

50 YEARS YOUNG

by Will Jacobs

This year, the University of Alaska Anchorage celebrates 50 years of public higher education

in southcentral Alaska. Home to more than 21,000 students, it is a major regional university with programs ranging from non-credit, non-degree courses to graduate degrees. UAA is now the largest of the University of Alaska schools, and, beyond doubt, one of the most important institutions, public or private, in Alaska.

UAA had modest beginnings. The president and the University of Alaska Board of Regents started to offer university courses on Alaska's military bases in 1950; in 1953, they began to enter into agreements with school districts to operate community colleges. The first of these created Anchorage Community College, the first institution of public higher education in southcentral Alaska. The college, which shared space with the new Anchorage High School (now West High), opened in 1954 and its first graduate completed an associate degree in 1956. ACC was followed by community colleges in Palmer in 1958 — later Matanuska-Susitna Community College — Kenai-Soldotna in 1964 and Kodiak four years later.

Throughout the 1950s, the university had offered a few upper division courses on Elmendorf Air Force Base and the U.S. Army's Fort Richardson. In the early 1960s this effort began to expand. The Board of Regents also began to consider the development of a University of Alaska campus in Anchorage, focusing as early as 1962 on property in the Goose Lake area in what was then the outskirts of Anchorage. Construction of the five buildings that constituted the Anchorage Community College

campus, the core of what is now known as the West Campus of UAA, began in 1968.

In the 1960s the Regents also began to decentralize the administration of the university. They created the Anchorage Regional Center in 1966 to bring all UA operations in the Anchorage area under one administration headed by Donald M. Dafoe, the first provost. Two years later, the Regents enlarged Dafoe's responsibilities by creating the Southcentral Regional Center. In a single organization, it included ACC, upper-division and graduate programs, Elmendorf and Ft. Richardson operations, and the community colleges in the Mat-Su Valley, at Kenai-Soldotna, and in Kodiak. This institution foreshadowed UAA as we know it today.

The '60s also saw a lively debate about the relationship between the expanding University of Alaska and Alaska Methodist University, a private school that opened in 1960. In 1969-70 the two universities created the Anchorage Higher Education Consortium — an agreement for easy transfer of students and, more importantly, the land, library collection, and financial arrangements for the Consortium Library. Since its completion

in 1973, the library has served both UAA and Alaska Methodist (now Alaska Pacific University) faculty, staff, and students. It is the foundation on which the new Library of the 21st Century, set to open this fall, is built.

In 1970, the Regents grouped the existing upper-division and graduate programs into the Anchorage Senior College. They also decreed that in any city where the University of Alaska offered those programs, the operation — including community colleges — was to be named “University of Alaska, (City).” Lewis Haines, who succeeded Dafoe as provost of the Southcentral Region in 1969, was the first CEO of the University of Alaska, Anchorage. In 1976, to mark the continued decentralization of the UA system, the president appointed John Lindauer as the school’s first chancellor.

The 1970s were a complex and confusing time for the new university. The statewide system and the Anchorage operation were consumed with labor disputes, organizational confusion, financial difficulties, and passionate quarrels about the compatibility and relative importance of the community college and university missions. This turmoil peaked in a series of leadership crises. The year 1977 saw four different presidents of the University of Alaska.

Given these difficulties, it is not surprising that the experimental combination of the community colleges and traditional university programs in a single administrative framework, embodied in the Anchorage and Southcentral Regional Centers and the original University of Alaska, Anchorage, did not endure long. In 1978 the University of Alaska placed all community colleges in an organization devoted exclusively to a community college mission. This change effectively separated ACC from the fledgling UAA — leaving the latter to be composed solely of the units reorganized from the recently dissolved Senior College: the College of Arts and Sciences, the Justice Center, and the Schools of Education, Engineering, Nursing, Business and Public Administration.

The late ‘70s began a period defined by continued growth and increasing independence of all the institutions in the region, supported by the increasing flow of state funding from North Slope oil money. Less than eight years into this promising era, however, the whole of the University of Alaska was threatened by the collapse of state finances, caused by a decline in world oil prices. In the fall of 1986, President Donald O’Dowd proposed to reorganize the university system yet again, this time to consolidate all operations — community colleges, baccalaureate, and graduate programs — into three separately accredited regional universities headquartered in Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Juneau.

Whatever the financial savings (and these were disputed), O’Dowd intended not only to end the organizational independence of the community colleges but to eliminate them altogether, with the exception of Prince William Sound Community College. Each part of ACC’s mission was to continue, but it was to do so within the framework of a new University of Alaska Anchorage (no comma). An independently identified ACC ceased to exist. In the Mat-Su Valley, Kenai-Soldotna, and Kodiak the colleges dropped “community” from their names and returned to administrative arrangements within the new UAA similar to those that had existed under the Southcentral Regional Center.

To some in Anchorage and outside, it appeared that the community college mission could not survive the reorganization. Less visible but important was the fear that merging the community college and university missions in one house would most seriously compromise the latter. Proposals for complete separation of the community colleges resurfaced to no avail. The Regents approved the O’Dowd plan in 1987 and the governor and legislature declined to interfere.

Debate persists in many quarters over the necessity, wisdom, and ultimate consequences of the 1987 restructuring, but there can be no doubt that the present University of Alaska Anchorage, the product of crisis, controversy, and compromise, has developed into a major regional university with a reputation for high quality programs in each part of the complex and comprehensive community college and university missions inherited from its predecessor institutions. Much is owed to the two chancellors — Donald Behrend and Lee Gorsuch — who led the new UAA out of the turmoil of the ‘80s and through the fiscal difficulties of the ‘90s to its present status. UAA has enjoyed almost 16 years of stable and continuous organization and institutional identity. This has allowed the creation of programs across the range of UAA’s missions, an enlarged physical establishment, a first-class electronic infrastructure, a “Library of the 21st Century,” and an Anchorage campus community based on new dormitories and a campus commons. Now the largest university in the state, with an all-campus total workforce of almost 3,500 people and annual expenditures of \$170 million, UAA is an important Alaskan institution, vital to the continued health and development of the region and the state. ■

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