institutions across the country, to do what we are embarking on at the University of Alaska: reaching out and into the K-12 environment. The federal government can set the stage and promote the mindset that the issues with K-12, should be owned by every tier in the educational system.

States with significant challenges in rural areas, low college attendance rates and low graduation rates could be targeted under such a federal effort to ensure resources are steered toward those states that most need them. Activities such as partnerships with state Departments of Education, school districts, summer bridging programs, middle college programs, career awareness, special education teacher training and early testing, assessment and placement. The goal of such efforts would be to introduce more K12 students to post-secondary education and the value of a higher education. Such federal support, if conducted on a national scale, could have tremendous benefits on both the retention of K12 students and the success of post-secondary students in states needing the most help.

No discussion on what impacts the success of post-secondary students can go very far without mention of financial aid, specifically, needs-based financial aid. The reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act holds much promise for students in Alaska and across the nation. Increases to the PELL grant and a more user friendly FAFSA application process should help a student's ability to afford an education. However, in Alaska, efforts at a state needs-based aid program have not been widely supported. The exception is ACPE's Alaska Advantage Grant – which is for the most part self-funded. Any effort our congressional delegation can apply toward helping the state develop and fund a needs-based aid program – or enhance and more

adequately fund the ACPE Alaska Advantage Grant program – would help post-secondary students succeed.

I would be remiss not to mention three other federal programs that need continued funding in the future. Those are the Alaska Native Education Equity Act, the Alaska Native Serving Institution programs and Future Teachers of America.

In closing, money alone will not ensure success. It will take commitment and action by concerned educators, parents, business and civic organizations. Perhaps most importantly our elected leaders must provide policy and funding that will enable success in all levels of education in this great state.

Let me close with a statement I find myself making in venues large and small, within UA and outside of it: I was not born here – but I will die here. I am committed to this university, the state of Alaska and the people of Alaska to make the education landscape better than when I arrived here. I do this for all Alaska's children including my own.

Thank you.