

# ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

## LEGISLATIVE BUDGET AND AUDIT COMMITTEE

Division of Legislative Audit



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May 29, 2009

Members of the Legislative Budget  
and Audit Committee:

In accordance with the provisions of Title 24 of the Alaska Statutes, the attached report is submitted for your review.

### UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA UNIT COST ANALYSIS AND OTHER SELECTED ISSUES PART 3

January 16, 2009

Audit Control Number  
45-30033C-09

In the third phase of the University of Alaska (UA) Unit Cost Analysis audit, the focus of review was distance education (DE) delivery and technologies to: (1) analyze the current use of DE services being utilized by UA; (2) determine if available technologies are being used to the maximum extent possible, and (3) if available technologies are not being used to the maximum extent possible, determine how additional education services can be delivered with aggressive use of technology in a cost effective manner.

Generally accepted government audit standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. Because of a federal law making student information confidential, portions of our audit were not conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Fieldwork procedures utilized in the course of developing the findings and discussion presented in this report and the effect of the scope limitation are discussed in the Objectives, Scope, and Methodology.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Pat Davidson".

Pat Davidson, CPA  
Legislative Auditor



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## OBJECTIVES, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

In accordance with Title 24 of the Alaska Statutes and a special request by the Legislative Budget and Audit Committee, we conducted a performance audit of the University of Alaska (UA) use of distance education (DE) delivery and technologies.

### Objectives

The three audit objectives being addressed in this report are:

1. Analyze the current use of DE services being utilized by UA.
2. Determine if available technologies are being used to the maximum extent possible.
3. If available technologies are not being used to the maximum extent possible, determine how additional education services can be delivered with aggressive use of technology in a cost effective manner.

Additional objectives in the special request were addressed in prior audit reports. *University of Alaska, Unit Cost Analysis and Other Selected Issues, Part 1*, issued in November 2005, presented the unit cost analysis and addressed other issues regarding housing and prior audit findings and recommendation. *Part 2*, issued in April 2006, addressed whether travel by UA faculty and staff was arranged and conducted in a cost-effective manner.

### Scope and Methodology

For the scope of this audit, distance education was generally identified as those courses taught which utilized technologies to a substantial extent. Specifically, distance education courses were those identified on UA's management information system as delivered primarily by a technology where students can participate away from a traditional classroom environment. The review covered the period from 1999 through academic year 2008, however, the focus was primarily on the distance education activity for academic years 2005 through 2008.

Our scope was limited by a federal law which made student records confidential. The specific law was the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)<sup>1</sup> of 2005. As a result of the federal confidentiality of student data we were unable to have access to the detail information that would have allowed us to verify the DE activity data provided by UA. Because we could not independently verify the all the information provided by UA's portions of our audit work do not meet the *Government Auditing Standards*.

Various numerical information regarding DE students, faculty, and courses presented in this report has been provided by the University of Alaska, Institutional Research. Because of FERPA we have been unable to independently verify this information, however, nothing came to our attention during the other portions of the audit that would indicate the

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<sup>1</sup> 20 U.S.C. §1232g

information provided was materially inaccurate. We have presented this information to assist in providing a perspective on the significance and potential impact of the findings and conclusions contained in this report. Since this information has not been subject to normal audit procedures we have labeled it as *information provided by the University*.

Because of FERPA, we were prevented access to significant evidence regarding the status of distance education. In an attempt to offset this limitation, we expanded the number of staff interviewed throughout the UA system. To gain an understanding of the various technologies utilized in DE delivery, the types of courses offered, locations of faculty and students, and identify the kinds of student support services offered, we relied extensively on the following:

- Reviewed and analyzed UA developed reports over DE, student, faculty, and management issues.
- Reviewed and analyzed the strategic plans of the Board of Regents and each MAU.
- Identified and analyzed several academic programs which were primarily delivered through use of DE technology.
- Identified and reviewed meeting minutes and other documentation generated by various committees tasked with developing and resolving DE delivery issues.
- We interviewed the following groups:
  - Each MAU provost, registrar and chief information officer.
  - The health distance education program managers, the Associate Vice President of UA health programs, as well as other health program staff located on rural campuses. Also we reviewed documentation evaluating the first and second years of program implementation.
  - Each rural campus student registration assistance staff, IT staff, as well as some campus Directors.
  - Various faculty and deans throughout the system regarding use of and/or progress towards increased use of DE technologies.
  - All members of the electronic technology team.
  - The Vice President of Academic Affairs, Chief Information Technology Officer, Associate Vice President of Student Affairs, the Director of Distance Education, and the Director of Institutional Research over various aspects of DE issues.
  - The vice chancellor, director and instructional designers of the Center for Distance Education located within the College of Rural Development at UAF.
  - The director of the Alaska Distance Education Consortium and reviewed their charter and meeting minutes for 2005-2007.
- We obtained and analyzed various course data provided by UA Institutional Research.

- We observed and examined course information on the Banner system from a test region provided by the UAS registrar.
- We reviewed and analyzed each MAU's DE and information technology web pages accessible by students as well as the UA main page and distance education gateway.
- We obtained, analyzed and compared 2005 to 2007 information from the Regulatory Commission of Alaska for communication access as currently identified for all communities throughout the state.
- We obtained and analyzed the UA performance based budgeting information for 2007 and supporting documentation.
- We reviewed and analyzed DE course titles, course descriptions, and technology used for delivery based on the DE gateway information.
- We reviewed additional information regarding DE in Alaska and other states.

Additionally, with the assistance of UA staff, we conducted two surveys; one of faculty teaching DE courses and another of students taking DE courses. Due to FERPA limitations, we were unable to independently verify the completeness of the lists of faculty and students provided by UA. We sent out the surveys to the faculty and UA sent out the survey to the students.

Further details of each survey are as follows:

#### Faculty

The University provided a listing of all faculty members (513) who taught at least one DE course in AY 07. Fifty nine faculty members did not have an active and valid email address and, therefore, were excluded from our faculty survey. The remaining 454 faculty members were sent a survey of which 214 (or 47%) responded. The survey was conducted electronically and controlled through a secure website monitored by the Legislative Audit Division.

#### Student

Due to FERPA limitations, the University performed the mechanics of issuing a survey to DE students. The University identified 13,521 students who took at least one DE course in AY 07. The survey was conducted electronically using a secure website established by the Legislative Audit Division. UA issued an email containing a web-link to the survey to a non-statistical sample of 3,799 DE students. Five hundred and nineteen students responded to the survey providing a response rate of approximately 14%.

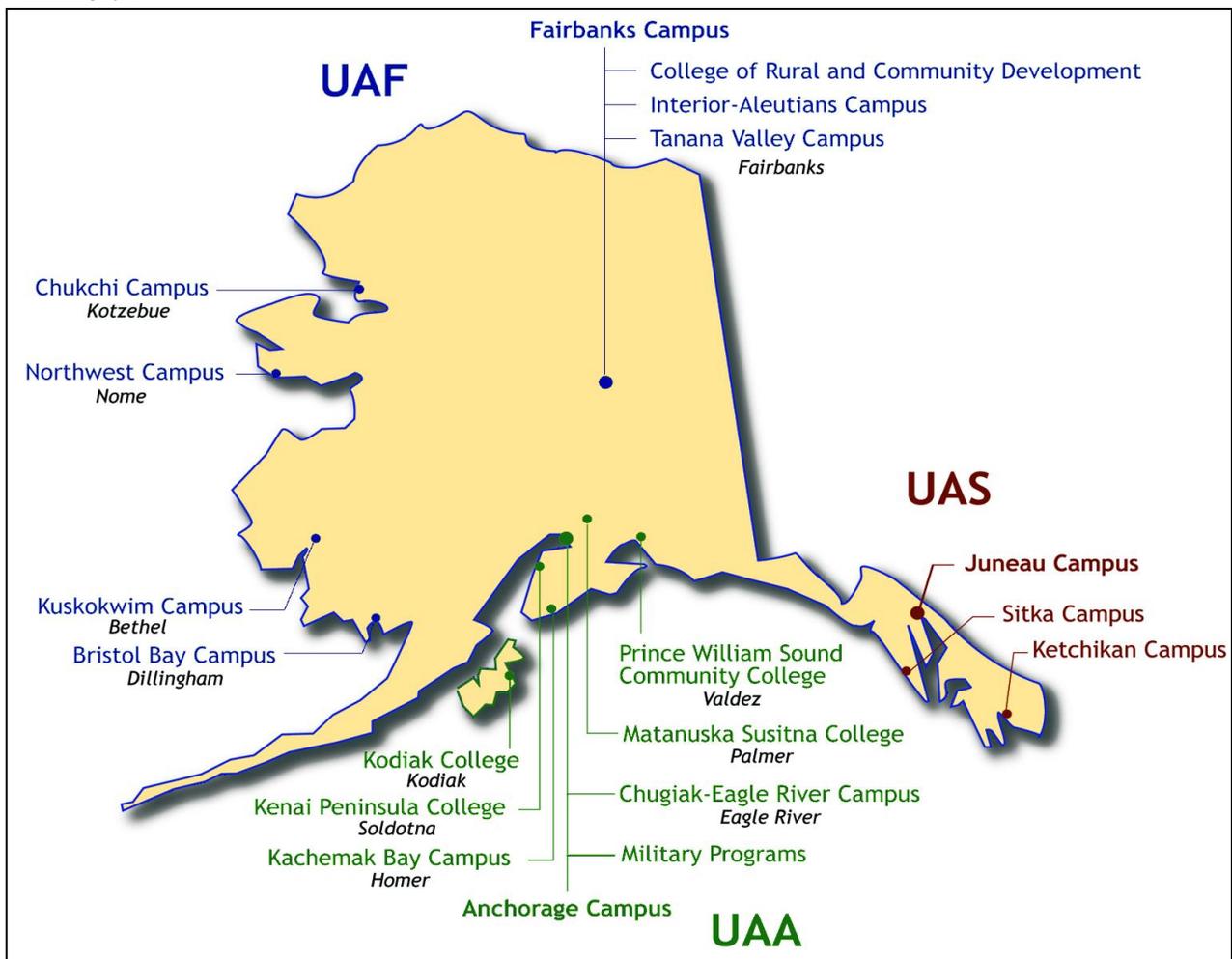
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# ORGANIZATION AND FUNCTION

The University of Alaska (UA) was established by the Alaska Constitution, Article VII, Section 2, and by AS 14.40 as the state university. The Board of Regents, appointed by the governor, and confirmed by the legislature, serves as the governing body.

The University of Alaska (UA) System is composed of several major units: the system office (Statewide), and three separately accredited regional institutions: University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF), University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA), and University of Alaska Southeast (UAS). Each institution is led by a chancellor who reports to the president, who in turn, reports to the Board of Regents. Statewide administrators and executives reporting to the president include the offices of information technology (IT), general counsel, academic affairs, university relations, finance and administrations, and human resources. While the statewide office does not deliver any academic degrees or certificates, it provides internal coordination and services to the campuses that are not typically replicated at the campus level.

Exhibit 1



Map used with the permission of the University of Alaska

The map on the previous page shows the three main administrative units (MAUs), the colleges and community campus locations which report to the main campuses of Fairbanks<sup>2</sup>, Anchorage and Juneau.

In 1986, community colleges and rural campuses were merged into the UA system. The MAUs assumed responsibility for the educational missions of the merged colleges and campuses. Many of the rural campuses support multiple communities and villages which are geographically located near them.

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<sup>2</sup> Not shown on the map is the Interior-Aleutians rural centers located in Fort Yukon; Galena, McGrath, Tok and Unalaska which are administered through the Fairbanks campus.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Under University of Alaska's (UA's) current organizational structure, distance education (DE) processes and issues are developed, implemented, and supported by each MAU. System-wide processes and student support services for DE are minimal.

University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) Independent Learning Program<sup>3</sup> is the oldest DE delivery at UA and has offered correspondence courses for more than 40 years. During the 1980's, emerging technologies were adapted to DE delivery. Meanwhile, the other UA campuses, University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA), and University of Alaska Southeast (UAS) began developing various DE courses.<sup>4</sup> Now, well over 1,500<sup>5</sup> DE delivered courses are available system-wide. Course offerings vary from those necessary for gaining a degree or certification, to others for self-improvement

### Distance Education Defined

A traditional view of DE in Alaska has predominantly been based on technologies bridging rural students' isolation from the urban campuses. As more communication technologies are utilized in course delivery, students in any locale now have greater opportunities to manage their instructional time. Generally, DE can be defined as follows:

*Distance education is planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, special methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements.*<sup>6</sup>

With advancing internet communication technology, the strict concept of DE, due to geography or time, is blurring. Both urban and rural based students can participate in DE courses offered across the UA system. Within this context, DE courses are those where substantial<sup>7</sup> use of one or more technologies occurs in course content delivery. The types of DE technologies used encompass a variety of delivery methods including; audio conference by telephone, electronic mail (e-mail), faxing, room-based video conference<sup>8</sup>, desktop video conference, and the World Wide Web.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Independent Learning Program is now called the Center for Distance Education.

<sup>4</sup> The Board of Regents has traditionally supported the differing missions and distinct focus of each MAU.

<sup>5</sup> Information provided by the University of Alaska.

<sup>6</sup> Moore, M.G. & Kearsley, G. (1996). *Distance education: A systems view*. Washington: Wadsworth Publishing

<sup>7</sup> Substantial use was determined to be courses identified on UA's management information system as delivered primarily by a technology where students can participate away from a traditional classroom environment.

<sup>8</sup> Room based video requires students to participate at a designated location, such as the Nome campus, due to availability of video transmission equipment. It is also referred to as interactive television.

<sup>9</sup> Other technology available includes pre-recorded media and correspondence for course delivery.

One in four UA students took at least one DE course during academic year 2007.

Approximately 26%<sup>10</sup> of all students at UA during academic year<sup>11</sup> (AY) 2007 took at least one DE course.<sup>12</sup> This suggests DE is not just an opportunity for rural students, but urban as well. (See Exhibit 2<sup>13</sup> at right.)

From AY 05 to AY 07 system-wide enrollment in DE courses increased from 63,710 credit hours earned to 70,944.<sup>14</sup> Assuming an average course is worth 3 credit hours, the increase approximated 2,411 more courses taken in AY 07 compared to AY 05. Of this increase, about 75% occurred at UAA. (See Exhibit 3<sup>15</sup> at right.)

Students take DE courses for time and convenience.

Time and convenience were the two main reasons cited in a survey of students who took at least one DE course during AY 07.

In addition, 27%<sup>16</sup> indicated they had no alternative as some or all of their courses were DE delivered.

DE delivery is still more challenging for rural based students than their urban counterparts.

Rural students are more likely than their urban counterparts to have challenges with communication access.<sup>17</sup> The typical DE course communication access includes: video, telephone, and internet. Inadequate communication

Exhibit 2

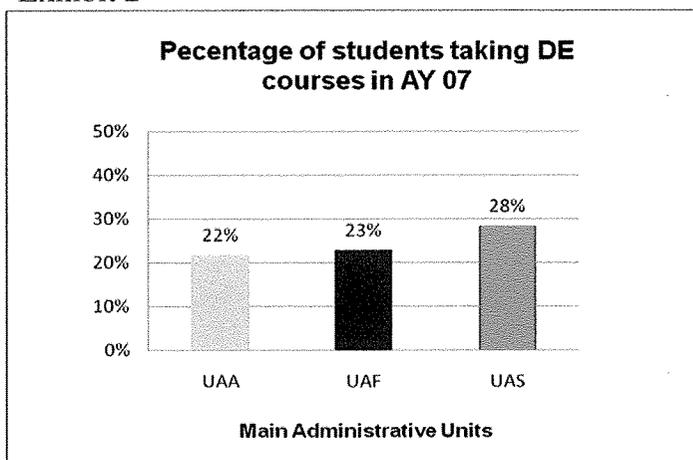
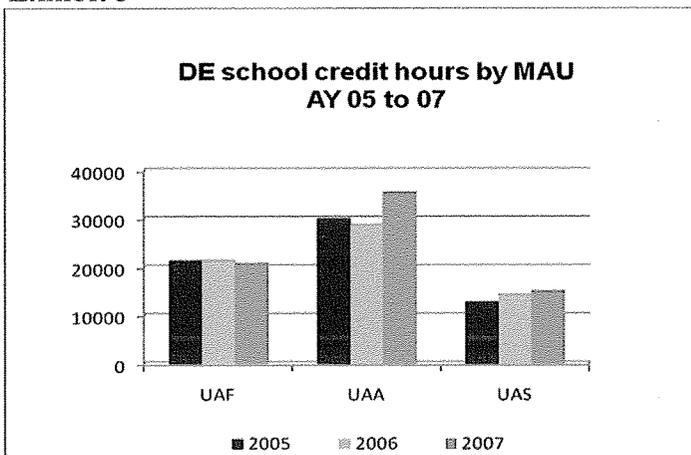


Exhibit 3



<sup>10</sup> According to the University of Alaska, there were approximately 13,520 DE students out of the total UA student population (52,000) during AY 07.

<sup>11</sup> AY 07 includes summer and fall courses delivered in 2006 and spring 2007.

<sup>12</sup> According to the University of Alaska, approximately 4,300 students were not associated with an MAU in AY 07. Of these 58% (2480) took DE courses.

<sup>13</sup> Information for Exhibit 2 was provided by the University of Alaska

<sup>14</sup> Information provided by the University of Alaska.

<sup>15</sup> Information provided by the University of Alaska.

<sup>16</sup> One hundred and twenty nine (129) of 478 student respondents.

<sup>17</sup> Internet communication connection issues range from local dial up only, to low bandwidth. Other connectivity can be telephone and satellite video access. Off the road system locations rely on satellite and relay systems which can function poorly or not at all due to adverse weather conditions or insufficient reception equipment. Connectivity

access still exists for many rural locations; therefore, rural students often must use UA facilities to participate in DE. Rural based UA staff indicated even though access challenges exist, rural communities benefit when students remain close to home when taking courses.

- Some improvements in online access to technology have occurred but remain an issue for many rural communities across the State.

According to Regulatory Commission of Alaska’s (RCA) data, there has been a slight increase in communication access in rural locations. However, not all rural areas of the State have the same quality of internet access. For example, Kotzebue has broadband internet where other rural communities only have dial-up access. This disparity in communication and internet accessibility, which affects UA students, is described as the digital divide<sup>18</sup> between rural and urban areas of the state. Although improvements in access to technology have occurred in the past few years, based on RCA information, access issues still exist for many non-urban communities.

Primarily, UA has dealt with poor or limited internet access in the rural areas by delivering many DE courses via audio-conference and written correspondence. The majority of these are offered through the Center for Distance Education (CDE) at UAF.

Exhibit 4

| <b><u>Type of Distance Delivery in AY 07 by MAU</u></b>      | <b><u>UAF</u></b> | <b><u>UAA</u></b> | <b><u>UAS</u></b> | <b><u>Total</u></b> |
|--|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| <b><u>Number of Courses Delivered</u></b>                    |                   |                   |                   |                     |
| Audio Conference   | 240               | 60                | 119               | 419                 |
| Web  | 51                | 331               | 223               | 605                 |
| Video Conference/Satellite                                   | 4                 | 113               | 19                | 136                 |
| Multi-media  | 38                | 118               | 2                 | 158                 |
| Other  | 22                | 63                | 28                | 350                 |
| <b><u>Number of Participants</u></b>                         |                   |                   |                   |                     |
| (Correspondence is tracked only by participants not courses) |                   |                   |                   |                     |
| Correspondence - Web   | 349               | 0                 | 1                 | 350                 |
| Correspondence – Mail  | 443               | 0                 | 1                 | 444                 |

As shown on Exhibit 4<sup>19</sup> above the most significant type of technology used was audio conference or web based.

improvements are also affected by the size of the community served and their ability to afford the costs of communication access.

<sup>18</sup> Digital divide for UA students is where some have complete accessibility and others can only partially participate due to limited broadband access to course tools and materials.

<sup>19</sup> Information was provided by the University of Alaska.

- Rural communities use UA facilities in support of DE.

Participation by rural DE students often times requires access to campus facilities. This may not necessarily be the case for urban-based students taking DE courses. However, in many areas of rural Alaska the ability to access quality<sup>20</sup> internet and communication services are not available at a student's residence.

UA facilities are available for students in 15 rural<sup>21</sup> communities. These rural campuses offer students face-to-face courses, serve as a hosting campus, and provide student support when students take DE courses delivered by other campuses. Student support services offered range from computer labs, classrooms for video and audio courses, library services, proctoring of exams and staff, to assisting students with use of newer technology.

- Distance education offers opportunities for rural students and their communities.

Distance education provides opportunities for both students and communities in rural locations. Staff at rural campuses indicated some place bound<sup>22</sup> rural students could only pursue post secondary education opportunities through DE courses.

In addition, UA staff said rural communities benefit most from DE offerings when they retain their residents, instead of losing them to urban areas. In April 2006, the Chukchi Campus director addressed the Board of Regents on the importance of DE to rural Alaska. According to the director, "*the quality of our villages is really dependent on the education that we can deliver.*"<sup>23</sup>

Despite technical problems and difficulties experienced, both students and faculty will continue to participate in DE courses.

A survey of both faculty and students identified they had encountered difficulties during DE course delivery. Even with the problems encountered, both faculty (81% of respondents) and students (94% of respondents) overwhelmingly indicated they would participate in DE courses in the future.

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<sup>20</sup> It is bandwidth that plays a significant role in the quality of internet and communications services. For example, in a rural location a student's access is only limited by the amount of bandwidth. This means if a course is delivered in large amounts of data transmitted, and the student has low bandwidth or dial-up, the quality of their data reception will be poor. *The bandwidth of a connection is the width of it or the amount of data that can fit through it. To use an analogy, more cars can travel a ten-lane road than a five-lane road. Bandwidth is expressed in bits per second (bps). This indicates the number of bits of information that can fit down the line for a second.* <http://www.broadbandforjoe.com/broadband>.

<sup>21</sup> Rural campus facilities are those considered positioned in remote locations from their MAU. For purposes of this report remote campuses do not include the following: Tanana Valley campus, College of rural and community development, Chugiak-Eagle River campus, Military programs, and Mat-Su College.

<sup>22</sup> Students are referred to as "place bound" when due to subsistence lifestyle or family reasons they cannot leave their village for the duration of a school semester.

<sup>23</sup> *Regents' Recap: Highlights of the UA Board of Regents' Meeting, April 2006*

Each MAU has developed its own approach to DE delivery.

Overtime, each MAU has developed its own policies, procedures, and technologies used in conjunction with DE course delivery. Information Technology (IT) staff across the UA system indicated they discuss the use of new DE technologies. However, the development and use at each MAU tends to be unique in approach. Some of the differences in policies, procedures and technologies are compared in Exhibit 5 for UAA, UAF and UAS.

Exhibit 5

|   | <u>UAA</u>                  | <u>UAF</u>                          | <u>UAS</u>                             |
|---|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| Blackboard Version used <sup>24</sup>   | 6.3                         | 6.3                                 | 6.0                                    |
| Faculty permitted to purchase and install alternate software and hardware for DE courses. | Yes                         | Yes                                 | No <sup>25</sup>                       |
| Number of student sign-ons to access DE course materials and MAU support applications.    | Multiple                    | Multiple                            | Single                                 |
| Help Desk Hours   | 6am-12am M-F<br>8am-5pm S-S | 7:30am-9:30pm M-F<br>10am - 6pm S-S | 7:30am-8pm M-Th,<br>8-5pm F, 1-5pm S-S |

Generally, DE students crossing MAUs must independently figure out how to navigate through the UA system to access and participate in courses. This situation was identified in a 1999 UA report<sup>26</sup> that stated:

*As a result, students registered in courses at the three universities [MAUs] experience differing academic, administrative, and technical practices. In some cases, these practices differ within the same university [MAU] so that, for example, students in courses originating from Sitka encounter practices different from those originating from Juneau<sup>27</sup>. The result is confusion and aggravation for students, faculty, and staff alike.*

While UAS has resolved several of these issues, for the most part, this condition still exists at the other MAUs and continues to create difficulties for students registering for courses at different MAU locations.

<sup>24</sup> The versions identified were in use as of August of 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Faculty may make purchases; however, only IT staff is permitted to install system technology at UAS.

<sup>26</sup> *A Systemic Approach to Distance Learning: An Assessment of Issues, Opportunities, and Strategies*, Elaine Sunde, August 1999.

<sup>27</sup> UAS has resolved many disparate processes between the three regional campuses of Juneau, Ketchikan and Sitka which were identified in this report. However, generally, this condition still exists between the three MAUs.

For example, a student associated with UAF's Northwest campus, located in Nome, enrolling in a course offered by UAA's Mat-Su College will encounter differing academic, administrative and technology practices followed by UAF and UAA.

IT staff provide training and support for faculty.

Each MAU has an IT department which includes technical staff and instructional design staff to assist faculty members with hardware, software and DE course development. In addition, the IT department provides faculty members with specialized training in DE technologies.

- Faculty develop DE courses, relying on IT to provide support when requested.

Generally, faculty take the leadership role in DE course development with IT staff providing technical support, upon request, to address hardware and software issues. For example, faculty may purchase software and hardware for use in DE delivery independent of IT staff input. Minimal best practices are available to guide faculty members in DE technology use. IT staff encourage faculty members to participate in DE technology training and use that experience to determine the types and kind of technology that will work best.

The most comprehensive training provided within the system is the annual *ITeach* courses, which have a limited number of spaces. The training approach also relies on previously taught faculty members to provide support for fellow faculty over DE technologies.

- Each MAU has differing numbers of specialized IT staff.

Each MAU offers different numbers of specialized support staff to assist faculty with DE course development. UAA has the fewest number of design staff and relies on previously trained faculty whereas; UAF has the largest number located within CDE. CDE also provides the annual *ITeach* courses for faculty system-wide. (See Exhibit 6 above for more information on *ITeach*.)

Exhibit 6

Faculty *ITeach* courses offered.

*ITeach* comprehensive training classes are available for faculty system-wide annually. Due to goals of the annual training, a limit of ten faculty members may participate. In both AY 06 and AY 07 only one *ITeach* course was offered. The purpose of *ITeach* is to immerse instructors in a week-long training to give them the knowledge and experience to develop DE courses. Participating faculty develop proficiencies which makes them a resource to their school or department in assisting colleagues developing or enhancing DE courses.

UA has systems which support DE.

UA has an information management system and a dedicated website which support DE. These provide a location for students to find DE courses and a management information system to track and report on DE. These systems are DE Gateway and Banner.

- DE Gateway

DE Gateway, developed in 2003, is currently maintained by CDE. It is the central location on UA's website to view DE courses available by semester. Most, but not all, DE courses are listed on the DE Gateway. Furthermore, the course listings on the DE Gateway provide, in varying degrees, the relevant technology information a student needs to know how to complete the course. Links are maintained on the DE Gateway to assist students with accessing the MAUs' websites for course registration and other information.

- Banner System

Banner is UA's information management system, and used by all MAUs. It is a comprehensive system which incorporates multiple functions and features for tracking students, courses, costs, and other data. For each course, a variety of information is maintained on Banner, ranging from the delivery method, to course number, department or school, and days and times of class meeting. General descriptions and additional notes about a course may also be contained on Banner.

The academic community supplies most of the course information entered into Banner. Once entered on Banner, courses identified as DE are also viewable on the DE Gateway. Banner also provides DE informational reports and statistics for various management purposes; both academic and administrative reports are available.

UA identifies solutions for system-wide DE challenges through reviews and reports.

For over a decade, UA has been concerned with emerging technologies and their affect on DE use and delivery to students. The concern over changes in teaching and learning systems has led UA to conduct, and contract for, various studies and reviews to identify the opportunities and challenges of DE delivery. The UA Committees and reports are produced as follows:

Statewide Academic Council<sup>28</sup> (SAC) (1999-2004):

- Sunde Report completed, August 1999.
- UAS 2010 Strategic Plan completed, March 2001.
- DE labor Committee Report completed, April 2002.

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<sup>28</sup> SAC is chaired by Vice President of Academic Affairs and is comprised of the Provosts at each MAU. They are responsible for policies and procedures regarding governance, decision making and research for the UA system. The Council assists the Vice President in accomplishing responsibilities as outlined in Board of Regent Policy.

- SAC Report completed, November 2002.
- UA Faculty Opinion Survey completed, July 2003.
- UA 2009 Strategic Plan completed, September 2003.
- Johnstone Report completed, June 2004.

Subsequent to the first report in 1999, SAC began developing vision and goals to advance DE. Through 2003, SAC was the responsible for UA DE initiatives. However, they were unsuccessful in moving system-wide DE initiatives forward. DE issues were moved to the purview of the Presidents' Ad Hoc Committee on Distance Education (PACDE).

PACDE (2004-2005):

- Madden Report released March 2006.

Based on recommendations in the Madden Report, the president established two committees to identify DE issues and possible resolutions. The educational technology team was directed to look at specific technology use and implementation concerns, and the distance education steering board (DESB) focused on student and academic issues.

DESB (2005 to 2006, when it was sunset):

- Communication Plan completed, March 2005.
- Course Scheduling and Sequencing completed, March 2005.
- Course Quality Assurance completed, March 2005.
- Status of DE at UA completed, July 2006.
- Campus Registrar & Director Meeting Minutes completed, September 2006.

ETT (2005 to 2008):

- Technology Support for UA Students completed, July 2006.
- Systems and approaches for enhancing faculty and campus input completed, March 2007.
- Technology definition and reporting (Banner codes) completed, June 2007.
- Distance Gateway and UA Online enhancements completed, July 2007.
- ETT Final report and Recommendation to SAC released, January 2008.

Ostensibly, the final report concluded that DE initiatives could not be implemented successfully without the guidance and input of SAC. As a result of the specific issues identified by ETT, in the spring of 2008, the Vice President of Academic Affairs recommended responsibility for DE initiatives be returned to SAC. As of August 2008, DE initiatives have been placed back under the purview of SAC.

## REPORT CONCLUSIONS

In the third phase of the University of Alaska (UA) Unit Cost Analysis, audit the focus of review was distance education (DE) delivery and technologies to: (1) analyze the current use of DE services being utilized by the UA; (2) determine if available technologies are being used to the maximum extent possible, and (3) if available technologies are not being used to the maximum extent possible, determine how additional education services can be delivered with aggressive use of technology in a cost effective manner.

While UA is organizationally a single university system, the three main administrative units<sup>29</sup> (MAUs), which make up UA, are separately accredited and function in many ways as unique universities. Therefore, almost any system-wide approach, such as DE, which moves away from regional and geographical boundaries, requires very high levels of cooperation and integration between the stakeholders<sup>30</sup> at each MAU to be successful.

With limited exceptions, or UA's implementation of DE delivery currently lacks a coordinated cohesive approach and is not student-centric.

The lack of a coordinated and cohesive approach to DE at UA is shown through: (1) insufficient IT support for faculty developing and delivering courses; (2) a limited collaboration between MAUs in supporting students taking courses from more than one campus within the UA system; (3) insufficient information provided to management and students by the management information system – Banner, and (4) a need to improve coordination between technology support and academic community for efficient and effective DE delivery. As a result, the current UA processes do not put the needs of DE students first. Previously, UA's president called for a student-centric approach. The current operations of DE at UA do not meet that directive.

- IT resources are limited for faculty support.

The IT resources available for faculty differ at each MAU, and generally have been limited. Limited resources have resulted in faculty dissatisfaction when developing courses or gaining technical assistance. Twenty one percent (21%) of DE faculty<sup>31</sup> surveyed indicated dissatisfaction with IT support and Exhibit 7, on the next page, identifies their top five reasons.

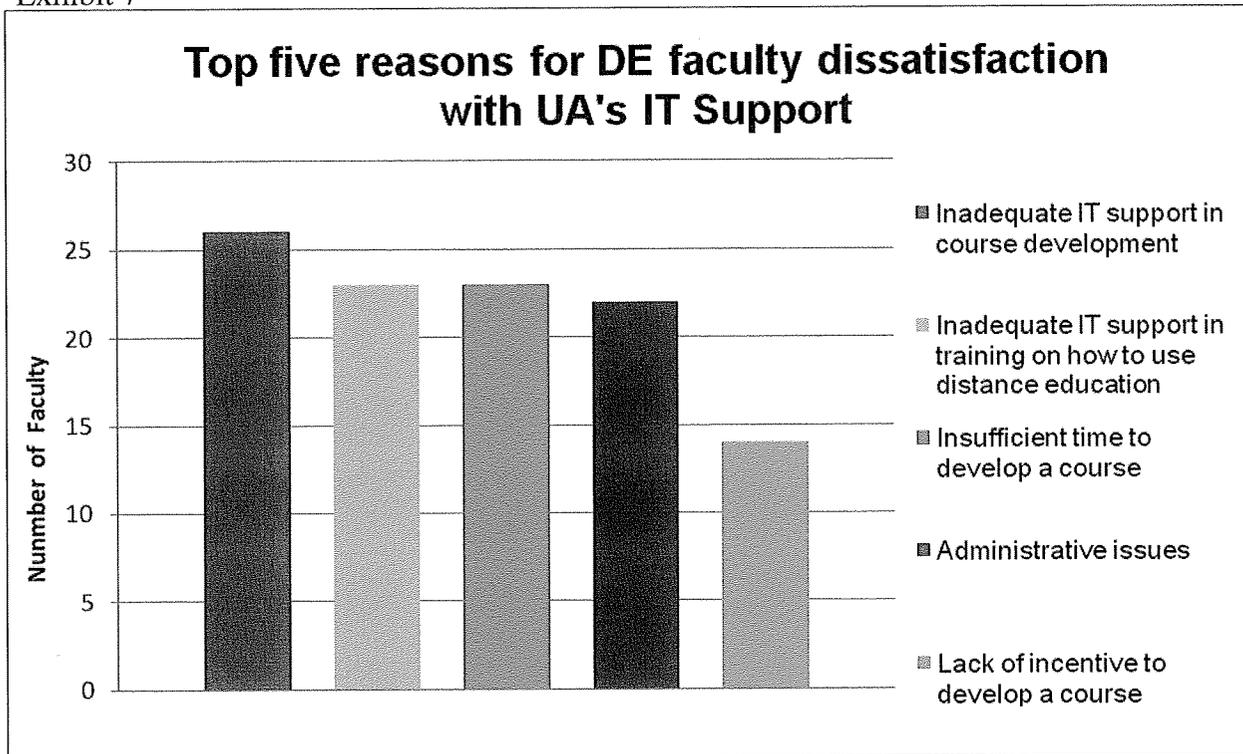
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<sup>29</sup> A fourth administrative unit, called Statewide, is generally not involved with day-to-day education delivery, therefore not considered an MAU for the purposes of this audit.

<sup>30</sup> DE stakeholders include faculty, students, IT support staff and student support service staff.

<sup>31</sup> DE faculty was identified as those who had taught at least one DE course during academic year 2007.

Exhibit 7



IT training on DE course development for faculty is limited. Generally, a training class had been offered once a year with a small number of trainee spaces available. In academic year (AY) 07, 13 faculty members completed the one annual *ITeach* course offered but 42<sup>32</sup> were turned away. In AY 08, course offerings were expanded to three annually. Thirty faculty members completed training in AY 08 with less than five turned away. These three courses were offered in different locations to help alleviate faculty travel costs. One of the three courses offered at University of Alaska Anchorage campus (UAA) was not filled to capacity. Of the seven participants, only one was a UAA faculty member and the remainder were UAF and UAS faculty traveling to participate. It is unclear why more UAA faculty did not participate in the training.

To mitigate limited resources, IT managers at each MAU rely on previously trained faculty members to assist and train other faculty. Although this practice has worked to a certain extent, the DE faculty survey indicated refresher courses and advanced courses were needed.

Additionally, the instructional design staff resources are limited for many faculty members. In AY 07, a total of 16<sup>33</sup> designers were available to support 1,934<sup>34</sup> teaching faculty members system-wide. Meanwhile, the health program had four design staff supporting 94<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Information was provided by the University of Alaska.

<sup>33</sup> There is an additional four designers who are specifically assigned to the Health Distance Education Partnership and not available to general teaching faculty at the MAUs.

<sup>34</sup> Information was provided by the University of Alaska.

<sup>35</sup> Information was provided by the University of Alaska.

faculty members during AY 07. The success of the health program (discussed on the next page) suggests the greater availability of design staff for faculty is an important factor in the success of development and support of DE programs. Comparing the ratio of designers available to faculty members for each MAU<sup>36</sup> also suggests there is a disproportionate allocation of design staff across the UA system.

Each MAU has a differing approach to supporting DE. These differing approaches and the limited number of designers, mean faculty members at each MAU may be left to seek assistance from other sources when IT cannot respond in a timely or adequate manner. Additionally, the IT managers of each MAU indicated they communicate over DE issues and share information relating to faculty support. An alternative view point was also offered stating that the differing DE preferences and practices at each MAU hamper effective and efficient use of limited system-wide staff resources.

#### Exhibit 8

##### UA Distance Health Programs Prove Successful

The health distance delivered programs (HDDP) began in 2004 with support from the Board of Regents. HDDP started as an intensive partnership effort between all three MAUs to provide support to the rapidly expanding area of health distance education. HDDP extends training opportunities throughout the state through technologies such as web-based, video conferencing, audio conferencing and blended mediums.

Concerted academic efforts and resources, including funding, were provided to ensure the success of the program. The HDDP approach to education delivery has a statewide perspective rather than through an MAU purview perspective. Because specific program goals and implementation timelines were identified, HDDP overcame existing disparate processes and procedures between the three MAUs. One factor integral to that achievement has been "student success advisors" available to students, and rural students in particular. Success advisors assist students with navigation of differing processes, procedures and resources available at the MAUs.

According to HDDP program managers, absent specific goals, timelines and funding, the program would not have accomplished as much in the same amount of time.

- Lack of incentives exists for MAUs to collaborate.

Few incentives exist for MAUs to collaborate. In fact, two Board of Regents performance based components used to measure MAU success are disincentives and create competition for acquiring DE students. These disincentives are student head count and credit hours. The greater the DE head count and earned credit hours, the greater the performance measure is scored. The higher the overall performance measure score, the more funding allocated by the Board of Regents. Furthermore, minimal MAU collaboration can negatively affect students taking DE courses.

Various UA officials received students' complaints about the difficulty in getting assistance in locating alternative DE courses, but a wide variety of UA staff indicated that DE options at other MAUs were not their concern.

<sup>36</sup> See page 24 in Recommendations for those ratios per MAU.

For example, when on campus courses at a specific MAU were filled to capacity,<sup>37</sup> students were referred to only that specific MAU's DE offerings, rather than the UA DE Gateway which contains DE courses system-wide. This situation limited UA resources made available to students, and may have unnecessarily slowed students' progress toward completing their educational goals.

- Inconsistent DE course identification and information leads to inadequate management reporting and student information.

UA's management information system (Banner) contains inconsistent and incomplete information on DE courses. For management purposes, it is difficult to completely identify all DE courses offered by UA. Also, for students' needs, DE course information regarding technology requirements is inconsistent and often insufficient. Specific types of parameters are used on Banner to identify DE courses. Additionally, Banner contains special fields which provide description and notes about a course. However, system-wide, the use of DE course parameters and information on Banner was found to be inconsistent and incomplete.

On Banner, identification of DE courses and related course information is largely generated and controlled by the academic community on a course-by-course basis. The course description content is subjective, and there are no standards for completeness. UA staff indicated course identification and information was not reviewed for specific DE consistency and completeness prior to data entry on Banner. Course coding identifiers selected and technology information provided are generally based on academic interpretation which can differ between individual faculty members, programs, schools, and MAUs. UA management's use of this information does not appear to be a consideration when Banner course parameters and information are selected. Likewise, information needed by students to be adequately prepared for a course is not always a consideration when DE course description and technology information are entered into Banner. As a result, the lack of uniformity creates confusion, inconsistencies, and inaccurate information about DE courses. This affects both managers and students.

- Management<sup>38</sup> reporting for DE is incomplete and inaccurate. Not all courses delivered through DE technologies contain established Banner identifiers. For example, an AY 07 course listing identified instructional methods for several courses as delivered by video conference, audio conference and multi-media, but was missing appropriate DE course parameters. Therefore, reports created for management use would not have included these courses. As a result, additional course sections could have been added to address DE needs that were not necessary. Also, IT support staff would not be aware additional resources may have been needed to adequately support course delivery. Inconsistent use of DE course identifiers means information is

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<sup>37</sup>There are typically several sections of general education courses offered at each MAU each semester, such as English 111. Since these are required for most any program they tend to fill up quickly.

<sup>38</sup> Management in this case includes both faculty and academic administrators who don't directly deal with students.

imprecise and managers at UA may make a different decision than they otherwise would.

- Students access DE course listings on the Gateway. The information on the Gateway is generated from the Banner system. The technology requirements and other information provided for various courses were not uniform or complete. For example, one course simply identified a course as web based, whereas another web based course listed the specific soundcards and operating systems necessary to access the course. Because of this lack of uniform and sufficient course description information, students may not know what is required to participate and therefore, are not adequately prepared to access a course.

#### Exhibit 9

##### Decisions for use of technology is driven by the academic community

The technology used in course delivery is largely up to the academic community, both the faculty member who teaches the course and the Dean who approves the course. DE IT support and course design staff can offer suggestions and best practices have been developed in some locations but the academics have the final say.

Faculty may purchase software and/or hardware, such as servers, and deliver course materials separate from the established UA systems. The extent of this practice is unknown. Therefore, when course delivery is interrupted, IT staff may not be able to identify and correct the problem timely. In addition, the security of the UA system as a whole could be compromised.

Various reasons have been given, by both faculty and IT staff spoken to, for use of individual software and hardware, such as: 1) the available software supported by the university may not meet the needs of the faculty member; 2) faculty members require use of text book specific software; 3) lack of knowledge by faculty members of technologies currently available; and 4) insufficient training and access to IT course design support staff.

Although a sub-committee of the educational technology team was tasked with developing a standardized DE definition, and corresponding Banner identifying parameters, little to no progress has been made to implement their use. Failure to move forward has been attributed, in part, to the academic community's influence over business processes at each MAU. In addition, to a lesser extent, failure of system-wide standardization has been attributed to MAUs' preference for customizing their DE business practices.

- Better coordination between academic community and technology support is needed to improve efficiency and effectiveness of DE delivery.

Coordination of efforts between the academic community and IT support staff is lacking in varying degrees at all three MAUs. As a result: (1) IT staff may not be capable of quick resolution of problems encountered in course delivery; (2) some students may be excluded from access, and (3) duplication of efforts could occur.

Generally, there are minimal protocols and standard processes for faculty members to engage with IT support<sup>39</sup> when incorporating DE technologies into courses. Therefore, IT staff can be blind to newer technologies utilized by faculty and may not be prepared to respond effectively and efficiently when problems occur.

Furthermore, it is possible for faculty to incorporate advanced technology requirements into their courses without IT staff's knowledge. The advanced technology (for example, online interactive instruction which requires high-speed internet) could exclude some students from accessing a course.

Also, the lack of coordination between faculty and IT design staff, particularly when new courses are developed, increases the likelihood that duplication of efforts are occurring.

Better communications could substantially reduce the course development learning curve and result in more efficient use of IT's limited resources. Even reliance on faculty imbeds (those who have gone through *ITeach* training) does not ensure current technologies are appropriately or effectively utilized.

- Development of different DE approaches by MAUs across UA creates challenges in navigation and access for students.

While students can and do take DE courses from more than one MAU at a time (in AY 07 11%<sup>40</sup>, (approximately 5,700), of all UA students taking courses crossed MAUs), it can be difficult and is not encouraged. Each MAU has different organizational and operational approaches to DE delivery. The result is disparate systems and processes which create challenges for student navigation and access when taking courses from more than one MAU within the UA system.

In a 2004, memo the UA President identified adoption of a student-centric approach:

*To ensure ... opportunities are made available to the largest number of students throughout the state at least cost ... it will be important for us to maximize our effective use of modern educational technology. We must also align our business processes, information technology developments, and student services in ways that are fundamentally student-centric, with a goal of enabling our students at any location, to be served the best the University has to offer, from any location.*<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> An exception is UAS where every course offered uses *UAS Online* as a significant part of course delivery. *UAS Online* bundles various software and tools into one environment for faculty use.

<sup>40</sup> Percentage was provided by the University of Alaska, UA Institutional Research.

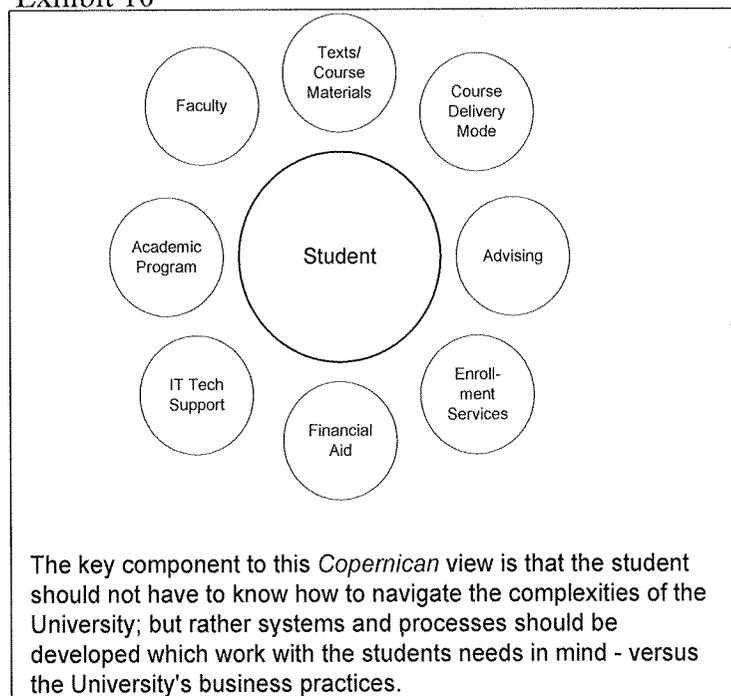
<sup>41</sup> President Hamilton's memo, dated October 7, 2004.

We have been told that it is still the intent for UA to adopt this approach as effectively and efficiently as possible. However, the current DE processes at UA are not “*fundamentally student-centric.*”

For example, there is no central location offering needed services to the DE student. Although the DE Gateway lists many DE offered courses, it does not list all of them. Students do not enroll from the DE Gateway; instead they are referred to individual MAUs for registration and other assistance. Specifically, students taking courses from more than one MAU must have multiple sign-on IDs and passwords, deal with different help desks and business hours, understand differing text, and course materials purchasing processes, and follow different processes for wait-listing when courses are at capacity enrollment.

Even where the same course management software<sup>42</sup> application is used by each MAU, differing versions are used and customized which can create a different navigational experience for students. When students crossing MAUs need assistance, typically they are referred to the campus delivering the course for help. Exhibit 10 (to the right) presents the variety of systems and processes that are involved in a student-centric approach. A student-centric approach would help reduce the difficulties encountered by students crossing MAUs when taking DE courses.

Exhibit 10



While current individual issues may seem to be more of an irritation for students, continued development of disparate approaches has the potential to create more barriers for students rather than maximize the benefits of DE technologies. In a February 2008, report<sup>43</sup> on UA statewide services, the condition of minimal collaboration was observed as:

*...campuses are often institution-centric rather than student-centric, and can be blind to the needs of the students who utilize the services of multiple campuses.*

<sup>42</sup> Blackboard is course management software used by UA. Blackboard is customizable by IT staff at each MAU. As part of the software, a website location is created for each course offered. The course website is available for faculty to use, but its use is not required. Access to a course website is limited to the teacher and the students enrolled. Each MAU requires students to use a unique identification and password to access Blackboard. Some features of the Blackboard software include student progress, grade status, syllabi, and quizzes.

<sup>43</sup> Planning the Future: streamlining Statewide services in the University of Alaska System, Prepared for the office of the President University of Alaska by Dr. MacTaggart and Mr. Rogers, dated: February 1, 2008

Overall, the limited IT support resources and minimal faculty interaction with IT developing DE courses, lack of incentives for MAUs to collaborate, and differing DE approaches, indicate there is room for improvement in UA's DE delivery. (See Recommendation Nos. 1, 2, 3 and 4.)

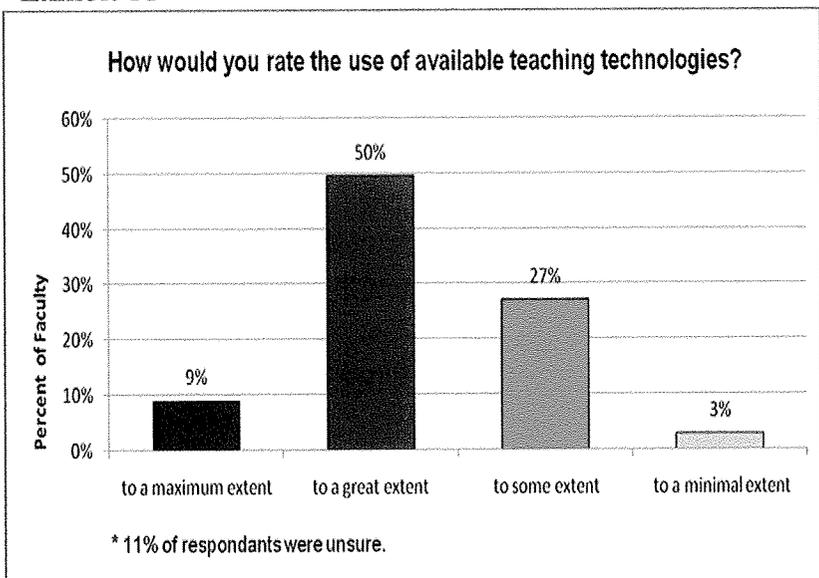
Generally, UA is not maximizing the use of available DE technologies.

Multiple factors, when taken as a whole, indicates DE technologies are not being used to the maximum extent possible in providing DE to UA students. In addition to factors previously discussed about the current DE status, UA faculty members' experiences are also important in determining whether maximum use of technology is occurring.

- Faculty surveyed indicated room for improvement exists in technology use.

Exhibit 11

Faculty who taught at least one DE course during AY 07 were asked if maximum use of DE technologies occurred. Responses identified that 80% found use of available technologies at something less than the maximum extent. (See Exhibit 11 to right.)



Although faculty responses may not appear significant, when combined with factors previously discussed, these strongly suggest that UA has room for improvement in maximizing the use of available DE technology. (See Recommendation Nos. 1, 2, and 3.)

It is questionable if more aggressive use of advanced technology for DE delivery is warranted and in rural areas may still be cost prohibitive.

Based on current DE technology use and support previously discussed, UA is not maximizing the benefits system-wide of DE technologies available. It is unlikely more aggressive use of technologies would provide additional benefits. Additionally, communication service delivery in both public and private sectors could be enhanced with increased access to broadband in rural areas of the state. However, there has not been a comprehensive economic package that has yet made it cost effective.

- Rural communities use basic communication technology to the greatest extent possible.

Students in rural locations face challenges connecting to DE courses and other UA student resource systems. Review of DE courses taken in AY 07 found almost 19%<sup>44</sup> (419) were delivered by teleconference and audio. The majority of courses were offered through the Center for Distance Education<sup>45</sup> (CDE). CDE generally delivers DE courses to a majority of rural locations throughout the state. Both student and support staff, based at rural campuses and management staff at CDE confirmed that telephonic delivery was the best and most consistent connectivity for course delivery. Although other types of technology were also used, the course delivery modes identified suggest rural students' demand less advanced technology which serves them better.

Technology has improved communication access over the past several years. Still many communities continue to experience limitations in communication access due to insufficient or inconsistent connections. These limitations not only adversely affect current education delivery, but potentially hinder successful DE access through more advanced technology use, until access is improved. Therefore, more technology use may not reduce the gap between current and maximum DE delivery for some communities.

In addition to problematic communication access in rural locations, UA lacks sufficient management information to determine whether other technologies could be incorporated in a cost effective manner. Absent the ability to determine where demand exists for more DE courses, it is not possible to efficiently or effectively plan a system-wide approach to improve DE through technology. Lacking adequate system-wide DE information, each MAU will likely continue to develop more disparate DE processes which could diminish opportunities offered by advanced technology and not foster a student-centric approach to DE delivery. (See Recommendations Nos. 1, 2, and 4.)

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<sup>44</sup> Information was provided by the University of Alaska.

<sup>45</sup> CDE is located within the College for Rural and Community Development based at UAF.

(Intentionally left blank)

## FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendation No. 1

The University of Alaska (UA) President should ensure distance education (DE) recommendations are implemented.

There is no mechanism in place to ensure accountability, monitoring and feedback of DE implementation to executive managers of UA. Many reviews, reports, and groups have developed recommendations to improve DE system-wide; however, UA has not successfully implemented a majority of them. Although the president previously identified and delegated implementation of DE recommendations, the committee responsible has not been held accountable for outcomes or timeframes for completion. Instead, DE initiatives have been deferred to DE study and review groups. As a result, marginal system-wide support to improve DE according to the president's directives has occurred.

UA's organizational structure is a primary reason for the difficulties in implementing DE recommendations. The Board of Regents supports three main administrative units (MAU), each with a differing focus and approach in education delivery. Therefore, moving DE to a student-centric approach, as directed by UA's president, requires a collaborative effort. Collaboration is difficult to achieve when there is no accountability and the MAUs prefer functioning as unique entities, rather than as members of a team or divisions within a single organization.

UA's 2009, "*System Strategic Plan*"<sup>46</sup> identifies goals, objectives and principles for the direction of the University. Two points from *Goal 2, Educational Quality Objectives* within the plan affect DE delivery. They are:

- 1) *Improve collaboration among campuses... and,*
- 2) *Erase technology barriers to communicate and share content between campuses and beyond campuses...*

In October 2004, a memo from UA's president specifically notes:

*... We must also align our business processes, information technology developments, and student services in ways that are fundamentally student-centric, with a goal of enabling our students at any location, to be served the best the University has to offer, from any location.*

Lacking accountability and periodic reporting to the president for implementation of recommendations, gaining system-wide agreement for DE process<sup>47</sup> change seems virtually

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<sup>46</sup> The 2009, Strategic Plan was finalized September 18, 2003, and approved by the Board of Regents.

impossible. As long as recommendations such as a single student sign-on for system-wide access or a centralized registration for DE courses are not implemented, achieving the goal of student-centric processes cannot occur. Furthermore, processes for DE students may become even more complex. As MAUs continue to expand their DE processes independent of each other, implementation of system-wide recommendations will be increasingly difficult.

Accordingly, we recommend UA's president ensure those responsible for DE initiatives are monitored and held accountable for implementation of approved recommendations. Additionally, considering past DE committees have developed recommendations for improvement with limited implementation results, the committee should also periodically provide progress reports which include measurable outcomes and timeframes to the president.

### Recommendation No. 2

UA's president should develop incentives for MAUs to collaborate on DE initiatives.

Currently, there are disincentives in place for MAUs to collaborate on DE initiatives. These barriers include fiscal policies and administrative procedures, which constrain cooperation between MAUs in achieving a student-centric approach to DE. Resistance, more specifically, stems from performance budgeting measures, allocation of tuition revenues, and independently developed DE processes.

Performance based budgeting (PBB) has been used by UA to fiscally reward MAU accomplishments. Two PBB measures focus on student head count and school credit hours as a method to distribute financial and other resources. These measures essentially put delivery<sup>48</sup> campuses in direct competition with a campus hosting<sup>49</sup> the DE student. The student is identified with the delivery campus which subsequently becomes part of their performance calculation, yet student services and support are provided by both the delivery and hosting campus.

Similarly, tuition revenues are allocated to the delivery MAU. The delivery campus does not necessarily share the tuition revenues with the hosting campus when the hosting campus is separate. Typically, hosting campuses also have costs associated with a DE course. The lack of revenues provided to the hosting campus can hinder its willingness or ability to support DE delivery for students.

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<sup>47</sup> DE processes are used to generally describe various aspects of DE including, student access to UA online systems, software applications, course registration, text book purchasing, accessing financial aid, IT assistance etc.

<sup>48</sup> Delivery campus is the campus which offers a course. It is the campus where student registration must occur as well as obtaining IT help if there are problems with course delivery.

<sup>49</sup> Hosting campus is where the student receiving the course is physically located. Hosting campuses provide facilities and services to students such as computer labs, video classrooms and assistance with navigating the UA system.

Additionally, MAUs have developed student support processes relatively independent of each other. Although technology allows education delivery to occur without regard to geographic boundaries, MAU processes are mainly geographically focused. Due to this, shifting to one system wide approach for DE processes will require changes by all MAUs.

Good business practices rely on streamlining processes and reducing duplication of efforts to achieve efficiencies. Leveraging system-wide resources through collaboration and seeking efficiencies across operational processes will benefit UA.

Without development of performance measures that provide incentives for a student-centric approach, MAUs will continue to resist collaboration in developing system-wide DE processes. Furthermore, lack of incentives equates to continued independent development of DE initiatives by MAUs. More independently developed DE systems and student services increase the likelihood of access barriers for students taking courses delivered by campuses outside their geographical area. Access barriers increase the complexity of student navigation of UA system-wide which is contradictory to a student centric approach to DE delivery.

We recommend the president develop appropriate incentives which encourage MAUs to collaborate in DE delivery. Appropriate incentives should take into consideration the shared responsibilities for DE between delivery and hosting campuses.

### Recommendation No. 3

The Vice President of Academic Affairs should ensure faculty receive sufficient DE technology training and technical support.

UA is not providing sufficient training and technical support for faculty teaching DE courses. Various reasons contribute to inadequate resources being available, including the minimal number of training sessions and IT design staff available.

During AY 07, one *ITeach*<sup>50</sup> five-day class was offered in Fairbanks for 13 faculty members from across the system; however, 42 were turned away. Similarly, during AY 06 approximately 66 faculty members were turned away from the one *ITeach* class in Fairbanks. This situation improved in AY 08 as training was expanded to three *ITeach* classes offered in three locations, and only five faculty members were turned away. However, it was notable that the course offered on the Anchorage campus was not full, had only one UAA faculty member. The remaining participants were faculty who traveled from other MAU locations. Although, discussions with UA staff identified that UAA faculty had limited resources for DE training and support, it was unclear why more UAA faculty members did not participate. Furthermore, respondents to the faculty survey indicated they were dissatisfied with UA IT support due, in part, to inadequate IT resources for course development and training on technologies.

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<sup>50</sup> *ITeach* classes are five days in length and are taught annually by Center for Distance Education at UAF.

Additionally, at two of the three<sup>51</sup> MAUs, the number of available IT design support staff<sup>52</sup> appears to be disproportionate to the number of faculty. (See Exhibit 12 at right.) At UAA there is one specialty designer to 355 faculty, and at UAF one for every 97 faculty members. As previously identified in conclusions, the success of the health programs DE initiatives is partly due to the number of design staff available for health program faculty at a ratio of 1 to 23. Although, that level of support is not anticipated to continue, it was considered essential in order to get courses developed and available for students.

Exhibit 12

|                   | No. of ID<br>for faculty | No. of Faculty<br>served | Ratio ID to<br>Faculty |
|-------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| UAA               | 3                        | 1,064                    | 1:355                  |
| UAF               | 7                        | 681                      | 1:97                   |
| UAS               | 6                        | 189                      | 1:32                   |
| HDDP <sup>1</sup> | 4                        | 92                       | 1:23                   |

<sup>1</sup> Health Distance Delivered Programs has its own ID staff that is not available to other programs or general faculty

As a result of the disproportionate availability of designers, some of the faculty members wanting DE training have to locate other faculty who have received *ITeach* training or are left to seek out their own DE applications and support. Therefore, additional faculty time and resources were likely spent to develop DE courses which otherwise, would not be necessary. Additionally, when insufficiently trained faculty develops DE courses, IT resources are further limited when course delivery problems occur. Ultimately, students' educational experiences are negatively affected when inadequate IT training and technical support is available to assist faculty.

The UA 2009, Strategic Plan presents goals which should lead to improvement in this area. The pertinent goals state:

*Goal 4 FACULTY AND STAFF STRENGTH:*

- 1. Provide development programs that reflect University priorities and are suited to particular faculty and staff, relying where possible on existing university resources and expertise.*

*Goal 6 TECHNOLOGY AND FACILITY DEVELOPMENT:*

*Support distance education through additional technology and faculty development. Provide all faculties the support necessary to develop and deliver high quality curricula with appropriate technologies, based on research into the effectiveness of various distance education pedagogies.*

The combination of these three factors: faculty denied training opportunities, faculty dissatisfaction with IT DE support, and disproportionate numbers of design staff to faculty across the system strongly suggests that UA does not offer enough DE training and support. Accordingly, we recommend the Vice President of Academic Affairs ensure that faculty

<sup>51</sup> UAS has a 1:32 IT staff to faculty ratio. UAS has developed and incorporated DE technologies into the majority of their course delivery. Therefore support staffing has been adjusted to better meet on-going needs of faculty.

<sup>52</sup> Technical staff includes instructional designers and specifically assigned media specialists.

training needs are met, and adequate technical support is available for faculty teaching DE courses.

#### Recommendation No. 4

The Vice President of Academic Affairs should develop, implement and enforce use of standard DE course parameters and uniform course description information recorded on the management information system.

UA system-wide does not consistently use standard DE course parameters<sup>53</sup> for identification on the management information system (Banner). Furthermore, descriptive course information contained on Banner and available to students on the DE Gateway is not uniform or complete in content. Instead, MAUs have independently interpreted and recorded course parameters and descriptive course information on Banner which is inconsistent, unreliable or incomplete.

Of the total DE courses delivered in AY 07, about 9% (203) lacked the established standard UA main DE identifier. Due to this, even though the course delivery method indicated substantial<sup>54</sup> use of technology, these courses were excluded from management reports generated on DE course activity. Inconsistent coding results in incomplete and inaccurate information generated for management purposes. As a result, management could make decisions regarding DE which they otherwise would not.

The course delivery information on Banner is also available to students through the DE Gateway. Scanning courses listed on the DE Gateway found web-based courses described differently from each other. More specifically, Course A may list “web”, Course B lists “web” and all hardware requirements, and Course C may not contain either type of information. The incomplete and non-uniform information on the DE Gateway affects students’ educational experience. Without sufficient timely and accurate information, students may not be able to determine before enrolling whether they have the necessary resources to successfully participate in a DE course.

Management is hampered when making decisions without relevant and reliable information. Lack of consistent and complete DE course information on Banner causes managers as well as students to rely on inaccurate and insufficient information for their purposes.

Accordingly, we recommend the Vice President of Academic Affairs ensure that standard DE coding parameters are used consistently on Banner system-wide. Furthermore, standard required course information and technology requirements should be developed, implemented and monitored through periodic reviews. Lastly, we recommend preexisting active DE

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<sup>53</sup> Course parameters are established codes which identify various information, such as the type of delivery method used for the course. Examples are: teleconference delivered lectures, web delivered lectures and labs, and video conference.

<sup>54</sup> Substantial use was determined to be courses identified on Banner as delivered primarily by technologies where students can participate away from a traditional classroom environment, such as video conferencing by satellite.

Banner courses be reviewed to ensure they contain complete and uniform information, as well.

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RECEIVED  
JUN 26 2009  
LEGISLATIVE AUDIT

Dear Ms. Davidson;

This letter is in response to the June 8, 2009 request for comments on the preliminary audit report titled "University of Alaska Unit Cost Analysis and Other Selected Issues, Part 3, January 16, 2009".

I'd like to express my appreciation to the staff of the Division of Legislative Audit for spending the time necessary to unravel and understand the complicated dynamics of distance education. You have captured our challenges accurately. Making programs accessible to students statewide via instructional technology in a system of higher education with multiple, separately accredited institutions is a challenge.

Students and the public have an expectation that the UA campuses, while they may be separately accredited, will develop and deploy academic programs, including distance education opportunities, as if UA was a single institution. This is a difficult, though not an unreasonable, expectation. A newly developed distance education plan is geared towards moving closer to this ideal.

As indicated in the audit, the distance education issues are no surprise -- they have been identified in multiple prior internal and external reviews. The fact that they still remain as "issues" indicates the difficulties involved in implementation.

Earlier this month, UA's senior academic leadership committee endorsed a comprehensive Distance Education Plan that outlines a path for collaborative decision making across the system. The plan addresses a broad scope of desired results, which include the audit's four outlined recommendations. The involvement of this group is essential since our provosts play a critical facilitation role in implementing specific campus actions.

### **Findings and Recommendations**

#### **Recommendation No. 1**

**The President of the UA should ensure distance education recommendations are implemented.**

A central element in ensuring UA's accountability is the President's biannual program and financial reviews. These reviews provide a comprehensive analysis of the campus and system goals and strategies, as well as a more formal accounting of financial and program resources. Beginning in Fall 2009, progress reporting on distance education goals and strategies will be included in these reviews.

All academic programs that are recommended to the Board of Regents by each MAU will include analysis of the program's distance delivery plans and potential.

Distance education has become a standing agenda item in the Board of Regents Student Affairs committee.

**Recommendation No. 2**

**The President should develop incentives for MAUs to collaborate on distance education initiatives.**

This may be the most challenging of recommendations to put into place. While we agree that UA campuses should be collaborative, it is not something that can be realized by simple mandate.

UA will continue to identify and remove barriers through implementation of the distance education plan. For example, one goal of the plan is an integrated system of distance education course offerings available at the University of Alaska, regardless of campus.

During the 2009-2010 academic year, a student should be able to use their single student identification at any campus in the UA system. This change helps ensure that students will receive consistent service at any campus help desk. While more work remains to be done in the areas of registration and student support, the campus IT organizations are fully committed to removing technical barriers and improving access for distance education students.

**Recommendation No. 3**

**The Vice President of Academic Affairs should ensure faculty receive sufficient distance education technology training and technical support.**

Senior academic leadership has already identified faculty preparation as its highest priority. This committee is preparing a detailed first phase of training, which includes budgets, timelines and options for instructor training and technical support.

**Recommendation No. 4**

**The Vice President of Academic Affairs should develop, implement, and enforce use of standard distance education course parameters and uniform course description information recorded on the management information system.**

We agree that stronger use of standard course parameters in the management information system will provide valid and reliable listings of available distance education offerings.

Continued refinement of UA's management information systems is essential to monitor and manage distance education activity.

In conclusion, I want to express my appreciation to the Legislative Budget and Audit Committee for the time that they expended in analyzing and preparing a comprehensive and succinct report.

Sincerely,



Mark R. Hamilton  
President