The Role of the University of Alaska in Northern Development

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Introduction

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, there are four accredited universities in the State of Alaska: the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA), the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF), and the University of Alaska Southeast (UAS). Together they comprise the state University of Alaska System. There is also one private university – Alaska Pacific University (APU).

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the impact of universities on Alaskan development by first describing the Alaskan context (both regional and educational) in which these universities exist, then narrating the details of their founding and development. With this narrative in place, the next section will examine the impact of Alaskan universities, both from the perspective of access to higher education and professional qualification, and contributions to economic, social and cultural development. The final section draws some conclusions about the impact of universities for Alaskan development and their potential future role.

The northern context

The name Alaska comes from the Aleut term ‘Alyeska’ meaning ‘the great land’. The great land stands apart: unique amongst contemporary northern circumpolar regions, it is a complete federal unit that is geographically separated from the rest of its political entity by the territory of another nation-state. By far the largest of the United States in geographic terms, Alaska has an east–west span of 2,400 miles and a north–south span of 1,420 miles. Alaska’s land area of 586,412 square miles is equal to one third of the land area of the ‘lower 48’ continental states, and its 33,000-
mile coastline is half again that of the continental United States (Kresge et al., 1997).

Alaska is comprised of four distinct geographic regions: the Pacific mountain system, southern coastal Alaska with both rain forest and grasslands, interior Alaska and the North Slope, combining coastal plains and foothills of treeless tundra. Alaska experiences extremes of both temperatures and precipitation. Alaska's human geography is a product of the interaction between the natural environment and economic and social forces indicating several distinct development stages: native Alaska, characterised by aboriginal occupation and resource use; colonial Alaska (1740–1940) with resource exploitation under both Russian and US occupation; military Alaska (1940–58) with a shift to defence activity and urban living; and the state of Alaska, from 1959 until the present with state government responsibility for development of Alaska’s resources (Kresge et al., 1997).

Alaska is widely regarded as the route by which the New World became occupied, with evidence for occupation of Alaska by aboriginal peoples from 15,000 years ago. Alaska's indigenous peoples, together referred to as Alaska natives, fall into five major groupings. The earliest European contact with the indigenous peoples was by Russians with the Aleuts around 1740. Contact with Northern Eskimos did not occur for another century (Langdon, 1987). The estimated pre-contact population of native Alaskans was 60,000–70,000 people, of whom some 46 per cent were Eskimo (Northern Inupiat and Southern Yuit), 21 per cent Aleut, 20 per cent Northwest Coast Indian (Tlingit and Haida) and 12 per cent Interior Indians (Athapascan). All these Native cultures were self-sufficient subsistence economies based on natural resources (Langdon, 1987). Despite the decline of native Alaska from its dominant position once Europeans came, native Alaska has continued to the present day as a vital element in Alaskan development.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Alaska was invaded by non-native fur traders, whalers, miners and fishermen, who exploited (and sometimes exhausted) the resources for distant markets and interests. First to come were the Russians, but once the Russians decided that Alaska had no further economic value for them, they were willing to sell it.

When, in 1867, the United States purchased Alaska from Russia, Secretary of State William Seward was ridiculed and Alaska was dubbed ‘Seward’s Ice Box’ or ‘Seward’s Folly’. Further Alaskan economic development came with salmon canneries in the late 1870s and a series of small goldrushes in the 1880s. It was the stampede touched off by the Klondike