



"65% of Working-Age Alaskans with a Postsecondary Credential by 2025"

AlaskaCAN Professional Development Committee Equity & Access – Barriers & Solutions

BARRIERS

Identified during the AlaskaCAN! Annual Conference, February 24-26, 2021

Navigation: The group identified barriers perpetuated by institutions including the tendency to use confusing jargon, ineffective transition support, and the failure to clearly communicate the pathway or stepping stones, including prerequisites, as some of the navigational challenges. They also observed that institutional competition has led to a failure to streamline experiences for students; transferring credit/dual credit is particularly challenging.

Representation & Identity: The group noted the lack of understanding of rural students' challenges and that lack of representation can make it hard for Alaska students to feel at home in postsecondary education. Students' inability to see themselves as college/career training students plays into fear and self-doubt. Exacerbating this lack of confidence is a gatekeeper mentality that creates systems for postsecondary-ready students rather than making postsecondary institutions ready for every student.

Access: Lack of access to hands-on training and the internet were all named barriers. The group also noted the lack of access to childcare and few opportunities to pursue postsecondary education/career training while making a living wage at the same time further limits access.

Exposure & Preparation: The group noted the lack of exposure to careers and educational opportunities can make it hard for students to envision what their options are. The pathways or steps to a career are often not communicated clearly or may not seem relevant. Counselors and school staff often do not have the time to give their full attention to postsecondary guidance as they are focused on urgent mental health issues.

Support: The group observed that many students are juggling family obligations, making prioritizing schoolwork challenging. Trauma, mental health challenges, self-confidence, or social/emotional challenges, and criminal records also create barriers to access.

Cost: The group found it was not only the cost, but also the lack of connection between students – especially those in rural Alaska – and available financial assistance that exacerbated financial challenges. Financial literacy and navigating the FAFSA are barriers. Outstanding balances can prevent students from re-enrolling.



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SOLUTIONS

Identified during the AlaskaCAN Fall Convening, September 27, 2021

The main theme was **Fostering Connections**. Breakout groups observed that while Alaska has career opportunities, training for those careers, and funding for that training, many of the youth who could most benefit from them may not feel connected to or know about them. Some of the more successful programs have focused on fostering connections.

Connect with personal guidance: UAF's Rural Student Services (RSS) demonstrates the value of having a trusted person provide continuous support and guidance from high school through postsecondary. A person – not just resources and information – is needed to coach students through the process, especially for those whose families have less experience with the postsecondary system.

Connect with financial support: The Educational Transfer Voucher (ETV) for students who have been part of the foster care system demonstrates the need for and value of having financial support for incidentals (books, travel etc.), not just scholarships. Working with students and families to outline and plan for the full cost of postsecondary education/career training can also help students be more financially prepared. Making counselors aware of these resources can help them ensure students are aware prior to when their ETV representative contacts them.

Connect with opportunities at home: Postsecondary attainment should be reconciled with rural community population decline. Rural communities tend to perceive that the more education/training a student gets, the less likely that student is to return home. Postsecondary attainment must be linked with community needs and goals.

Connect using community-based organizations: Community-based organizations, including Tribes, are often more trusted, better connected to the community, and have more resources to tap into when helping students and families. Partnering to expand FAFSA completion and awareness of other funding opportunities can help students and families plan ahead and access financial support for postsecondary education/career training.

Connect with information: Information about the process, links to local jobs, financial costs, and opportunities including scholarships must be easier to find and more widely shared to better help those who are working directly with students (advisors, teachers, family members, community-based organizations). Suggestions included creating a central place/clearinghouse for all resources/information and providing a timeline of when to do what including easy-to-access tips on how to stay successful.