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ABSTRACT

The Rural Alaska Native Adult program of Alaska Pacific University is specifically designed for adult Native learners. Courses in business administration, human services, and teacher education are offered to rural Native adult students via an interactive Internet-based format after an initial 1-week residency. The Internet component is facilitated via an interactive Internet seminar in a primarily asynchronous format. Course content is covered in applications-based, problem solving; highly inductive, integrated discussions; and debates. Tasks are frequently small-group or cohort-based, encouraging teamwork and leadership growth. The asynchronous format allows time for reflection, critical thinking about issues, and discussion of the subject matter with local mentors and elders. Such a format is very culturally appropriate and relevant for the Alaska Native learner. The predominate learning style is inductive, with applications-based exploration and knowledge building. Supplementing the asynchronous learning approach is a weekly online chat/conference room. Technology requirements are minimal--an off-the-shelf computer with CD-ROM and Internet capability and an ISP. Huge files and lots of "bells and whistles" are avoided. Realization of the difficulties that students encountered during the transition from campus-based residency to community-based continuing study in the Internet seminar resulted in implementation of counseling and socialization processes before and during the residency component. (TD)

**BRIDGING THE GREAT DIVIDE:
CONNECTING ALASKA NATIVE
LEARNERS AND LEADERS VIA "HIGH
TOUCH—HIGH TECH" DISTANCE
LEARNING**

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Bridging the Great Divide: Connecting Alaska Native Learners and Leaders via “High Touch-High Tech” Distance Learning

Much has been written recently about the evolving gap between the technologically rich and poor—and the impact of that gap for minority peoples across the country. Alaska Pacific University, with its longtime commitment to Alaska Native peoples, is confronting this challenge through providing a distance higher education program rich in substance, relevant in terms of the needs of rural Alaska, consistent in respect to learning styles, and accessible to those living in even the most remote of villages.

Bridging the “digital divide” is more than simply a question of access. While obviously of importance, access is only the eligibility threshold concern. Without access to computers and the Internet, opportunities to connect with the world and to enjoy all that such conveys are lost. However, simple access is necessary but not sufficient. Moreover, and perhaps surprisingly, access may be the easiest obstacle to overcome.

Access for Alaska Native learners in rural Alaska has improved markedly in recent years. Nearly every school building

in the state is linked to an Internet service provider (ISP). Many rural libraries enjoy the same access. Both venues are eligible for greatly reduced utilization fees under the provisions of recent telecommunications legislation. Additionally, nearly all Alaska Native regional corporations, village corporations, and Native governmental venues are connected to the Internet. In fact, some of the highest usage patterns in the U.S. are evident in what might be some of the most geographically isolated towns and villages in the Alaska hinterland—with some small villages experimenting with household level transponders for satellite linkage.

Such a situation represents a very significant and even dramatic first step for rural Alaska. It is, however, not the solution. The critical component is usage, and that step is predicated on matches of access and applications. Simply having a television set in the living room hooked to an antenna or cable does not mean effective and informed use of that technology any more than having a desktop computer hooked to the Internet. What must transpire is the bundling of appropriate levels of technology and access with relevant and applicable learning programs in order that the process leads to successful and meaningful outcomes for learners. Making that happen anywhere in rural America today is a

challenge and perhaps no where is that more of test than in the vast expanses of rural Alaska.

The Challenge

The task of meeting effectively and efficiently the higher education learning needs of adults throughout rural Alaska is an enormous undertaking. First, and perhaps most evident even to the casual observer, is the vastness of Alaska. Alaska is not only the largest state in terms of landmass, but it is more than double the square miles of the state in which we are meeting today. From the tip of Southeast Alaska to the far-flung islands of the Aleutian Chain, Alaska transcends what were at one time four time zones and a span equal to South Carolina to southern California. Similarly, using a map of the “lower 48” and superimposing our northernmost community, Barrow, on the Twin Cities of Minneapolis/St. Paul results in our capital city of Juneau overlaying Daytona Beach, Florida. Distance, coupled with oftentimes-severe weather conditions, begins to define the nature of the landscape for distance learning in Alaska.

Further defining the Alaskan reality of educational outreach is cost. Highways in the Alaska road systems numbered

consecutively have not yet exceeded single digit. Many learners in rural Alaska live in vast roadless regions accessible only by small plane or ship. Communication links across these lands require satellite transmissions and therefore are extremely expensive. Any effective higher education initiatives must wrestle with the issue of cost—for universities, for businesses and organizations, and for the students.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing colleges and universities in providing effective higher education opportunities for rural Alaska learners are the issues of focus and fit. Focus addresses the scope and range of programs provided. Not every institution can be all things to all learners. Certainly, a private university like Alaska Pacific University can not exercise that option. Even large state universities are increasingly facing the need to make choices. Questions of what to offer and how are now being asked at nearly all levels from federal and state governments, boards of trustees, faculty, students, the private sector, funding agencies, community organizations, and the general public. Central to the answers resulting from these questions is the fullest consideration of the issue of fit.

Fit refers to the match between all the range and scope of higher educational options and the world of the learners. Universities today are facing the need to make effective and efficient choices of fit now perhaps more than ever in their histories. Certain choices seem to come more from tradition than thoughtful consideration and thorough incorporation of the needs and realities of the world about us. Successful program design departs from the traditions and the givens and moves into the wider world of the vast array of interacting forces, positive and negative, influencing considerations and choices of the learners. Cultural considerations of language and custom need to outweigh the convenience of tradition and standardization. Models reflecting appropriate “fit” may diverge significantly from both historical paths trod and trendy superhighways taken. What was may not work; what is “pop” may be no better of a fit.

Pedagogical decisions need to be made with full consideration of students’ personal histories as learners, linguistic strengths and obstacles, group mores relative to academic performance, and wider cultural and social realities. The success of students rests in these considerations far more than in this simple issue of access to technology.

The RANA Program

The Rural Alaska Native Adult (RANA) Program of Alaska Pacific University (APU) is specifically designed for the adult Native learners and leaders across Alaska. APU, a private, liberal arts and professional degrees university located in Anchorage, has had a long tradition (by Alaska standards) of serving the higher education needs of Alaska Natives. RANA takes those qualities most esteemed in private higher education (high quality teaching, active student involvement, personal attention, flexibility and responsiveness) and extends them to rural Native adult students via a highly interactive internet-based format, coupled with an on-campus residency. What has been created is an exceptionally personal and interactive touch distance learning program made possible through new and evolving technologies of the Internet. In short, it is the fusion of “high touch” and “high tech.”

The Rural Alaska Native Adult Program was built on several important “histories” which contributes to its success. First, the current president of the university brings prior experience with distance education (albeit, a more traditional paper, pen, and phone- based approach) and Native American learners in the

lower 48. Second, all of the staff hired for the start-up of RANA were individuals steeped in the realities of living and working in rural Alaska. Thirdly, APU is an institution of higher education committed to both student success and the needs of adult learners. These elements in combination with others set the stage for success in RANA.

Since its inception, key decisions guiding the creation and development of the RANA program were made in a manner which facilitated the evolution of the program in careful and incremental ways. Assessment followed implementation at each step. Feedback, especially from the students in the program, was solicited on a continuous basis.

The RANA Program accepts a very limited number of students each semester into a very limited number of undergraduate academic programs. Currently, the RANA Program is operating three majors (business administration, human services, and teacher education) with a maximum admission of fifteen students allowed in each program. Each student applies to the University as a degree-seeking student and must meet the admission standards of APU. Students accepted into the RANA

Program are different from the traditional students on-campus in many regards.

Current RANA students share the following characteristics as a profile: working full-time, ages 28+, parents (single or dual), highly involved in community and/or church activities, some prior college experience (frequently negative), and, most importantly, a very strong and focused desire and plan to “take the next step” in seeking professional growth and upward mobility. Similarly, these students live in small communities (500-3000) scattered across the vast landscape of Alaska and represent differing Alaska Native cultures as well as limited non-Native populations. Students in the RANA program bring a diverse set of prior experiences with higher education to APU. Typically, students had: (1) bad prior experiences with colleges/universities (typically large non-Native focused institutions), (2) scattered experiences, some dated and some current, with a “bushel basket” of credit hours of multiple institutions, and/or (3) in rare cases, no significant experience or the opportunity to enroll in a college degree program. In summary, our students bring many diverse pasts, but one decidedly common future—the goal of earning their college degree.

The RANA Program starts by recognizing the realities of rural Alaska Native adult learners. They are busy! Work-related travel to out-lying villages often takes days, not hours. Weather impacts schedules and lives. Family duties and obligations are centermost in their lives. New roles and responsibilities in the ever-evolving new worlds of Alaska Native life present new challenges for learning and earning college degrees. RANA knows this. The RANA Program was designed from scratch to not only accommodate these “facts of life” for Native Alaska adult learners, but to actually translate some obstacles into opportunities.

RANA students are asked to attend a time-limited (usually one-week) residency on campus twice a year—usually at the beginning of the term of study. The strengths of having this brief, face-to-face time together are many, the positive outcomes huge. Students meet each other, forming a community of learners and a strong support network. Students meet and get to know their teachers on a first name basis, sharing meals, personal histories, and stories one with another. Given that it is only one week, and the fact that students come from all regions and the differing cultures of rural Alaska as total strangers, the amount of community created is astonishing. The residency in the RANA

Program is a given. While future residencies may differ in duration or time of scheduling depending on changing pedagogical justifications, the experience to date prescribes a residency for all RANA programs.

Following the residency, students then travel to their home communities to complete the semester's learning. Here they face a familiar, but now somewhat changed social reality. They return to families, to jobs, to community leadership roles, to church-related duties and to the demands of being a (usually) full-time student. This transition is fraught with concerns for RANA students. Students return to their home environments "pumped" from the residency experience. In one week, they made new friends, overcame challenges they feared, found new skills and ways of knowing, and now they return home—to a world that knows nothing of these new experiences and changes. Things at home were as they were. Expectations at work frequently remain the same, duties at home demand time and energy, and the role of student, particularly that of distant student, at best is unknown to others, and, at worst, undefined and unknown. Discover of this reality for RANA students rocked the program during the first semester of operation. Perhaps no other topic has garnered more

attention in the subsequent “lessons learned” than the dangerous gulf between residency and seminar—an issue having almost nothing to do with pedagogy.

Once students have returned to their homes, the remainder of the course is facilitated via an interactive Internet seminar in a primarily asynchronous format. Course content is covered, not in a scrolling-down, lecture style, but in applications-based, problem solving, highly inductive, integrated discussions and debates. Tasks are frequently small group or cohort-based encouraging of teamwork and leadership growth. The asynchronous format allows time for reflection and consideration of the topic, for critical thinking about issues, and for discussion of the subject matter with local mentors, references, and elders in the home communities. Such a format is highly culturally appropriate and relevant for the Alaska Native learner. The predominate learning style is inductive, with applications-based exploration and knowledge building. Supplementing the asynchronous learning approach is a weekly on-line, same time chat/conference room. Students join one another and the instructor (as well as other guests) for a 1-1.5 hour live internet-based discussion on the topics of the weeks, and to catch up on how things are going for all involved.

Each course in the RANA program is run on either an eight week or 16 week format within the University's semester framework. Typically students enroll in three courses, two in each of the eight week sessions and one (usually a writing or "process" course) for the whole of the semester. While it was the original design of the program to have students complete four courses a semester, thereby earning 16 credits each term, that heavy of a load was found almost immediately to be extreme. Furthermore, some students have found their comfort level to be two courses per semester—a course-at-a-time model. While the latter can complicate one's financial aid status, for certain students it is the best choice.

Perhaps a surprise to many, students have found technology access not to be a prohibiting concern. RANA, from the beginning, employed a "KISS" ("keep it simple, *****") philosophy in designing the program and all of the courses. Students are not asked to empty their bank accounts to purchase state-of-the-art high end computers, printers, or software. In fact, most students have not had to purchase computers in order to participate in the RANA Program. Many have access at their place of employment and/or already had a computer at home. Those students who did

purchase computers typically found suitable options at computer outlets in Anchorage or other larger communities in Alaska.

Neither are students “bandwidth challenged” in having to download huge files or lessons with lots of “bells and whistles.” Content is provided in traditional ways as well as with low-end technology (yes, there are still textbooks and facsimile). The focus in using “high tech” is interaction—between and among students and the instructor.

Minimal technology requirements are an off-the-shelf computer with CD-ROM and Internet capability and an ISP (Internet service provider; local or AOL). Students work at home, at local schools, or in their place of employment to secure Internet access.

Outcomes—or “Lessons Learned”

The RANA Program is a learning organization. Virtually every activity or initiative of RANA is accessed with an eye towards improvement or enhancement. In the RANA Program “lessons learned” are discussed, shared, and incorporated into the continuing development and improvement of the program. The

most important lessons learned are those ideas and suggestions coming from the RANA students themselves.

Perhaps the most significant lesson learned was the discovery, noted above, of the “re-entry” phenomenon. The RANA Program administrative staff and faculty failed to anticipate the scale of difficulties accompanying the transition from campus-based residency to community-based continuing study in the Internet “seminar.” The awareness borne of this discovery has involved changes in the RANA Program beginning with recruitment and continuing through the residency and afterwards. Prospective students are not only informed and counseled related to this occurrence, but are engaged in an anticipatory socialization process prior to even attending the residency. In addition, during the residency the impending reality of re-entry is discussed very forthrightly and candidly among “veteran” students and “rookie” students in their “lessons we have learned” session (conducted without faculty or staff present). Lastly, students, faculty, and staff place special attention to the new networks of learners and teachers, friends and colleagues established during the residency. In this way, those who do know of the very special times together

and the personal growth and development can support one another during the days and weeks following residency.

This network represents one of the most promising outcomes of the RANA Program. Coming together as a group of learners leads to graduating as a network of leaders. RANA students currently come from the north and the south, the east and the west of Alaska, representing cultures with significant similarities and radical differences. Gathering together under the RANA roof allows the creation of lifetime-long networks and associations.

Lastly, without this unique program, these potential Native leaders would not have the opportunity to control their own destiny. Through RANA (as a model program) Native corporations, tribal organizations, agencies, and educational institutions are gaining the skills and knowledge these students have to offer. RANA creates a learning environment that effectively and affordably spans the technology divide, creating bridges to opportunity and the future for Alaska Native learners and leaders.

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