

Could Alaska's Diverse Campuses Survive a Forced Marriage?

By KATHERINE MANGAN

Alex Jorgensen, president of the student government at the U. of Alaska at Anchorage, told Alaska regents that he felt physically stressed by the speed of a proposed restructuring, and that students believed the one-university model was "being shoved down our throats." (*Brian Adams for The Chronicle*)

September 19, 2019

Juneau, Alaska

When Justice Dominy enrolled at the University of Alaska's Southeast campus here, she was eager to immerse herself in the language and culture of her Tlingit tribe. The small campus, nestled in a forest between the harbor and a lake rimmed by glaciers and snow-capped mountains, felt like home. Signs welcomed her in English and Tlingit, and colorful eagle and raven totem poles were positioned according to tribal custom, to provide spiritual balance.

Southeast, whose main campus is in Juneau, is the smallest of the three universities in the Alaska system. Because of the rugged surrounding terrain, the only way to reach the rest of the state or North America is by boat or plane.



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Some 850 miles away, Kenadi Brown is looking forward to competing in gymnastics on the system's largest campus, in Anchorage. The Seawolves' NCAA athletics teams enhance school spirit on what is mostly a commuter campus in Alaska's biggest city. Many of the students at the open-access university juggle their studies with jobs in oil, health care, tourism, and the military. "We have people getting certificates, associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees all in the same place," Alex Jorgensen, president of the student government at Anchorage, said as he led a reporter on a tour of the student center. "It creates a really interesting learning environment."

"No university system that I know of has attempted to put in place as significant a change as they're contemplating in Alaska this quickly."

Hundreds of miles north from those coastal communities, in the interior of the state, the Fairbanks campus attracts budding scientists willing to brave the cold to attend an institution that is internationally renowned for its Arctic research. Fairbanks has a more selective admissions process than Southeast and Anchorage, and it has strong programs in geophysics and Alaska Native studies. But like the rest of the system, it's struggling with declining enrollment and shrinking budgets.

A [painful summer \(https://www.chronicle.com/specialreport/Alaska-s-University-System/244\)](https://www.chronicle.com/specialreport/Alaska-s-University-System/244) exacerbated those concerns for all three of Alaska's main campuses. Gov. Michael J. Dunleavy, a Republican, dropped a budget bombshell, threatening to cut the university's state budget by 41 percent. The first-term governor had campaigned on a promise of increasing the annual payout that Alaskans receive from an oil-and-gas-revenue fund, which could be done only by slashing spending statewide. He eventually [agreed to reduce \(https://www.chronicle.com/article/Amid-Backlash-Alaska-Governor/246951\)](https://www.chronicle.com/article/Amid-Backlash-Alaska-Governor/246951) the higher-education cuts to \$70 million over three years instead of \$135 million over one year, but an undercurrent of anxiety remained across the state system as the fall semester began.



The U. of Alaska Southeast serves a diverse population including students from the Tlingit tribe. The state has proposed consolidating Southeast with the system's other two universities. *(Ian Perez for The Chronicle)*

That's because a major restructuring proposal, fast-tracked when the budget situation seemed most severe and slowed down only slightly since then, threatens the autonomy of campuses that have evolved to meet regional needs. The plan, favored by legislators, the governor, and the university system's president, would consolidate three separately accredited universities into one university with branch campuses.

Pushback on the proposal from students, employees, alumni, and business leaders has been so intense that on Friday, September 13, the regents, for the first time, agreed to consider options other than consolidating into a single university. They authorized (<https://go.boarddocs.com/ak/alaska/Board.nsf/goto?open&id=BFEQX46B60CE>) the system's president, James R. Johnsen, to work with the three chancellors to create 13 inter-university teams that will review academic offerings "to determine how best to integrate, reduce, or discontinue units and programs."

Their report is due to the regents in November, with some flexibility for programs that need extra time. Regents then will face a December 1 deadline for reporting to the Legislature.

The consolidation plan is being closely watched by policy makers and university officials in the lower 48 states who are grappling with some of the same pressures, if on a smaller scale: dropping enrollments, shrinking state support, low graduation rates, and public skepticism about the value of a college degree.

In the face of such pressures, some states, including Maine, Montana, Georgia, and Connecticut, have merged public-university campuses. But the hoped-for savings haven't always materialized, and new challenges have emerged.

The overhaul being considered in Alaska represents an extreme version of the consolidations that have been tried in other states. And as the university system is pushed to embrace its own reorganization quickly, a familiar question arises: Can a system really consolidate without watering down the distinct values of its campuses?

The budget compromise itself offered a sign of just how dire Alaska's situation had become: A cut of \$70 million over three years was suddenly being spun as a win. Some of the governor's critics have suggested that Dunleavy intentionally created a budget crisis with an unrealistically large cut so that he could later save the day by restoring some of the money. Comparisons were made to a fireman who torches a house, then returns to put out the blaze. Others say the governor simply underestimated the extent of the backlash.

Lyle James, whose Tlingit name is Xeetli.eesh, leads the Woosh.ji.een Dance Group in welcoming new students to the U. of Alaska Southeast. If Southeast becomes a branch campus, it could lose students and revenue. *(Ian Perez for The Chronicle)*

Regardless, the cuts set in motion a plan that could have far-reaching consequences for the state.

“No university system that I know of has attempted to put in place as significant a change as they're contemplating in Alaska this quickly,” said Terry W. Hartle, senior vice president for government and public affairs for the American Council on Education. “This is terra incognita.”

Arguing that desperate times call for such desperate measures, Alaska's Board of Regents moved ahead last month with a plan that had been agonized over — and rejected — more than once. In addition to cutting administrative costs, early plans called for a single

college for each major field, which would serve the entire state with a common curriculum, calendar, and applications. Courses discontinued on one campus could be taken online from others.

It's unclear when the regents will vote on whether to move ahead with the single-university model, but last week they emphasized that they need to act fast.

“When you take into account the loss of tuition and research dollars, it’s not clear that there will be any savings from the plan put forward.”

When Dunleavy scaled back the scope of cuts, “the level of urgency moved from a capital U to a small-case u,” Johnsen said. Despite the governor’s willingness now to consider other options, Johnsen has maintained that moving to a single accredited university would streamline and strengthen the university. The current structure, the president said, “seems like a whole lot of bureaucracy” for fewer than 27,000 students.

When oil was booming, he said, “we grew and grew and grew” to 16 campuses statewide. As oil prices, state support, and enrollments steadily declined, the average student-to-faculty ratio dropped to about 11:1, compared with 18:1 or 20:1 among Alaska’s peers, Johnsen noted.

“We have to adapt, and we’re going to have to make those hard decisions about what we keep what’s core to us and what we shed in order to thrive in a different environment,” he said.

Critics of the one-university plan see disaster looming. Here’s the nightmare vision: Campuses with no identities. Students, underwhelmed by the prospect of online learning, driven from the state. Demoralized researchers leaving, too. Even accreditation in peril. And all this for minimal savings. Or none at all.

“When you take into account the loss of tuition and research dollars, it’s not clear that there will be any savings from the plan put forward,” said Max Kullberg, an assistant professor in a program on the Anchorage campus that provides medical education (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/Growing-Country-Doctors/10605>) to students in Alaska and four other sparsely populated states.

The U. of Alaska at Fairbanks attracts scientists willing to brave the cold to attend an institution renowned for Arctic research. Some fear that the system's flagship could lose its Carnegie classification under the proposed restructuring. (UAF photo by Todd Paris)

Perhaps most troubling to many critics is the potential loss of regional identity if the system consolidates into a lead campus — almost certainly at Fairbanks, where the flagship and system's administration are located. Anchorage has twice as many students as Fairbanks, and many there chafe at the idea of being subsumed by the northern campus.

“A shotgun wedding of diverse institutions is wrenching and traumatic,” said Paul E. Dunscomb, chair of the history department at Anchorage. The current system represents “45 years of institutional evolution that you can't just sweep away.”

Moving to a common course schedule could make it difficult for the overwhelming majority of Anchorage students who work and commute to campus to continue, Dunscomb said. Classes that are scheduled two days a week to accommodate commuter students might not line up with those offered at the mostly residential Fairbanks campus, he said.

When the regents voted to ask Johnsen to move ahead with the single-university plan, they effectively shut down discussion about a consortium option, which the chancellors had argued would better serve students, safeguard accreditation, and maintain regional ties with donors, alumni, and industry. Skeptics of that approach said that it would essentially maintain the status quo, and that there's no reason to expect the close cooperation the chancellors called for.

Students, who were away during the summer when the flurry of budget-cutting began, have complained that they weren't adequately consulted.

Sonny Ramaswamy, president of the universities' accreditor, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, wrote in an email to *The Chronicle* that he had advised the administration not to rush the decision: It should “take the time and bring all the disparate constituents into the conversation to create a shared purpose and path forward based on data and evidence, analysis of the pros and cons of decisions, cost/benefit analyses of the different models, and identification and examination of other intended and unintended consequences.”

The university moved ahead on that front with surveys, public hearings, and dozens of meetings across the system. They got an earful. Jorgensen, the student-body president in Anchorage, told regents that he felt physically stressed by the speed of the proposed changes, and that students believed the one-university model was “being shoved down our throats.”

“We heard from students wondering what was going on, and it’s hard to give a response when you don’t know.”

Keon O’Brien, a music major who had planned to remain in Alaska to become a public-school teacher, said he was considering transferring out of state because of the budget cuts that have already hit his department. His classmates, he told regents, are future physicians and engineers who “would not hesitate to leave the state if it comes down to it.”

“If they leave,” he added, “they won’t come back.”

Over the coming weeks, the state’s higher-education policy makers will very likely be studying the experiences of other states. Consolidating campuses has gained popularity across the country in recent years as university systems try to rein in spending, mostly by combining services like admissions, financial aid, and information technology.

The downside of such consolidations, Hartle said, is typically “reduced educational offerings and services to students.”

 Joshua Corbett/The New York Times

Why Alaska’s Pressures Are Familiar

A number of factors facing Alaskans are resonating in other states, particularly in those with large land masses and dwindling populations.

Falling enrollments and shrinking state budgets. In Alaska, dependent on revenues from oil and gas, plummeting prices since 2015 have led to repeated budget cuts. At the university system, enrollments have slumped by about 20 percent over the past five years.

Residents who are skeptical about the value of a college degree. Many of them are also reluctant to take on debt to get one. In Alaska, well-paying jobs in fields such as mining and fishing haven't always required a diploma, one reason the state has the lowest college-going rate in the country.

Republican governors deeply critical of their state's higher-education systems. Like Gov. Michael J. Dunleavy, several Republican leaders in the state have expressed no qualms about depleting colleges' budgets to avoid raising taxes.

Concerns about bloated administrations and low rates of on-time graduation. The university's six-year graduation rate was 39 percent for Fairbanks, 25 percent for Anchorage, and 19 percent for Southeast, compared with about 60 percent for public universities nationally. University officials point out that those numbers don't capture the 59 percent of students who attend part time, and don't account for those who stagger their studies with work but eventually graduate.

One fear is that a research university like Fairbanks could see its Carnegie classification lowered, making it more difficult to attract faculty members and outside funding.

Dennis Jones, president emeritus of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (Nchems), is one of several accreditation experts who cautioned against a systemwide consolidation in a 2016 [report](https://www.alaska.edu/files/research/Accreditation/UA-1vs3-Accreditation-Review-Final-Report-15_D.Thomas.pdf) (https://www.alaska.edu/files/research/Accreditation/UA-1vs3-Accreditation-Review-Final-Report-15_D.Thomas.pdf) to the regents. It was too much of a stretch, they argued, to bring under one umbrella the missions of a research university (Fairbanks), a comprehensive metropolitan and largely commuter institution (Anchorage), and a regional, teaching-focused institution (Juneau). Anchorage and Juneau are open-access; Fairbanks is not.

"Alaska is in many ways, or could be, the canary in the coal mine," Jones said in an interview last month with *The Chronicle*. If the state succeeds in delivering services to all corners of the state under extreme budget and political pressures, "it will provide lessons for a lot of states," he added.

Recent mergers (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/Why-College-Mergers-Need-to-Be/243271>) in the lower 48 hint at the challenges Alaska might face if it moves ahead with its own fast-tracked version of consolidation. Maine, another state with a lot of land and few people, has aggressively pursued university consolidation (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/How-Maine-Became-a-Laboratory/242621?cid=rclink>), merging back-office operations at the system level. Academic programs have proved harder to consolidate under its “One University” plan, in part because of turf battles over which programs get to stay.

On Monday, Dannel P. Malloy, the Maine system’s new chancellor, presented trustees with a proposal to shift from seven separately accredited campuses to a single statewide accreditation for the university system. As governor of Connecticut, he oversaw a consolidation (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/How-Maine-s-New-Chancellor/246425>) that brought together the state-university system with community colleges and an online college under a new Board of Regents. The rollout was rocky, with faculty members decrying what they saw as a diminishment of their campus’s identities and opportunities for students.

“In Alaska they have to make commitments to change on the academic side which are much more far-reaching than Maine has done, and do so in about a tenth of the time,” said Aims C. McGuinness Jr., a senior fellow at Nchems and a former aide to the first chancellor of the Maine system.

Asked what lessons Alaska might learn from the experiences in Maine and Connecticut, he suggested zeroing in on a few program consolidations with the best potential to cut costs. The Alaska system should also get explicit assurances that the accreditations of its individual universities will be safeguarded during the change to a single-accreditation model, he said.

Georgia was seeking greater efficiency and services to students when it merged (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/Georgia-s-Mergers-Offer/240390>) 14 campuses into seven starting in 2011. It found, though, that the mergers didn’t save much money — the campuses still needed most of their professors, mid- and lower-level administrators, and service-staff members. For institutions with different missions and cultures, the merger also created challenges. Those included the costs of meeting new accreditation

requirements and the difficulties of blending academic programs. For instance, when Southern Polytechnic merged with Kennesaw State, it combined duplicate programs, like math, with different curricula and standards.

Arizona State University has five campuses under a single accreditation (<https://www.hlcommission.org/component/registry/?Itemid=&Action=ShowBasic&instid=1002>), but they are close enough that switching from one to another isn't as difficult as it would be in a state like Alaska, said Mildred Garcia, president of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. And Arizona State is one of three public universities in the state, not the only one.

In Alaska, programs across the system's 16 campuses and centers are deeply tailored to regional needs, said Cachet Garrett, the regents' student representative. Each of the universities, she said, "has done a marvelous job of embedding themselves into their local communities."

During a recent visit to the Juneau campus, she visited a fisheries lab where researchers are studying how Northern spot shrimp are affected by rising ocean temperatures and carbon-dioxide concentrations. It's an example of how a campus took a topic — climate change — that's of crucial importance systemwide as a regional challenge.

Glaciers visible from the panoramic windows of a campus dining hall in Juneau are noticeably shrinking. In Anchorage, smoke from nearby forest fires, spurred by an uncharacteristically dry and hot summer (<https://www.cnn.com/2019/09/09/weather/alaska-climate-crisis-summer-weir-wxc/index.html>), cleared just in time for student orientation. Both are obvious reminders, Garrett said, of how important climate science — especially prominent on the Fairbanks campus — is to the entire state. Regents rejected Dunleavy's proposal that state support for any research be zeroed out, but questions remain about how the system's research mission will survive year after year of budget cuts.

Despite assurances that classes will be available online, some students are also worried about how they'll continue their studies if their majors are cut midstream. "The concern I've heard is, 'If I'm taking courses in Anchorage and it offers a full program that gets collapsed into a program in Fairbanks, will I have to move to Fairbanks?'" Garrett said.

She knows as well as anyone how difficult it is to move from one campus to another. She got her first exposure to the university system at age 5, when her mother would occasionally bring her to classes at Matanuska–Susitna College, her hometown satellite of the University of Alaska at Anchorage. She earned her undergraduate degree from the Juneau campus and is now working on a master’s degree in Arctic and Northern studies at Fairbanks.

Like Garrett, Erin Johnston grew up in south-central Alaska. Her high school, in Willow, had a graduating class of 25. Wearing a pink puffy vest and fleece headband in the drizzly chill, she said she liked the small-town feel of the Juneau campus and couldn’t see herself in Anchorage (too big) or Fairbanks (too cold).

When she learned that her \$2,000 Alaska Performance Scholarship had fallen victim to the state’s budget chaos, she began looking at alternatives (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/Everybody-Is-Panicking-/246703>). “I had worked so hard during high school to get that scholarship, and then it was gone,” she said. It took nearly a month for recipients to learn that the scholarship had been restored.

“I guess we lost more students as a result of the failure to fund the Alaska Performance Scholarship than anything else,” said Eric W. Scott, dean of students and campus life at Juneau.

That month or so of uncertainty was, for them, a month of considering other options. “We heard from students wondering what was going on, and it’s hard to give a response when you don’t know,” Scott said. “We’ve been reassuring students that if you come for a program, there’s going to be a pathway” to complete it.

The university has reciprocal tuition agreements with neighboring states, including Washington.

“That flight to Seattle and that flight to Anchorage is not that different,” he said. “If UAS [the Southeast university] is not an option anymore, the question is, what plane do you get on?”

The U. of Alaska Southeast is the smallest of the Alaska system’s three universities, and also the most remote: The only way to get from the main campus, in Juneau, to the rest of Alaska or North America is by plane or boat. Here, new students explore their campus. (*Ian Perez for The Chronicle*)

Faculty and staff members, meanwhile, were feeling devalued by the state, and morale took a beating. When Moody's Investors Service lowered the university's credit rating, it was an indication, Scott said, of the "broad fear both within the university and outside that the university will have a diminished presence and lower quality as a result of ongoing cuts. But I do think the University of Alaska is a special place and UAS is an incredible place that will focus on students with a steely resolve in the face of any adversity."

Similar anxieties were playing out on the Anchorage campus. Kenadi Brown, the freshman gymnast, said she felt "lost and confused" when she learned over the summer about the budget cuts. Although the future of athletics at the university is uncertain, she was relieved to learn that at least for this academic year, she'll be able to compete.

Al Asuncion, a junior and resident adviser at Anchorage, is a first-generation college student who was born in the Philippines and grew up in Kodiak, Alaska. The son of cannery workers, he had mapped out his career while in high school, using Excel spreadsheets to calculate how'd he pay for his education.

When the budget cuts were announced, he worried that he might have to drop out. His scholarships came through, but he suggests that his advisees keep their study plans flexible in case needed courses disappear.

Cathy Sandeen, chancellor at Anchorage, said that with the budget uncertainty, many students, including athletes, were taking a wait-and-see approach before enrolling this fall. "The longer students stop out, the harder it is to re-enroll them," she said.

In the coming weeks, she said, "the faculty and staff are going to double down in our support and enthusiasm" for students to try to dispel any apprehensions they might have.

For Sandeen at the semester kickoff celebration at Anchorage, that included sitting in the dunking booth, green floaties on her arms, leading students in a "UAA!" chant before gamely going under when a student hit the target.



Cathy Sandeen

@CathySandeen

Replying to @CathySandeen

My first dunk was a success! More photos and video to come.



18 7:30 PM - Aug 24, 2019

[See Cathy Sandeen's other Tweets](#)

The crowd erupted in a cheer when she emerged, soaking but smiling.