

IDENTIFYING AND LESSENING BARRIERS FOR ALASKA NATIVE STUDENTS  
PURSUING A POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION: A GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

By

Dannielle A. Carlson, B.L.A.

A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

Rural Development

University of Alaska Fairbanks

May 2022

APPROVED:

For the full paper contact  
Dannielle Carlson at  
[dcarlson@aebsd.org](mailto:dcarlson@aebsd.org)  
907-386-6086

Kathleen Meckel, Co-Chair  
Debbie Mekiana, Co-Chair  
Charlene Stern, Committee Member  
Tia Tidwell, Department Chair  
*Department of Alaska Native Studies and  
Rural Development*

## **Abstract**

This research project seeks to provide stories from Alaska Native students in regards to their postsecondary education experiences to spread awareness of the unique barriers they endure and to recommend solutions to lessen those barriers. The Indigenous research methodology of storytelling was used to collect data on the experiences of eleven Alaska Native college students. Results show students had similar barriers related to lack of support from their families, lack of guidance in college preparation, being underserved in primary and secondary education, and a general lack of belonging on college campuses. A series of recommendations are included within this document which are informed by the researcher's lived experiences, student stories, and existing research. Such recommendations were intended for the following audiences: primary and secondary education, postsecondary institutions, Alaska Native corporations and tribes. They provide a holistic approach, recognizing that it is not one organizations' job alone to lessen barriers for Alaska Native students in education as a means to ensure a more equitable, accessible, and safe educational experience.

### **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to the people that believed in me through this journey and created opportunities for me that are not always readily given to our people—I am lucky to know you. This work is also dedicated to my Indigenous brothers and sisters who need someone who believes in them—I do. My wish for you is that you understand your value and the power of your traditional knowledge and that you are always the best version of yourself that you possibly can be.

“As you prepare for a college or university education, remember you carry cultural knowledge, identity, strength, and resilience that evolved from this land, which will help you adjust to a different place and challenges that may confront you in that new educational environment. Remember that others from your nation and other first nations have forged a path for you, and that you, too, will assist in shaping a stronger educational path for those younger generations, your brothers and sisters who will follow you.”

-Henrietta Mann

## Table of Contents

I.	Introduction	5
II.	My Lived Experience and Relationship to the Research	7
	A. Growing up in Rural Alaska	7
	B. Postsecondary Experience	11
	C. Professional Experience	16
III.	Real Students, Real Stories	18
	A. Marieana	18
	B. Alex	22
	C. Jeremy	27
	D. Common barriers	30
IV.	Bare Minimum: History of Alaska Native Education	36
V.	Long Term Effects: Where Are We Today?	40
	A. Existing Research	41
VI.	Recommendations	45
	A. Primary and Secondary Education Recommendations	45
	B. Recommendations for Postsecondary Institutions	47
	C. Tribal Organizations & Alaska Native Corporations Recommendations	50
VII.	Conclusion	52
VIII.	Acknowledgements	53
IX.	Additional Resources	54
X.	Appendix A: Interview Participant Recruitment Flier	55
XI.	Appendix B: Interview Question Guide	56
XII.	Appendix C: Interviewee Consent Form	57
XIII.	Recommendations from Current Rural University Student	59

## Introduction

Education provides us with tools and social capital to access immense opportunities. Necessary knowledge can be gained through education in order to be successful and fulfilled according to certain standards in today's society. Education provides access to positions of power that allow us to be involved in change-making and decision-making that affects all facets of life, even beyond education systems. Education is invaluable, yet so inaccessible to so many including Native peoples and communities.

Through interviews with Alaska Native students, I wanted to hear their experiences in higher education yet the ultimate goal in doing this research is to make education more accessible, safe and culturally responsive so that Native students can stop needing “grit” to get by-- so we can see more and more Indigenous people succeeding (and hopefully thriving) in education systems that were systematically built against them. This is the end goal. With this research project and the work that resulted from it, I had two other intentions in mind. First, to spread awareness and understanding about the barriers and challenges Alaska Native students are facing in education. Second, to implement change. The more awareness that we can spread about these issues occurring today, the more allies we build and the more change we make. Recommendations are provided with the hope and goal to implement change and lessen barriers for Native students. Conducting this research provided insight from actual students as the guiding voice for the recommended changes.

The students interviewed were honest and brave, and their stories informed the recommendations provided in this work. Through analyzing their stories in conjunction with my own experiences working with Alaska Native students in a higher education setting, I identified common barriers and experiences to create recommendations for different audiences.

Recommendations for primary and secondary education include: cultural relevance and safety training for all employees; hiring college and career counselors, including parents and guardians in meaningful and safe ways; and ensuring student preparedness for life after high school (offering classes each year that teach college, career, and life skills). Recommendations for postsecondary institutions include: cultural relevance and safety training for all staff, faculty and administration, fully-staffed Native (diversity/cultural) student centers on campuses, ensuring that the university workforce is representative of the student population, building cohort programs, creating pre-orientation programming, establishing a rural and/or Native student advocacy position within student government, offering Indigenous foods at the cafeteria, and taking a more holistic approach to equity and inclusion. Recommendations for Alaska Native corporations and tribes include: spending time in communities and schools to understand needs, creating mentorship programs, supporting cultural relevance and safety training in local schools, and investing in education beyond offering scholarship funding.

There were limitations of this research. I interviewed eleven Alaska Native students and their stories are not representative of all Indigenous students with their own lived experiences. Even with the recommendations provided, individual institutions and organizations must do their research to understand the unique needs of those that they serve.

This work is intended to benefit Indigenous students who have long suffered at the hands of Western academia. The results of this research however will benefit academia and society as a whole. With Indigenous students being the intended beneficiary of this work, my primary audience are those that can implement the changes recommended: educators. Educators can be college professors and academic advisors, but they can also be high school principals and guidance counselors. Educators can be our friends, families and communities. Educators can be

our leaders and representatives in school districts and Alaska Native corporations and tribes. If you are in a position to shape Indigenous minds within the education system, this work is for you.

### **My Lived Experience and Relationship to the Research**

*“Be the best you can be.” -- Fran Polumsky*

Before reading this work, it is important to understand how I got to this place of contributing to research that can spread awareness and implement change for Alaska Native students in education. I, like many Indigenous students, needed to be equipped with self-motivation, determination, and resilience to be able to get to where I am today.

I was fortunate to learn independence and resiliency at a very young age. I now see these skills as ones that I am fortunate to possess as they allowed me to survive the Western education system and land a career in a field where I can implement real change in the very system through which I struggled. The lessons that embedded these traits within me however were far from gentle. If this is as far as you read, please know that expecting Indigenous students to be resilient in order to succeed is unrealistic, unfair, and a perspective to be reevaluated.

### **Growing up in Rural Alaska**

Rural Alaskan communities are special places. While a lot of this work focuses on barriers that come with growing up in a rural Alaska community, it is an experience I would not trade for the world. I have been living in Juneau, Alaska for almost ten years and still struggle with the loneliness of being away from the village. I miss the small-community feeling of home. Often, it is the little things that get me such as not being able to stop into any house along the street to say “hi” on my way home from work.

Finding the right words to explain my upbringing is awkward and challenging. I lived with a different family each year of my high school career. I would not be the determined and driven person that I am today without the experiences that I endured during my childhood or the people who cared for me as their own. I hold no negative feelings toward my parents who were still growing up themselves while raising me. They needed to heal from their own trauma—trauma that they were never taught how to heal from. I am proud of how far they have come and thankful for our positive relationship today. I am also endlessly grateful for those who welcomed me into their homes as a teenager.

I grew up in Sand Point, a rural Unangax (Aleut) commercial fishing village on the Aleutian Chain. I learned how to operate an outboard skiff and a four wheeler before learning to drive a car. Driving my four wheeler down the gravel road, I waved to every person I passed and often stopped right in the middle of the street to ask someone driving or walking the other way where they were going or what they were up to. Sand Point is a community where everyone knows your name and your potential; a community where everyone is family.

I attended school in Sand Point until the 10th grade and then moved to King Cove, which is a 20-minute plane ride or eight-hour boat ride away, to finish high school. I was one of five in my graduating class and the only one to attend college. I had a subpar K-12 education with no idea how underprepared I was for a post-secondary education until I arrived at college. At home, I had always been a straight-A student. School came easy to me. First, I skipped a grade in elementary school going from second to third grade upon the recommendation of a teacher; then skipped again to the fourth grade the following year. In the sixth grade, after testing my math skills another teacher recommended moving me up to seventh grade. The principal and my parents did not think I should be pushed ahead any further. I continued to excel in education but

realized it was not necessary to challenge or push myself academically. School was easy; I did the bare minimum and always received A's.

As a junior in high school, I was at the top of my class and a "UA Scholar," a title which meant nothing to me at the time. My teachers, who were hired from outside of Alaska where going to college is a cultural norm, were confused as to why I was not planning for college. They offered one accelerated Math and English class my senior year and I was the only senior to enroll. My classmates were retaking junior high-level math (adding and multiplying decimals and basic fractions with the answers in the back of their worksheet folder) while I was taking trigonometry online. My English class was with an English teacher while my classmates took theirs with the History teacher. The other students often slept through or skipped their senior year of high school and still passed (except for one classmate who dropped out a few months before graduation). While I learned a lot in my advanced English course, the greatest benefit was my teacher's encouragement. They dedicated that time to helping me look for colleges and scholarship opportunities which is something my fellow classmates were not encouraged or supported in doing. My teacher helped me with both admissions and scholarship essays. This was not part of his job, or anyone's job for that matter. My school did not have a college or guidance counselor. It did not occur to me to feel lucky to have his support or to have someone to push me to think about college and help me along the incredibly foreign process. I would have been even more unprepared than I was if it were not for this one person who no longer works at my former high school.

Most scholarship applications require family income or tax information. At the time, my relationship with my parents was not great. They struggled with substance abuse most of my life. Not only did we have an estranged relationship, it was often extremely difficult to track them

down. Because I no longer lived in my hometown, I would at times have to call a cousin or neighbor to track them down for me which I would only do when truly necessary. The process of applying to colleges was a challenge. I jumped through innumerable hurdles and assumed that every student experienced the same process because I quite literally did not know anyone else who had gone to college. I assumed that the chaos was normal.

I was accepted into several schools both in and out of state. People would ask things like, “Where are you going to college?” to which I would usually reply, “Washington.” People were excited for me even if they did not know anything about college either. They would ask what I wanted to study, and I would reply, “Something in sports, maybe like sports journalism.” I had no idea if any of the schools I applied for offered anything like that. I did not know what to look for in a college, what degrees the different schools had to offer, or really anything about what I was doing.

A few weeks before most students would be off to college and making sure they had books for their classes and maybe social media stalking their soon-to-be roommates-- I finally chose a school. I earned my income by fishing and it was not a great season so I decided to stay in Alaska because I had that “UA Scholar thing.” The award is a \$12,000 scholarship that goes to the top 10% of every graduating class in the state of Alaska and is to be used at a University of Alaska school over the course of eight semesters. This equated to \$1,500 per semester and was by no means a free ride to an in-state school. I did not know anything about the award; I just knew that I had received it for having the best GPA in my class. I assumed that it meant school would be free at any university in Alaska and there was no one who knew enough to correct me.

## **Postsecondary Experience**

I decided to go to the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) for no real reason other than that I knew I was accepted and could use my scholarship there. I had applied to the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) and the University of Alaska Southeast (UAS) but had not been to either Fairbanks or Juneau before so Anchorage seemed like the obvious choice. I bought my plane ticket for \$500 one way, and embarked on a two-hour plane ride on the only airline service out of my village to Anchorage. I have an auntie who had a house in Anchorage so I stayed with her. She asked me where I was planning to live and I told her student housing. She suggested that I call and tell them (thank you, Auntie Hillary). At the time, I was also working on other things such as getting my first real driver's license so that I could drive in the city even though I did not have a car. In the village, they provide you with an off-road license and there is no driving competency test required to receive this. I had no secure housing in place and was already out of my hometown with all of my belongings packed into three totes.

Upon the suggestion of my auntie, I called UAA. This was the first time I picked up the phone to speak with the university that I was planning to attend. I am unsure if they ever tried to reach out to me. Cell phones were not a part of my everyday life in the village because service was still new and unreliable, especially in the summer when I was on a boat most of the time. When I finally called UAA, I was informed that freshman housing was full and that I needed to make an appointment with my advisor to enroll in classes, which started in two weeks. I would also need to come in for placement testing. All of this was foreign to me. The admissions office used so many words that I had never heard before. They also told me that UAS was listed as my primary campus and I remember being unsure what any of that meant.

I decided to call UAS and see if they had freshman housing available because I was 17 years old and securing an apartment off-campus was not an option. They had space in their

freshman dorms so I decided to change my plans and attend UAS. I booked a very affordable, compared to my previous experiences, hour and a half plane ride to Juneau where upon arrival, I hopped in a cab and asked them to take me to UAS. The cab driver saw all of my totes and figured I must have needed to go to housing and dropped me off there.

I had taken the placement tests required to sign up for college classes at the UAA campus however it was a stressful time and I did not do as well as I should have. At UAS, I ended up in a remedial math course. I recall my math professor pulling me aside after the first week of class and telling me that he could tell by my facial expressions that I might belong in a different class. I had already learned all of the content in my online trigonometry class in high school. He had me retake the math portion of the test and I was able to switch math classes. I am thankful for Augie, who still works at UAS, for helping me find the correct math class in my first few weeks at school.

This was just the beginning of my postsecondary journey. I do not know how I got through it, but somehow I did. I befriended girls who were non-Native and not from rural Alaska. To say that we had a lot of cultural differences would be a massive understatement. I started to act and dress like them in order to feel like I had a group of people that I could call my own in this new place where I knew no one. Over the course of my freshman year, two different roommates moved out of my room so I spent most of that year living alone. I was financially unstable and struggled to do things like pay my phone bill on time, often losing my only connection to people at home. I did not have parents to call on a regular basis for emotional support which made my other hometown relationships all that much more precious.

I was no longer the smartest student in the room. My K-12 education did not prepare me with the skills I needed to survive, let alone thrive academically. I did however manage to get

good enough grades to pass all of my classes. Thankfully, I had the skills to teach myself things and the determination to make a life for myself. I stayed in school and earned a degree becoming the first in my family to do so. When I thought about dropping out, the only reason I stayed was because I simply did not have anywhere else to go. I had no safety net. If I dropped out of school, I would be homeless and without my only source of income which came from several student jobs. I stayed at the university out of necessity. I needed this degree and had no other options. Failure, certainly, was not one.

Eventually, things became easier for me as I learned to navigate and adjust to the postsecondary education world. I learned that you could take P.E. classes in college and so I signed up for one. Playing sports is a huge part of rural Alaskan culture and I had always been athletic. Fran Polumsky taught those courses and was the first person to make me feel like I had family at UAS. She challenged me to live the lifestyle that I was used to at home by staying active and working hard. She reminded me, and all of the students in her class, to be the best they could be every day. She hired me as her teaching assistant and would always ask how I was doing and tell me what a rockstar I was. This support and encouragement were things that I did not even realize I was missing; however, my mental health began to improve significantly just by being around her. Her support meant the world to me and we still find time to have lunch together today.

As a college student, I often did not notice or pay attention to the difference in my own experiences compared to those of my friends and peers. I would feel a small twinge of discomfort when my friends would go to their parents' houses to do laundry or eat meals. I was reminded of our differences when their parents would call from out-of-town as I desperately tried to get ahold of mine all year with little luck. Their parents bought their plane tickets home for

holidays yet mine could not support me financially. I could not relate to their experience of growing up and I shrunk down to a very small version of myself to feel like I belonged. I had already learned resilience at a young age and how to adapt to a given set of circumstances in order to get by.

In my second year of college, I did not have as much scholarship funding as I needed. Several of the scholarships from my freshman year were one-time applications only open to high school seniors, meaning that I could not continue to receive that funding. I had to file the FAFSA to take out a loan during a year when I had no communication with my parents. I worked with Janelle Cook, a Financial Aid Advisor who was also Alaska Native and from rural Alaska. I did not feel like I had much of a choice other than to be transparent about my situation and why I could not file a FAFSA and also share how desperate I was to stay in school. I felt heard by Janelle and as though she understood. At the time, I did not realize that it was because of the unique understanding between Native people about the barriers that we experience. She helped me to file my FAFSA as an “independent.” I had people from home write letters explaining how long I had been living without my parents and had to answer uncomfortable questions about myself and my relationship with them. I was disqualified from filing because I answered one question about my contact with them honestly, stating that I only talked to them when I got the chance which might have been two or three times that school year. Because I did not answer “no,” I did not qualify. In the end, Janelle did the type of financial aid administrative work that can only be described as magic, enabling me to file without my parents' information. Of course, that meant that I had to accept only the loans available to me which were the ones that collect interest from day one rather than upon graduation. I am still paying off those loans today.

There were a few moments where I was forced to recognize that I was different from my friends and that the rules also applied differently to me. One such moment was when I was a college freshman and came home to my dorm to find an eviction notice from student housing after my third underage drinking violation. I was asked to come in and discuss the consequences with a staff member and during the discussion, was asked a variety of questions including whether or not I had a problem with binge drinking as a 17-year-old college student. I remember how uncomfortable that question made me and so I checked with the non-Native girls that I had gotten in trouble with. I learned that they were not asked this question in their discussions with the same staff member.

I had avoided drinking until this point of my life because I saw the damage alcohol did to my family. I was just trying to be a normal college student. I wanted to fit in and make friends and it was about to cost me the roof over my head and my education. I explained that without student housing, I would have no option but to drop out of school and go home where I would continue to experience housing security issues. After talking with my friends about what happened, I heard from some older, non-Native students on campus that they had received a lot more than three violations and had never been asked to leave. In addition, they had gotten in trouble for having guns in their room that were supposed to be checked into the housing lodge and still had never received an eviction notice.

This experience was terrifying at the time however it ended up connecting me with Joe Nelson, the former Vice Chancellor of Enrollment Management and Student Affairs. Joe would be more important to my journey than I could have ever known at the time. The staff member told me that there was nothing he could do-- "rules are rules" and my only option was to file an appeal. I was not sure what that meant but he said Joe would help me, and that is exactly what he

did. I was relieved to see that the person who would help me was Alaska Native. I collected letters from my friends who had gotten in trouble more often and had never been asked to leave to turn in with my appeal. With Joe's help, I was able to stay in housing and stay in school. I never received another underage drinking violation.

### **Professional Experience**

I met Joe again as a student employee in the Registrar's Office when I was a fourth year student still in need of an extra semester of classes to graduate. I was doing student employment work that felt really insignificant (one of my two part time jobs while being enrolled in 17 college credits) until Joe offered me a job to recruit students for UAS. He said that my story could help other students like me. Joe took a chance on me and believed in me, and so I accepted the job offer—my first full time job. The opportunity to work with rural students across Alaska as an admissions counselor is what brought me to pursue this research.

Like me, many Alaska Native students do not have people in their lives or schools helping them, believing in them, or pushing them to go to school or training to help them discover their potential. Many of my current colleagues who work with students with stories similar to mine do not understand the barriers that these students face. There is a belief that education is equitable because there are Native and rural students in college. This assumption is problematic for our students because it reinforces the illusion that the Native students who are failing, dropping out, or underprepared are not motivated to do well in school or simply do not care enough. Research shows us that this is not the case.

Sharing stories in classrooms across Alaska helped to inspire other students to want to go to college. It felt incredibly rewarding until I began to realize that many of the students I

recruited would eventually drop out before finishing their degrees. They would come to college and experience some of the things that I did, but perhaps without the inherent hyper-independence survival mechanism I had, and would decide college was not right for them and leave. Realizing that my experiences in high school and college were common to other Native and rural Alaska students is what fueled my passion for this work. None of this would have happened if Joe had not offer me that job, if Fran Polumsky had not offer me a sense of community at UAS, if Janelle Cook had not offer me a welcoming environment to help with my FAFSA, or if that one high school teacher had not encouraged me and gave me the time and support to apply for college and scholarships. I also believe that none of this would have happened if I did not already have a fierce determination to make a life for myself that was more stable than what I grew up around.

My story is one that I know intimately and have become very comfortable sharing. I believe that raising awareness for these experiences is important and a huge step in making change. I hope that sharing my story helps other students to feel less alone, and also serves as a wake up call for those in academia that believe education is equitable. My story is only one story and one student experience. It is unfortunate however, that there are many stories similar to mine, more than we could ever fully capture. I am grateful to have the platform and to be trusted with the responsibility to share some of these stories that are similar to my own. I am incredibly proud of the students that were willing to share their stories with me. This work would not have been possible without you.

### **Real Students, Real Stories**

*“If I didn’t go through what I did, I wouldn’t have the drive that I do now.” -- Tasha Hueman*

For this research, I interviewed eleven Alaska Native students about their educational experiences. While I use the term “interview”, a lot of these conversations felt like storytelling between friends. It is important to allow for a comfortable and safe space for conversation, thought exchange and healing while doing this work, especially with Indigenous people. While this section does not include every student story shared with me, it does provide a glimpse into Indigenous students’ post-secondary experiences. Stories that were not highlighted in the following sections still informed the findings of common barriers as well as recommendations to address them.

All of the students interviewed identified as Alaska Native. One student dropped out of college for good, two were not currently attending but have vague plans to return someday, four took a break and are currently back in college, three have graduated, and one is a current student who did not stop out and is very close to graduating. Eight of the participants were first generation college students. Nine of the participants were from rural Alaska and of those, four had attended schools in both rural and urban Alaska during their high school careers and noticed a significant difference in the rigor of the curriculum. None of the eleven students interviewed believed that they had a normal college experience. I also received a written paper from a non-Native student from rural Alaska who had heard about my research and wanted to provide me with recommendations on how to support rural students at the campus she is currently attending. Almost all of my interviewees mentioned that they were thankful for their difficult experiences because it made them more resilient and more determined.

### **Marieana**

The first story is from Marieana who tried attending college for a while but ultimately decided that it was not for her and does not have plans to return. She is a first generation student

from rural Alaska that graduated from a high school class of five students. She decided to go to college because her friends were going and she wanted a reason to get away from her unhealthy home life. She was not clear why she was even going to college or have much of a drive to get a degree. She did however have a teacher that went out of their way to make the entire senior class fill out scholarships that were available to them. This teacher knew of the local scholarships students could get and helped them access the applications, create cover letters, and secure funding for college if they decided to go. Marieana's teacher made it clear that they did not personally care whether or not any of the students had any intention of going to college— they were still expected to spend that class hour filling out scholarships. This was not the teacher's job, nor anyone's job at this school as there were no regularly scheduled classes for seniors to plan for life after high school.

When asked about her experiences with education prior to college, Marieana said that back then, it felt really cool to not have any homework or to try hard in school. She realized however as a senior, that testing below proficiency in almost every category was actually a huge disadvantage. The lack of educational rigor in her rural school not only did not equip her with the skill set to succeed, it set her up to be put into remedial courses that would not count towards her college degree. She also never had the opportunity to be diagnosed with ADHD until later in life because she did not have any homework outside of the classroom and rarely needed to pay attention or take notes in her high school classes. Marieana had no idea that focusing or retaining information was an issue for her and could not figure out why she had difficulty concentrating in college. She expressed her frustration with why it was so easy for her college friends to sit down and complete an assignment. At the same time, she could not retain the information or concentrate on the content that she was reading, taking her longer to complete assignments.

“I had no guidance really. So, I just was winging it the whole time when it seemed like everybody around me knew where to go, knew where the tutor centers were, knew where all the resources were at college. And I was just like, help me, I’m failing Math 052.”

Another barrier she experienced came from the lack of support in her home. Her teacher expected the whole class to file a FAFSA and it took Marieana three months to complete it in its entirety because it required information from her parents who were often drinking and did not make the time to help her. Additionally, she was not yet 18 years of age and certain documentation (such as medical records for student housing) could not be released to her without her parent’s consent.

Not only was there no emotional family support, there was also no financial support. In fact, it was quite the opposite as Marieana found herself supporting her brother (who graduated the same year and went to trade school) and her mother (who never even really talked to her) while going to college and trying to figure out how to support herself. While in college, she dreaded having to go home for the holidays not only because of the financial burden of getting home (\$1,000 round trip) but also because she did not want to have to be around unhealthy family members.

Marieana expressed that she believed other students had similar experiences to this but did not like to talk about it. “I just don’t think people like to talk about how shitty small communities can really be because they want to be proud of their culture and where they come from,” she said in discussing her family situation at home. When explaining that she did not think that she had a normal college experience, she referred again to “normal students” having family support. One particularly hard experience she had during her time in college was when a

family member was hospitalized and expected not to make it. She flew to Anchorage to be with them and upon her return to campus had missed some assignments. One professor showed no compassion or flexibility when requesting partial credit to make up the assignments.

“[The professor] was like, ‘I don’t know what you value in your life, but you do not value this class as much as I do. You chose to value something else when you knew you were registered for this class and you knew it had deadlines. You’re an adult and I can’t help you.’ And I was like damn, okay. I just withdrew from that class and was like I’ll take a loss on this one, I guess.”

Withdrawing from classes holds consequences for a student’s on-campus housing and financial aid. When I asked Marieana for recommendations on ways that the college experience could be made more smooth for students she stated, “Some people can’t handle being full time ... Life still goes on while college is happening.” The example provided was in relation to scholarship eligibility requirements. If Marieana could only take two classes in the fall, she would have to apply for a part-time scholarship, but if she could take four classes in the spring, she would not have the full-time financial aid and would have to take classes part-time. The same would be true if she took a full load of courses in the fall however “life happened.” She could only take part-time classes in the spring making her ineligible for the year long, full-time scholarship.

Marieana ended up dropping out and now lives and works in Anchorage. She mentioned the societal pressures of not attending college, “It seems like the only way you can be deemed successful in life is if you go to college, if you have some kind of degree... it’s like the world

won't take you seriously otherwise." She concluded by saying that she did not even know why she was going in the first place and that it was really just about being away from home.

### **Alex**

The second story is from Alex (pseudonym), a student who went to college straight out of high school and is currently stopped out but does have plans to go back. Alex is a first generation college student from rural Alaska and graduated from a high school class of 72. The class started with a total of 86 students at the beginning of the school year but dwindled from students dropping out before graduation. Alex began her interview by telling me,

"I think I'm now realizing that I've just been so used to being resilient and through those years [college] it's been more of a survival mode type of thing. And then now, I feel like I've done a lot of growing and healing to the point where I'm able to pinpoint and reflect back on to my experiences in the dark, and just think like, 'oh that wasn't okay.'"

Alex mentioned multiple times that she had decided to be more appreciative of what her hard experiences taught her than to see them as inequities. This survival framework was similar to what many other students shared. Prior to this research, Alex had received requests from people doing similar research however they were non-Native and she did not think they would understand so she turned those offers down. She was thankful to have a safe space to share her story with me in hopes that it would help to raise awareness and make college a safer place for Native students.

Alex shared many stories about her experiences in primary and secondary school. She grew up with parents who drank a lot, affecting her ability to do well in school. She often would

not get enough sleep at night, staying up worried about them and missing a lot of school because they did not wake her up on time. At seven years old, Alex started watching and caring for her little brother, learning how to take care of herself and him from a young age. She was not able to hang out or do what her friends did because she had family responsibilities. When she was old enough, Alex got a job providing one of the two incomes to support her household. This job required her to work from 10 PM to 4 AM, allowing very little time to sleep before school. Along with providing some of the household income, she had to care for her younger brother, attend school, and eventually navigate the pressures of being a senior and figuring out a path after high school.

Alex's earliest memories of primary education were getting in trouble more often than her classmates, poor attendance, and eventually being held back a grade despite not understanding why she could not move along at the same rate as her friends and classmates. In secondary school, her biggest problem was attendance and she ended up failing an important class that she needed to graduate because it was her first class of the day and she never made it on time. Eventually, sports motivated her to get herself to school on-time and she made sure none of her required or difficult classes were scheduled early in the morning.

In secondary school, the feeling of isolation and being different deepened as she was taken out of her classes often due to her Independent Education Program (IEP). She felt ashamed and did not think she needed an IEP. In her adult life, Alex met another Native person who also experienced having an IEP in high school and told her that only the Native kids in his class had them growing up. She quickly realized that was the same situation at her school.

At her high school, there was one college and career guide to help a class of 80+ students. Alex heard about college from this guidance counselor and it was like a light bulb went off. She

saw it as something she could do on her own - a way out stating, “My dream was just to leave my family and get out of there.” It was hard for Alex to figure out what she wanted for her life because she was busy taking care of her family. Her parents, who did not attend college, had expectations about what kind of school they wanted her to go to, what they wanted her to study, and that she would return home afterwards and get a particular job without offering guidance or financial support. In her upbringing, Alex was taught never to question authority and found it hard to be stern with herself and others fearing disappointing her parents.

Alex was told how important college was so that she could have a roof over her head even though they had not gone to college and had a roof over theirs. She heard of scholarships and needing to apply to colleges but did not understand the steps to get her there. This person explained, “you just apply and you get an acceptance letter and you go.”

“I had a class that started with 86, and I think that’s a pretty big number for just one college career guidance counselor, in my opinion. Especially if there are rural, Indigenous students who are probably most likely first-generation students in their families to attend college ... There should be more than just one guidance counselor depending on class size, who can explain in-depth of what it’s like, not just assume and give short answers to these students who don’t have any idea what they’re doing and some of the challenges they may face, like family and financial stuff.”

The guidance counselor made it seem like there were so many scholarships that you just needed to apply for them. It sounded easy to Alex but she quickly found out how overwhelming the search process could be and how confusing the requirements were for each scholarship. She did

not understand the GPA requirements or if she met them or about writing an essay that was specific to what they were looking for in students that they would fund.

Her recommendation to make the college search process smoother was to have enough college and career counselors to support the size of the class that they are assigned to help. Simply telling students to find scholarships and apply was not helpful. Rather, it would be more effective to provide them with two or three specific schools and scholarships that they could qualify for and assist them in applying.

Alex eventually chose a college that her parents did not want her to go to and did not tell them about her decision until she was getting on the plane. She navigated the university's website on her own and called the first number that she found. Thankfully, the person that answered was very helpful and although Alex was frantic and crying, they walked her through all of her steps needed. Alex stated that applying to colleges could be made smoother for students if the cost of admission was more transparent and included fees for expenses such as placement testing, housing, meal plans, and transportation.

Alex also described some negative experiences that she had in college. She expressed feeling terrified about being spoken to about tuition, financial aid, and the FAFSA. She had no idea what the FAFSA was or how expensive college would be. The staff also explained to her "you need to pay this fee" or "turn in this or we are going to have to drop you and you cannot go to school here." Alex was fearful and anxious about what would happen if she were to get kicked out of school and lose her housing and independence.

She confided everything that she was dealing with to one of her professors and they recommended working with an academic advisor. Alex described her advisor as not being kind nor welcoming. The advisor's body language was tense as though she was already frustrated,

irritated and stressed by Alex needing help. Alex was unsure if she explained herself well enough because she felt uncomfortable being in a room with the advisor. At one point during the meeting, the advisor asked, “Why don’t you just ask your mom to pay for it? It’s just \$100.” This comment made Alex feel incredibly embarrassed that her mom could not just come up with a hundred dollars. She cried the entire day and felt as though no one understood what she was going through and was too ashamed to share her burdens with her roommates or friends. That initial meeting turned out to be her first and the last with that particular advisor. Eventually Alex found a different advisor and still has a great relationship with her today.

She experienced a difficult time passing math and had to take the same class five times, getting more and more discouraged. She viewed this class as a huge barrier that affected her GPA which in turn affected her housing and scholarships. Alex’s main goal was to keep a roof over her head and she tried her hardest to pass math but simply could not. Instead, she spent her time and money on classes that she knew she could pass even though they would not necessarily count towards her degree while also working multiple jobs to survive. When she finally did pass the class, Alex decided to take a break from college explaining that she was mentally and physically exhausted. The university that she attended eventually lowered the GPA requirements and amount of required classes needed to live in student housing and according to Alex, the removal of those requirements “really saved her life.”

Alex had a challenging journey in education however still wants to finish her degree and is awaiting benefits from her current employer to fund classes. She attributed her ability to persist to the close connection she has with the second advisor who celebrated with her when Alex passed the math class and reassured her that she can finish her degree when she is ready.

Alex's story reinforces that having a caring community or a person to rely on in the education system is pertinent to student success.

### **Jeremy**

The third story is that of Jeremy, a first generation student working towards his bachelor's degree. Jeremy came from a community in rural Alaska with a population of less than 200 people. He did not believe that he had received a quality education that set him up for success in college. The overall expectation in his hometown was that if you graduated from high school that was as far as you needed to go. There was not an expectation to do anything after graduating high school. The one K-12 school in his community had about three teachers during any given year and no counselors. At the time, Jeremy did not understand the low quality or expectations of his education because he had nothing to compare it to.

Jeremy did remember that once a year, an admissions counselor from the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) Kodiak Campus would come to his school with free pizza and swag to tell them they should go to college. Other than that one visit a year, there was no mention of college from teachers, parents, or community members in the village. This is how Jeremy explained his experience with the admissions counselors visits to me:

“Again, nobody was expected to go to college, and so when the recruiter came out it was like ‘hey, they’re bringing us pizza and free snacks and we get to sit around all day and listen to them talk instead of go to school,’ but that was really the depth of it. There was nothing else before or after that. So it was like ‘hey, college!’ and then it’s like nobody thought about it again.”

Jeremy moved to the hub community of Kodiak, Alaska for his senior year of high school. Prior to moving to Kodiak, he had been a straight-A student his entire life. In Kodiak, he found himself failing almost every class. Jeremy noticed how new the textbooks were compared to the ones in his previous classrooms which were very outdated, in fact, so much so that he and his classmates would often point out their parents and aunties and uncles' names written in them.

Jeremy stated that he has "quite the vendetta with the village school education" after what he experienced and what his younger family members are still experiencing. He told me, "We [village students] are not provided the same quality education that maybe the hubs of our regions are provided, even though we're supposed to be a part of the same school districts." By the end of his sophomore year, Jeremy had finished all of the math requirements to graduate from his village high school in their entirety. They offered the classes that they could and that was it. Jeremy went out of his way to self-advocate and asked his math teacher to help him one-on-one. During what was supposed to be his P.E. period, he took an online trigonometry class mostly because he just enjoyed learning.

At Kodiak High School, Jeremy worked with an advisor who specifically worked with Native students from the surrounding villages. He took college classes while still in high school, otherwise known as dual credit, and decided to continue on after graduation. Jeremy said he did not have a reason or a goal in mind but just enjoyed learning.

Jeremy was motivated to pursue a college education because there was nothing else going on in his village. According to him, the lifestyle of drinking, drug use, and fishing was not something he fit into. He explained, "The expectation was you're basically an alcoholic and into drugs by the time you're 15, and I was made fun of for loving to read. I was made fun of for being a nerd. I was made fun of relentlessly for liking education and liking school. It's kind of

almost beaten out of you.” These issues continue into adulthood when he returns home, and there are those who talk down to him for being “smarter than them” now that he has a college degree. According to Jeremy, people in his village view pursuing education as selfish and as leaving them behind. The lack of importance on education and its benefits within the village setting stems from a lack of investment, exposure, knowledge, or access to opportunities. Now, Jeremy sees his educational journey as a way “to show younger generations that you don’t have to be an alcoholic in the village; you don’t have to live in the village for the rest of your life; and, you don’t have to conform to what everyone expects of you.”

Jeremy explained that between the ages of 18-21, while attending school full-time and working, he had to learn what he believed others outside of the village school system had been taught from as early as middle school: to understand the importance, significance, and utilization of a college degree as well as skills such as time and financial management.

Jeremy explained how problematic it is that the village schools are being left behind in education, especially with pathways and opportunities to set them up for success in postsecondary education. “Most students that come from villages know less than those coming from regional hubs— the less they know, the less they have goals to receive a degree. And so that perpetuates the issue where we have many village students that don’t leave the village or establish educational careers, let alone professional careers.”

While in college, Jeremy’s love for learning helped him to do well enough to receive his Associate’s degree, and he is currently working on his Bachelor’s degree. He indicated that he did not have a Native teacher until he was in college and added, “I realized there’s not a lot of us [Natives] educating. We’re being educated by people who don’t know anything about us.” Jeremy believes that we need more Natives educators teaching Native students not only in

school but in all facets of life, with an emphasis on the importance of education and what it can do for us as a people.

Jeremy also believes that there are benefits to being a Native person wanting to pursue post-secondary education in that you can qualify for many scholarships. The missing piece however is actually applying for them to further your education. Jeremy talked passionately about the loss of Native ways at the hand of Americanization. According to him, the only way to stop this loss is to take an educated stance. By having a degree, you will be taken more seriously and have more power in the public eye. He explained that hopefully our experiences and knowledge as Native peoples will hold more weight. For example, we will be better able to save our culture and languages if we take an educated stance in that fight. Jeremy's long-term goal is to work for his Native corporation because he wants to do as much good as possible for his people.

### **Common Barriers**

A recurring theme from working with students is that many do not necessarily pursue college because they have a drive to obtain a degree or a career path. Many go because of societal pressure or wanting to get away from their home or unstable family life. Some have seen the lifestyles of those in their families or communities who did not pursue an education and so they choose a different path in hopes that they can build a better future (and eventually inspire others to do the same). Two male students told me they wanted something more reliable than the only job that was available to them in their home community--commercial fishing. The fact that these experiences are so common tells us that students need guidance from a young age to understand the value of education, how to be prepared for that education and what support is

needed. Students that stay in college as a means to merely survive is not safe or just and adds much more pressure to an already difficult journey.

Students that attend college as a means of survival also likely do not have family support at home, making them even more in need of on-campus support systems. One student I interviewed explained that her dad had passed away and her mom had moved out on her leaving her to raise herself and plan for college on her own. The necessary task of filing a FAFSA to attend college left her feeling alone and often in tears, as it asked questions about her parents, both of whom were no longer present in her life. Indigenous students are often taught to respect their elders and their parents. Even when they do not receive that respect or support in return, these students feel the pressure of needing to make their families proud which in turn, can increase the stress of attending and succeeding in college. A first generation student told me, “It was the smallest things like knowing I was going to be able to have a bed and a washer and dryer and not have to worry about lights or any kind of stress like that. A lot of people leave to have structure and stability and security.”

A theme that I heard from multiple interviewers is how important it is to have a culturally relevant curriculum. One student that I talked with stopped out after he ran out of Indigenous Studies classes because he got bored and did not see any reason to take other classes taught from Western perspectives.

Another student who went to two different tribal colleges explained that at the first tribal college he attended, there was minimal support for tribal students and he struggled in his science classes as the students were expected to learn how to make aspirin. He saw no connection to how this knowledge could ever help his people. He transferred to tribal college where he thrived studying the breakdown of omega fatty acids in traditional foods in his science classes. This

same student explained that too many high schools do not teach the true history of Alaska Native peoples which is also problematic. Another student who attended school in urban Alaska and was not a first generation college student echoed the same perspective. In his primary education, his school offered two weeks a year of “Indian Studies” during which time he was often singled out for being one of the only Native students in the classroom. These two weeks were the epitome of his experience of Indigenous knowledge in the classroom before going back to college specifically for Alaska Native Studies.

Another student told me that his good friend got their degree to be a mental health counselor but struggled when she returned home to work in the village school. She quickly realized that everything she learned about psychology and youth did not apply to the unique problems and traumas Native students experienced. He explained this by stating “Western education not getting it” -- ‘it’ being the experiences unique to being Native. A lack of culturally relevant curriculum prevents Native students from seeing the importance or relevance of getting a college degree. This in part relates to a comment from another student that said professors do not know how to relate to Native students, which inhibits their ability to help them or understand their learning style. These testimonies demonstrate the need for culturally relevant curriculum at all educational levels as well as the need for cultural training for educators.

Many students do not understand how unfair or unjust some of these experiences are until they have the space to share and reflect upon them. Most do not feel comfortable sharing these stories with or asking for help from just anyone.

“I think I was asked maybe twice to share my story, but it was with people I don’t know, I don’t remember their names, but I was afraid of what people would think or how people would react to

my story. Only because they were not Native, and they most definitely do not understand what you understand with me. We've gone through similar experiences that you would only understand, not a non-Native person. And much as I know it is important to share my story, I didn't know what they were capable of doing with that story. I didn't know them or trust them like that."

We cannot expect these students to carry these burdens on their own. There should be safe spaces on campuses that students can trust to reach out for help getting through barriers. One student said that many are immediately overwhelmed by the work required in college because they were not given the tools to manage it, especially due to the lack of expectations. These students are usually too uncomfortable to ask people that they do not know or trust for help. During one of the interviews, I was told, "I just really hope that there's more focus and support on those that don't have anyone else to talk or turn to."

I heard from multiple interviews that having a good relationship with someone, usually an academic advisor, helped them to persist in college. One student compared the two colleges that they had attended and explained that, at one school, it felt as though his academic advisor was there to push classes on him. In contrast, at his other school he felt that the staff and faculty cared about how you were doing and often treated students like family. At the university he left, he felt like professors were just telling him information instead of teaching it. At the university he ultimately graduated from, he felt as though the professors were really teaching students and helping them to understand new concepts. He further explained that the first college had a Native center however he did not have anything positive to say about this space. He still missed home and the sense of community. A student who is now returning to college as an adult explained that

at 18 years old, he did not know what an advisor did or who his advisor was. As an adult, he now sees how valuable an advisor is to college success and wishes it was something he knew the first time around.

A significant barrier common to students from rural Alaska was the lack of a rigorous K-12 curriculum that would prepare them for the work that they would be expected to do in college. One student explained that he took fourth grade math as a second grader and stayed on that same trajectory until the fifth grade. Instead of supporting his accelerated math ability, the school refused to keep moving him ahead and instead required him to take and pass the same sixth grade math three years in a row. If his rural school had supported him academically, this student could have been done with his college math requirements by high school graduation.

Another student told me that if he had not gone to a larger school for two years, he would not have been prepared for college. When he returned home to graduate, he was much further ahead academically than his classmates. In his village school, quizzes were open-book and classes were easy to pass. Students did not realize that the lack of homework and challenging work in high school was damaging until they were in college and lacked skills such as note taking, concentrating on homework, and time management which were necessary to pass classes.

Through the data, it also was clear that the students who attended rural primary and secondary school understood the importance of a college and career counselor with the capacity to understand and help them. Many students mentioned that the cost of college was not transparent. They did not know what they were responsible to pay for, how much it was going to be or if their scholarships were going to cover it all. They also did not know to factor in things like plane tickets, basic living needs, and meal plans. Many students did not file a FAFSA until they were on college campuses and realized that scholarships did not cover their bills. Students

often need to be extremely self-motivated in their college search, application and decision making processes in order to navigate all of these barriers.

In addition to needing a high school counselor, many students cited the difficulties of high teacher turnover in smaller schools. While I personally view this as problematic for many reasons, the biggest issue students emphasized was the inconsistency of teachers in their school and the fact that it slowed down their academic progress each year. Teachers would often spend time trying to evaluate where their students were at often wasting a lot of time reteaching content that the students had learned the prior year. Students also felt as though many of their teachers did not expect them to go to college, which was why they did not push or invest in them academically. One student said that he felt as though teachers would always pass students no matter if they met the expectations for class or even showed up. A student who stopped out of college and recently returned part-time as an adult shared about her teachers in her rural school, “If they’re not motivated to teach us, we’re not going to be motivated to learn.” The student added that teachers who were from out of town that knew she was planning to attend college would often make her feel small or less than for not understanding all of the steps to get there. They made her feel as though she was doing everything wrong even though she was doing it all on her own.

Students are motivated to attend college to do good for their families and/or communities. One student shared that his ability to push through his post-secondary education was because his goal was always to move back home and work for his tribe. One student explained that her parents did not have the opportunity to be educated. When her father was in school, the village did not have a high school and because of this, she felt fortunate to have these opportunities now

even if the journey has not been easy. This student wanted to serve as a good role model for others and make her family and her own child proud.

Through this research, I interviewed many students who dealt with and often conquered significant barriers throughout their educational journeys. As much as they are inspiring and as fortunate as I feel to have their trust to share their stories, it is disheartening to hear how long and how often our education system has failed our Indigenous and rural students. Unfortunately, it is not surprising. The following section on the history of education in Alaska is critically important to understanding the current failures of our education system.

### **Bare Minimum: History of Alaska Native Education**

*Dispossession, segregation, and assimilation have created intergenerational disadvantage and trauma that impede educational progress among most Indigenous students.*

According to most middle school textbooks, U.S. history began in 1492. However, Alaska Native and American Indian communities have rich histories that long predate European contact. Alaska Native people have distinct worldviews that contrast with Western beliefs and practices of individualism, capitalism, and assimilation. Conversely, Alaska Native and Indigenous values and worldviews are rooted in family, community, environment, and spirituality<sup>1</sup>.

Our grandparents were some of the most informed people in the world<sup>2</sup>. They held irreplaceable traditional knowledge and “had to learn how to communicate in a language

---

<sup>1</sup> Carol Barnhardt, “A History of Schooling for Alaska Native People,” *Journal of American Indian Education* 40, no. 1 (2001).

<sup>2</sup>American Indian College Fund. 2019. *Native Pathways*, A College-Going Guidebook. American Indian College Fund.

different from their respective Indigenous languages given them at creation, which are as Native to this country as are you”<sup>2</sup>. Hoonah elder, Martha Dementieff, explained that we used to be able to choose what we wanted to learn and who we wanted to teach it to us. When formal (Western) schools were introduced, we had no more say in what we learned or how it was taught and it quickly became a standardized, ‘one-size-fits-all’ experience.

Western educational systems have taken the place of traditional teaching and learning methods. Traditionally, Indigenous education was delivered through storytelling, ceremony, and leading by example. Native children learned the language, skills, and values that were needed to be productive members and leaders within their communities and families through an educational system that was suited to their lifestyles. The late Dr. Oscar Kawagley explained that education used to be gentle and non-judgemental, it was not as harsh however this all changed upon European contact.

From the very beginning, the desire to ‘civilize’ Indians through education was designed to colonize Indian minds to obtain Indian labor, land, and resources. Alaska Natives have a unique relationship with the federal government as compared to other American Indian tribes. Our “history” starts upon the purchase of unceded Native land in Alaska by the United States from Russia in 1867. This was almost 200 years after the federal government began assimilating, enslaving, killing, and forcibly moving Native American tribes off their homelands in what is now the contiguous United States. Pre-existing policies developed during early contact with American Indians directly influenced Alaska Native peoples. Soon after the U.S. purchased Alaska, a legal basis for the federal provision of education was passed in the form of the Organic Act of 1884 which mandated schooling for ‘all races.’<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Haycox, “Sheldon Jackson in Historical Perspective: Alaska Native and Mission Contracts, 1885-1894,” *The Pacific Historian* 28, no. 1 (1984): 18-28.

The schools created in Alaska were built around colonized ideas and had strict ‘English-Only’ policies that prohibited children from speaking their Native language. In addition to boarding schools (where Alaska Native children were taken away from their communities and forced to live without their families), there were also “contract schools” which were run by missionary groups with the intent to convert and assimilate Alaska Native children to Christianity and Western ideals. Appointed the General Superintendent for Education in Alaska in 1885, Sheldon Jackson was a Presbyterian missionary who believed strongly in the efficacy of acculturation through education (in English). A major difference (and important factor) for Alaska Native people was Jackson’s insistence that Indians be schooled in their traditional villages<sup>3</sup>.

It was not until the discovery of gold and capitalist industries, such as commercial fishing and logging, which brought an influx of white people to the territory of Alaska, that the government granted authority to some communities to incorporate their own schools. When schools opened outside of integrated towns, they catered to only white children and children of mixed blood that led a “civilized” (i.e. colonized) life. Schools for Indian children often suffered from a high turnover rate and did not offer any curriculum past the 8th grade. The federal Bureau of Education used schools as a means to assimilate Alaska Native children into civilized Christian Americans’.<sup>3</sup>

Education has historically been a tool used by the government to civilize (and/or Christianize) the ‘savage’ Indigenous people who made their homes on land desired by the colonizer, in this case, the federal government. It is important to acknowledge the historical trauma and loss that education brought amongst our ancestors when we discuss why our

Indigenous students are falling behind in academia and, more importantly, how we, in academia, are failing our Indigenous students.

I challenge all educators, especially those working in Native communities and Native serving institutions, to learn and teach the true history of Indigenous peoples and to understand the lingering impacts of colonization. I see this as a bare minimum requirement to work with Native students in their educational journeys. I also challenge Indigenous students to exercise critical thinking even if the professionals who should be teaching you this information have convinced you that history began when Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria arrived on this continent. I challenge you to challenge educators, the education system, and all colonized, Western institutions. Today's education system was not built for us yet we deserve an education system that fits our needs. Some people have been battling and continue to battle to make education a system that can support you in your journey and future successes.

You deserve an education and the opportunities that come with it. Society might not realize it, but it desperately needs Indigenous peoples in leadership positions and power to challenge the Western institutions and ideals that have proven to not work. We owe it to our predecessors that were forcibly assimilated at the hands of the education system and the federal government. Henrietta Mann put it into better words than I ever could when she wrote, "Remember, you are unique in that you come from nations that have always produced true human beings with phenomenal minds from cultures that have strong values such as love, respect, understanding, and generosity. Furthermore, ancestral traditional knowledge teaches us about living in a harmoniously interdependent world characterized by the inclusive circle of life. This is your inheritance from all the generations that lived in this place, long before 1492."<sup>2</sup> It

would be great to declare that now that schools are not legally segregated and “opportunities are available to all” that all of our problems are solved, but, unfortunately, this is not the case.

### **Long Term Effects: Where Are We Today?**

*There is great uncertainty attached to how educational opportunity can be revived among Indigenous people so systematically denied such opportunities. How many generations does it take for the damage to be undone?*

While Indigenous people, specifically Alaska Natives, have historically had a tumultuous relationship with education, we deserve high-quality, culturally responsive education for current and future generations. Education helps secure high-paying jobs and encourages students to connect with others pursuing higher education, thus, introducing other related opportunities, such as social capital and social networks that they would not normally be exposed to. Many Alaska Native students however struggle to access and obtain postsecondary education. Despite being highly motivated to further their education<sup>4</sup>, only 10% of Native American adults have a bachelor's degree, and only 4.8% have a graduate degree<sup>5</sup>. Only 17% of American Indian high school graduates go on to a postsecondary setting, while their white counterparts attend at 67%<sup>4</sup>. American Indian and Alaska Native students have the highest dropout rate of any racial or ethnic minority group in the U.S., with a national dropout rate ranging from 29% to 36% in postsecondary settings<sup>6</sup>. Based on these statistics, it is too easy to justify low enrollment and completion rates as shortcomings for American Indian and Alaska Native students however,

---

<sup>4</sup> Aaron Doyle et. al., “The Educational Aspirations/Attainment Gap Among Rural Alaska Native Students,” *The Rural Educator* 30, no. 3 (2009): 25-33.

<sup>5</sup> Pilar, Wil Del, “Degree Attainment for Native American Adults,” *The Education Trust*, November 15, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen V. Flynn et. al., “An Emergent Phenomenon of American Indian Postsecondary Transition and Retention,” *Journal of Counseling & Development* 90, no. 4 (2012): 437-449.

therein lies the problem. Ultimately, it is the postsecondary institutions that are continuing to fail Indigenous students.

While American Indian and Alaska Native postsecondary success is a national issue, it is important to be aware of our statistics locally in Alaska. According to the Institutional Effectiveness team at the University of Alaska Southeast (UAS), Alaska Native students represent 20% of the total student body however their retention rate is 58% as compared to 70% for all students on campus.

### **Existing Research**

Many studies focus on Indigenous students in the lower 48 or other countries. A study on how to better support Aboriginal students at universities in Australia found that institutional change was necessary to support these students. While there was an Aboriginal center on campus, it was far away from the main campus and isolated students further, preventing them from getting involved with mainstream campus life. Aboriginal or Indigenous Centers are important to students' sense of belonging on campus however they alone are not going to solve the fact that required changes are needed to increase Aboriginal student success at the university. The lack of integrated support for Aboriginal students across all university sections allows many students to fall through the cracks. A university-wide, holistic support initiative would increase the awareness of Aboriginal students. The researchers concluded that "appropriate cultural knowledge bears the potential to transform teachers' practice in meaningful ways, and policy statements need to be developed to ensure this happens."<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Judith Rochecouste et. al., "Teaching Australian Aboriginal Higher Education Students: What Should Universities Do?" *Studies in Higher Education* 42, no. 11 (2017): 2080-2098.

Studies focusing on American Indian or Alaska Native students in the lower 48 consistently show that students who receive social support such as connecting with a Native person or cultural center on campus and that have family support are more likely to be retained<sup>4</sup>. The first year retention rates for Native students at a four-year college are the lowest of any other race. One study looked at Native American students' sense of belonging during their first year of college and found that isolation, disconnection, and marginalization, such as microaggressions, were all factors that negatively affected these students' sense of belonging on campus. Students in the study identified that family affirmation from afar and cultural affirmation on campus were essential in their persistence. Many students wondered why they had to leave so much of themselves at home (i.e. ceremonies, family, lifestyle, and foods) to pursue their degrees. Indigenous students come from a communal culture and having a social support center provides them with a sense of community that they find essential. American Indian and Alaska Native students agreed that their families and the ability to give back to their communities were the significant motivating factors to finish college<sup>6</sup>. The desire to serve as role models, making their families and communities proud was the motivation that American Indian and Alaska Native students needed to overcome difficult situations on university campuses.

While the main focus of my research is understanding institutional barriers that impede Alaska Native success in postsecondary education, learning about barriers that this population faces which are beyond our institutional control are crucial to this study. Examples might include a poor-quality K-12 education, lack of postsecondary educational knowledge, or lack of role models who have gone through postsecondary education. This information will help us to better understand the hoops that these students are already jumping through and how high their postsecondary education aspirations are.

Doyle, Kleinfeld, and Reyes used the “aspirations-achievement” gap to facilitate the discussion in their qualitative study of rural Alaska Native high school seniors from three different villages, which included 49 total students. The “aspirations-achievement” gap is common among minority youth and youth of low socioeconomic status. Studies on Alaska Native youth consistently found they had high aspirations for continuing their education, however their behavior did not reflect those goals. Four themes came out of the study’s findings: 1) Most rural students had high educational aspirations, wanting to go to vocational school or college, and most had occupational aspirations that required some type of postsecondary education; 2) Very few students knew how to go about attaining their educational aspirations or were taking steps to reach their educational goals; 3) Most students said their families and counselors encouraged them to go to postsecondary education but vague encouragement translated into action on the part of the students only when concrete and sustained messages accompanied it, and 4) Directed students often had peers with aligned career ambitions.

All students interviewed had thought about going to college or training after high school even though most admitted that they did not know higher education was “necessary” for them. Alaska Native students see few examples of other rural students who have graduated from postsecondary institutions. Moreover, there are few paid positions that require a postsecondary education in rural Alaska. Over half of the students in the study did not believe they received a quality education which negatively affected their self confidence to succeed in postsecondary education. The authors explain that improving the quality of education in village schools so that students are successful should be a major policy concern in rural education. This would require teachers to develop culturally relevant teaching methods “instead of using rural schools as a

stepping stone to urban teaching jobs.” More Alaska Native teachers in the community are hired to develop connections between the standard curriculum and students' cultural experiences.

Although all students interviewed in the study had thought of going to college or training after high school, 76% did not have any realistic plans for attaining their aspirations. Students would say things like they plan to go to college or go to training without any idea about where they would receive their training or education or what they would receive their education or training in. Students taking steps toward attaining their postsecondary plans said that their counselors did more than give advice or hand them information. Instead, they helped them choose and apply for a postsecondary program and scholarships. The study concludes that it is important for families and counselors to encourage rural Alaska Native students to pursue postsecondary education; however they still must follow up with direct, personalized assistance in making plans and filling out applications and scholarships.

In follow-up interviews with these same participants one year later, researchers found that 71% of students lived in their home villages. Of the 30 students thinking about going to college in the initial interviews, only six had enrolled in a college. Of those six, five dropped out typically within their first semester. The primary reason given by students who dropped out was family issues. Upon returning home, they fell too far behind in schoolwork and dropped out. One had lost their scholarships due to bad grades and did not know how they could return to college financially. Of the 31 students (note: some had more than one plan) who wanted to go to a vocational school or training program, only two went. Four ended up joining the military and succeeding there. It is interesting to note that all four males that joined the military were from the same community. From this finding, one of the authors' recommended offering structured

pathways (example: all you have to do is “sign up” for the military and they help you figure out the rest) to postsecondary enrollment, creating cohort programs.

## **Recommendations**

The most important part of this work, besides raising awareness of these barriers and inequities in our current education system, is where to go from here with this information. This section, and the recommendations within it, are based on my knowledge and experiences as a student and an employee of the postsecondary education system in addition to student stories, and existing scholarship. This research project is a starting point however there is a lot of work yet to be done.

### **Primary & Secondary Recommendations**

Rural schools need to do better. Many students are underserved from the beginning of their educational experiences and yet do not realize it until they attend a larger school or by the time they are in college, which is too late. Education is almost necessary for a person's overall well-being in society today. Many doors will be shut to those who do not obtain post-secondary training or education. We need Indigenous students to have just as good of a chance to succeed. Indigenous students should not feel as though they have to be in survival mode to get through school. They also should not have to leave their hometowns for a better primary and secondary education. Those early experiences in the education system will shape how education is viewed. Rural schools in general are not challenging students academically or investing in students (socially, emotionally or academically). By not doing so, such schools are ensuring that doors are closed for their students before they can explore the innumerable opportunities. A few specific recommendations to improve primary and secondary education in our rural schools are:

- Cultural relevance training for all employees
  - Teaching students in ways that make learning relevant

- Intentional support with higher education application processes such as financial aid, housing options, and class choices
- Guidance counselors in each school
  - Many rural senior classes are very small. Meet with seniors individually and as a group. Provide them with information on local scholarships available to them and challenge them to make a plan with steps on how to get there.
  - Require training to help professionals working with students to understand that they should not be meeting them for the first time on day one of their senior years and challenging these students with what they want to do after high school. They should build a relationship prior. Students who are not having these conversations with their parents are likely not attending college. Building a trusting relationship, going over options and creating a safe space before challenging these students to know what they want to do after high school is pertinent to their safety and well being.
  - Many students do not have families that understand college admissions processes. These students need additional support in their schools to assist and support them and to increase their understanding of why college is important.
- Working with parents and guardians
  - Having support from families is a major factor in a student's ability to persist in their postsecondary journeys
  - Create a welcoming environment for them to be involved in learning about college and postsecondary opportunities too.
- Preparing students for a college education

- A required course to prepare for life after high school ensuring that they have the skills should they decide to pursue a postsecondary education
- Requiring (and supporting) students to file a FAFSA before graduation
  - Students who filled out scholarships even without knowing what they were going to do with them were motivated to try college because they knew they had some financial aid to help them.
  - Please see the National Association of College Admissions Counseling (NACAC) article in the additional resources section about the rise in college attendance from schools that have required a FAFSA as a high school graduation requirement.
- Requiring note taking, study skills, and time management in all secondary classes as appropriate for each grade level.
- Do your research. Keep track of your students who leave-- were they able to graduate? Did they decide college or training was not for them and have work lined up at home? Keep data on why they returned.

### **Recommendations for Postsecondary Institutions**

Understanding where Indigenous students come from is a bare minimum requirement for any educator. Many of these students carry shame and guilt for the way that they were raised or their personal experiences and are scared to ask for help. If they trust you enough to ask for help, you need to be equipped to help and understand where they are coming from. A student told me that college professionals do not understand Indigenous students' needs forcing many of them to leave and be too traumatized by the education system to come back: "College is so military-ish. There is no flexibility. It's just you have to do this and take this and this and that. Yet, every

individual is different, and we all deserve an education, but sometimes we miss that opportunity because of the rules... they aren't built for everyone.. Not fitting for each individual, especially Native and rural students.” Meeting students where they are and taking accountability for their success and well-being should be a priority for postsecondary institutions.

Students should not have to experience microaggressions on top of everything else. One interviewee told me he was singled out in a college class on the first day and told that he was at a disadvantage as a Native student. He ended up failing that class. I see many of these issues being addressed by introducing a requirement for educators and staff to complete (and renew) cultural relevance and safety training.

In addition to the recommendations in this section, I included a formal recommendation by Rylee Johnson (See appendix D). Rylee is a current student at the University of Alaska Southeast and submitted the attached document to the university. I find her recommendations applicable to any university serving rural and Indigenous students.

- Required cultural relevance training for all staff, faculty, and administration
  - Many students experienced tremendous harm at the hands of staff and faculty who were clueless about Indigenous issues and ways of being.
- Creating a Native/rural student advocacy position within student government
- What foods are Indigenous to the land your university or school occupies? Offer them in your cafeterias.
  - “Going two years without Indigenous food or the food from my community, southeast Alaska, was so hard for me. I can't imagine what some of these students are going through when they're raised on one diet their whole life and they get to the [University of Alaska] and are handed their [meal plan] card without any

resources or means of getting to the grocery store, let alone the foods that they were brought up with.” -- Angelo Katasse, Indigenous scholar.

- Spending extra time with Native and rural students to ensure they have a network of people they trust on campus. An example of this might be a pre-orientation program for Native and rural students designed to build a cohort among peers and ensure they know their academic advisors and other resources (FAFSA help, navigating tutor centers, understanding resources available) in a meaningful way before the school year begins. This could also help ensure they are more prepared than the students I interviewed were.
- Building rural student cohorts before coming to campus and maintaining them as recommended by a retention study done at UAF. Students could start their senior year by taking the same college math and success skills courses; the next semester they would take the same college writing and success skills courses. Once on campus, all students from cohort locations would take a study hall class together taught by an older student serving as a mentor. Full study is mentioned in the resources section.
- Cultural activities should not be limited to the cultural center on campus and instead implemented in classrooms, student housing, events and activities. All campus departments should be connected with the cultural center on campus.
  - It is important to continue to support events hosted by cultural centers on campus because sometimes having a non-Native can change the vibe and feeling of safety of public events for Native students.
- Cultural centers (while not the sole department responsible) should serve as a community for students. I envision these spaces being fully staffed with professionals who can help with financial aid, class registration, campus involvement, mentorship, tutoring,

educational and degree pathways, etc.. Along with having the academic piece, they should also serve as a space to connect with other Indigenous people and elders in the community to network and share laughs, food, art, dance, and ceremony together.

- Representation matters. If recruiting and retaining Alaska Native students is your goal, then you should have an adequate representation of Alaska Native staff, faculty, and administration on campus. These individuals will make students feel more welcome and safe and also likely have a unique understanding of Indigenous ways of being and learning.
  - A few older students mentioned that they see a difference in colleges starting to celebrate Indigenous peoples and what they can bring to education, however there is still much work to be done.
  - Another student explained that he sees a lot of Native students wearing regalia in advertising for the University when in reality, there are very few Native students that attend. Those Native students who attend college have had to fight to wear their regalia to ceremonies on certain campuses.
- Do your research. Why are students leaving? What are common barriers you notice on your campuses that these students experience? Are there barriers that your institution can remove to ensure a smoother transition and experience for these students?

### **Recommendations for Tribal Organizations and Alaska Native Corporations**

We live in a world that often requires degrees yet we do not do enough to support, push, or encourage Native and rural students to pursue and complete degrees. Alaska Native corporations and tribes must do more than offer scholarships. Many students said those scholarship opportunities made them consider going to college to begin with but in the end, they

needed more than a scholarship check. There should be people within these organizations to spend time on the ground in communities to get to know their shareholders and tribal members and to make sure that they are being heard and their needs met.

Specific Strategies:

- Create opportunities and funding for students to be exposed to college while still in high school. The University of Alaska hosts multiple exposure opportunities and schedules group tours.
- Create and fund mentor programs. Who from these corporations or tribes has a college degree and can be paid part-time or full-time to work as a mentor for others planning to pursue a postsecondary education?
- Spend time in our communities to truly understand the needs beyond a dividend or scholarship check. Build pathways to help shareholders or tribal members to meet needs.
- Advocate for required cultural relevancy and safety training at the schools serving your students and communities.
- If your mission has anything to do with the well-being of your people, understand how education helps them get there. Build education departments and hire staff that can help shareholders and tribal members access educational opportunities, training, and other resources.
- Create college preparedness handbooks to be used in community high schools.

The above strategies are just a few general ideas that were informed from existing research, resources, and student stories. These recommendations are offered to help organizations

implement important and needed changes. This list will be ever-changing as we learn more and should be adjusted to fit different students, communities, and regional needs.

### **Conclusion**

In doing this project, I have listened to students laugh and cry at the traumatic experiences that they have endured. It has been a healing journey for them and me because they found a safe space to share their story. They were motivated to share their experiences in hopes that we would listen and make much needed changes. The students who participated in this research and made this project possible deserve recognition for their bravery and for their part in shaping the thoughts and recommendations provided in this guidebook.

I cannot force anyone to understand the importance of this work or to implement change yet these students, and others like them matter and deserve a lot more than what the education system has handed them. I am in awe of how brave Indigenous students are, but more than that, I am disappointed that we have allowed them to endure such a tumultuous relationship with education for so long.

Educating Indigenous students is not only needed for their people and their home communities– it is needed by society as a whole. Many universities and organizations have goals to improve Indigenous student attainment from recruitment, to retention, to graduation. It is time to do the work required to reach these goals. I am aware that there will be barriers, such as institutional approval and funding, but we can no longer sit still. We have a responsibility to listen to students and to improve conditions so that they no longer have to be resilient. We have a responsibility to them and to the future generations to come.

Between listening to Indigenous students and referring to existing research, we should have a pretty good idea of how we are undeserving this population and how we can do better. I do not have all of the answers, but I do know that we cannot wait until we “start doing better”. We can accomplish and implement many things now to support Indigenous students and we are way past overdue in this goal. It is time to realize that it is not up to me, or other Native educators on their own but it is up to everyone working in academia from educators to school board members to scholarship foundations. We need to work together and let the voices of Indigenous students guide us.

I look forward to seeing culturally relevant education become more normalized, requiring that cultural safety training be implemented, and growing the support systems for Indigenous students. I do not take my responsibility in this mission lightly and am honored and passionate to continue this fight for my Indigenous brothers and sisters and the generations to follow.

### **Acknowledgements**

This work is made possible by the students who shared their stories with me: Tasha Huemann, Rylee Johnson, Dustin Newman, Angelo Katasse, Audrey Foster, Jeremy Clarion, Monica Chase, Marieana Larsen, Colten Mack, and the students who asked to not be identified by name. Your voices matter and have made this project possible, continue to use them. Thank you for trusting me and for bringing my passion project to life.

### **Additional Resources**

Stop Talking: Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning and Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education by Ilarion (Larry) Mercurieff and Libby Roderick

Native Pathways: A College-Going Guidebook by the American Indian College Fund

An Indian Teacher Among Indians by Zitkala-Sa (Gertrude Simmons Bonnin)

Yuuyaraq: The Human Way of Being by Harold Napoleon

How Can the University of Alaska Fairbanks Improve Their Retention Rates of Alaska Native Students by Minnie Naylor and Catherine A. Brooks

An Indigenous Methodologies Participatory Action Research Study of Alaska Native Transition and First Year Persistence in Higher Education by Valerie Svancara and Barbara Sikvayugak

Open Letter to Native College Students by Amanda Tachine

Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods by Shawn Wilson

FAFSA Requirements Aim to Boost College Enrollments. Here's Their Impact So Far. by Adrienne Lu

The Forgotten Minority: Native Americans in Higher Education by Robert N. Wells, Jr.

Appendix A: Interview Participant Recruitment Flier

# CALL FOR ALASKA NATIVE INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS FOR A RESEARCH PROJECT

Participants must be at least 18 years old

Participants must be Alaska Native  
Participants must be current college students or  
former college students (i.e. college graduates or

students that have stopped attending college  
temporarily or permanently).



Participation is completely voluntary and  
participants can decide to stop at anytime



There will be no compensation for participants  
There will be no direct benefits to participants

**Purpose of the research project is to  
identify unique experiences of Alaska  
Native students in pursuing a  
postsecondary education**

Interviews will be confidential.  
Interviews estimated to last no longer than 60 minutes  
Interviews can be done in person, online, or on the phone.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT  
DANNIELLE CARLSON AT  
DACARLSON6@ALASKA.EDU**

## Appendix B: Interview Question Guide

Draft Interview Outline  
 Research Project: Barriers in Postsecondary Ed for AKN Students  
 Reseacher, Dannielle Carlson

Researcher script: Thank you very much for participating in this study. Do you have any questions before we begin? I'd like to start by asking you some questions about your experience in postsecondary education. We will be audio-recording this interview and you may ask to stop or pause the recording at any time.

- Can you tell me about your primary and secondary education?
  - Do you think you received a quality primary / secondary education (i.e. do you think it prepared you for your postsecondary education, why or why not?)
- What motivated you to pursue a postsecondary education?
  - What was your experience like after making that decision (i.e. college search and application process)?
  - Can you think of any ways in which this process could have been more smooth? (anything that could've helped you that you didn't have access to?)
- What are some specific hardships or issues you have faced when attending or while planning/thinking of attending college/postsecondary education?
  - Do you think that other students have had similar experiences?
- How is college or postsecondary education portrayed in the media / social media?
  - Was that similar or different to your own experience? How so?
  - Would you say you've had a "normal" college experience?
- If there was anything you could change about the college experience, application process, etc., what would you change?
- Did you or will you receive an undergraduate degree?
  - If yes, what are some reasons you were/are able to persist?
  - If no, what are some reasons you weren't able to finish?
- Is there anything you would like to add on this topic?

### Demographic Information

- Age:
- Gender Identity:
- Racial Identity:
- First Generation Student (Do you have parents/grandparents who have received college degrees)?:
- Hometown or region:

## Appendix C: Interviewee Consent Form

### Informed Consent Form

Dannielle Carlson (Researcher) Identifying Barriers in Postsecondary Education for Alaska Native Students

**IRB #:** [1847209-1]

**Date Approved:** 12-22-2021

My name is Dannielle Carlson. I am a graduate student doing research on the barriers Alaska Native students experience in postsecondary education. I would like to interview you because you have knowledge on this topic.

#### **Key Information:**

- This study involves research with Alaska Native students that are attending or have attended a postsecondary institution. The purpose of this research is to identify challenges or barriers Alaska Native students have faced in this pursuit.
- I will listen to your stories and use them in my research. I will also use existing research on similar issues.
- I will draw possible solutions and recommendations from the stories you share. I will provide those to people who are working in postsecondary institutions that serve Alaska Native students.

#### **Study Details:**

- You will be asked questions in a one-on-one interview about your experiences in postsecondary education. The interview will take about 60 minutes. You are free to stop at any time. You may skip any question you do not wish to answer.
- Your interview will be audio-recorded. The purpose of recording is to capture what you say as correctly as possible. Only myself and a company hired to type the interviews will hear your recording.
- There are no anticipated benefits to the participant directly. There are no expected risks to you if you take part in this study.
- There will be about 10-12 participants interviewed for this study. Your participation in this study is voluntary and refusal to participate will involve no penalty.
- Your stories will be used in presentations and publications. It's up to you whether or not your name appears in this study. Please review options A and B and check one.

     **Option A:** You agree to be identified by name in this study. If you are quoted, you will have a chance to review the text before it's included in a final document. You will also be named as a co-researcher.

     **Option B:** You agree to be identified by a general title (such as "student") in the study. Your name will be removed from all interviews so that no one besides me can trace you to the information you gave.

You may ask me any questions now. If you have questions later, you can contact the principal investigator/committee chair Kathleen Meckel at (907) 474-6842 or [kmeckel@alaska.edu](mailto:kmeckel@alaska.edu) or Dannielle Carlson at (907) 386-6086 or [dacarlson6@alaska.edu](mailto:dacarlson6@alaska.edu)

The UAF Institutional Review Board (IRB) is a group that reviews research projects involving people. This review is done to protect the rights and welfare of the people involved in the research. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant or in the event of a research-related harm, you can contact the UAF Office of Research Integrity at 474-7800 (Fairbanks area) or [1-866-876-7800](tel:1-866-876-7800) (toll-free outside the Fairbanks area) or [uaf-irb@alaska.edu](mailto:uaf-irb@alaska.edu).”

**Statement of Consent:**

I am at least 18 years of age. I understand the information presented to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been offered a copy of this form.

---

Signature of Participant & Date

---

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent & Date

### **Appendix D: Recommendations from Current Rural University Student**

To whom it may concern,

Ciuniurutet (greetings), my name is Rylee Johnson and I'm from Bethel, Alaska, a rural city located roughly 400 miles away from Anchorage. Bethel is a fly-in only region meaning we are not connected to any road system within Alaska. Bethel is also a regional hub to 46 surrounding villages, and has a school district the size of West Virginia. I had the privilege of being born and raised in a rural city. My education was encompassed by the culture of my community, the Yup'ik culture. I am studying B.A. Elementary Education and plan to return to Bethel to teach. In my education I was a name not a number. At UAS I feel that same way, my professors know me by my name, I'm not just a number in their class. Although there are some aspects about UAS where I see an opportunity for positive change.

Navigating the college system as a rural student I felt oblivious to information that was readily provided to my peers from non-rural areas. My peers voiced their concerns to me about how professors allow insensitive remarks and are even dismissive of our experiences and cultures. This makes it uncomfortable for students to participate in discussions, group work, and classroom culture. Taking courses as a rural student from home my professors were inconsiderate of the internet quality and resources that weren't available to me.

Every teacher that enters the Lower Kuskokwim School District has to complete cultural awareness and informational courses. These courses help our staff better understand the students of our community. For example, in my region we use nonverbal responses like raising our eyebrows to say yes and scrunching them to indicate no. If a

teacher had not had the training to look for non-verbal cues they might think the student is ignoring them. These miscommunications happen quite frequently between myself and my professors. I would like to propose required rural and cultural awareness training for faculty and staff. The system is extremely difficult to navigate coming from rural communities, the UA system should work for all students within Alaska not just those coming from non-rural areas.

I would like to point out something I found below when I was looking through the different UA campuses all over Alaska. I found the Kuskokwim Campus in Bethel, my hometown. As I was reading the information the UA website has for the Bethel campus I noticed something really hurtful. The information provided stated "The service area includes census districts with the highest rates of poverty, youthfulness, and lowest rates of full-time permanent employment in the state and nation (U.S. Census Bureau data). The region also holds one of the last indigenous cultures and societies resident in their homeland and still speaking a vital Native language - Central Yup'ik/Cup'ik Eskimo." I looked at other campuses and noticed their poverty rates or employment rates were not information that was provided. Seeing this compared to the positive viewpoints of the other rural campuses was hurtful. I hope to see some changes made to the page that provides information about such a beautiful community.

I hope in the future we can create a position on student government that allows rural students to have our voices heard. I think having a rural advocacy position on student government would be a great start. We as rural students would be able to bring our concerns to admin and faculty without fear of being dismissed. I thank you for your

time and consideration reading my experiences as this is something that I am deeply passionate about.

Sincerely,

Rylee Johnson

## Bethel

The Kuskokwim Campus is located in a regional transportation and service center for an extended community of more than 46 Alaska Native villages. They are primarily Yup'ik/Cup'ik Eskimo villages with 56 tribes in a 57,000 square mile roadless area comparable to the state of Illinois. The area has a regional population of nearly 25,000 people. Bethel is a community of about 6,000 people 80 miles inland on the Kuskokwim River. The Kuskokwim Campus offers academic, vocational and community interest courses, as well as courses leading to associate, baccalaureate and master's degrees.



The Kuskokwim Campus, Bethel

Kuskokwim Campus is the largest rural campus in the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) system and is a branch campus of the College of Rural and Community Development (CRCD). The campus is physically located in Bethel, a regional hub community situated in Alaska's Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, about 400 miles west of Anchorage. The service area includes census districts with the highest rates of poverty, youthfulness, and lowest rates of full-time permanent employment in the state and nation (U.S. Census Bureau data). The region also holds one of the last indigenous cultures and societies resident in their homeland and still speaking a vital Native language - Central Yup'ik/Cup'ik Eskimo.

<https://www.alaska.edu/uajourney/notable-people/bethel/>

### **Rural Area Student advocacy position on Student Government and required training for Staff**

- 1. Students from rural areas do not have the career counselors that people from bigger city schools have. (We don't know our options for schools, what certain colleges offer, and they don't help us take placement tests. )**

2. **Students coming in from rural areas don't have very many dual credit opportunities, college course-taking opportunities, all the opportunities that our peers have. Starting off we are at a disadvantage.**
  
3. **If we do have the opportunity to have placement tests done in the school (on a rare occasion) the internet quality doesn't help the test-taking process. Rural areas do not have registered test taking facilities and sometimes we have to fly into bigger cities in order to take these exams. (Taking my PRAXIS at home, my internet quality was so low my test was glitching so I had a harder time completing the test. The education program wanted me to have my PRAXIS completed before the summer ended. )**
  
4. **In rural areas, the internet reaches up to 500 dollars or more a month. How do you expect low-income students to pay for internet access in order to take these tests or turn in applications?**
  
5. **Taking courses from home in a rural area is a struggle that most people in the system don't understand. One of the professors requires us to check out books from local libraries each week. How are we supposed to do that with no library? Another class I have requires we buy our own materials for certain at home labs. If I was taking the course from Bethel, I would not have access to materials like 2 gallon clear soda bottles or items that most chain grocery stores have. (This adds an additional cost of buying material when the fee is included in my tuition.)**
  
6. **With that being said our professors don't understand the struggle of living in rural Alaska where many of OUR students come from. Faculty and staff aren't required**

**to take any cultural or rural Alaska training. How can they help our students succeed when they don't understand our students, the struggles they face, and the lack of college-level courses we don't get to take.**

- 7. The cultural insensitivity in our classrooms makes it an uncomfortable learning environment for many students. (Students are proven to do significantly worse in a classroom they don't feel comfortable and or respected in.)**
- 8. If we don't have people from all perspectives making decisions and adding input this will continue to be overlooked.**