The University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA), still a relatively young institution, has been providing higher education in southcentral Alaska for over 60 years. It is a major regional metropolitan university in the population center of the state, with programs ranging from certificate and associate degrees to doctoral degrees. UAA is now the largest unit of the University of Alaska system, and, beyond doubt, one of the most important institutions, public or private, in the state of Alaska.

The University of Alaska (UA) Board of Regents began offering university courses on Alaska’s military bases in 1950; in 1953 they formed agreements with independent school districts to operate community colleges. The first of these created Anchorage Community College (ACC), the first institution of public higher education in southcentral Alaska. The college shared space with the new Anchorage High School (now West High), opened in the spring semester of 1954, and awarded its first associate degree in 1956. Additional community colleges were created in Palmer in 1958 (later Matanuska-Susitna Community College), Kenai-Soldotna in 1964, and Kodiak four years later.

Throughout the 1950s, UA also offered limited upper division courses on Elmendorf Air Force Base and Fort Richardson. In the 1960s this effort expanded, focused on programs in education and engineering management, with discussions of developing a University of Alaska campus in Anchorage. This planning became more serious in the aftermath of the devastating 1964 earthquake and the consequent rebuilding of the city. In 1970 the first five permanent buildings of the ACC campus (now known as the West Quad of UAA) opened in what was then a forest on the outskirts of town. Upper division offerings were consolidated shortly after, and more land was cleared to build the Anchorage Senior College (now the Social Sciences Building) in 1972. The campus grew to connect these two entities.

The early 1970s were a complex time for the new university. The UA system and the incipient UAA campuses were consumed with financial difficulties caused by a very limited tax base, and passionate debates about the best ways to serve the needs in each region. The discovery of oil deposits at Prudhoe Bay in 1968 and the construction of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline from 1975 to 1977 fueled both population growth and state spending. Rising oil prices and the flood of royalties into state government overheated the Alaskan economy. Valdez opened Prince William Sound Community College in 1978, funded by local taxes on the oil industry.
The next years were defined by increasing independence of the separately accredited colleges in the region. It was a promising era as new money flowed and the campus expanded both in buildings and enrollments. Anchorage saw the development of East Campus buildings and opened its first on-campus housing. However, this exhilarating time was short-lived as the University of Alaska system was threatened by the collapse of state finances produced by a serious decline in world oil prices.

In the fall of 1986 UA proposed to reorganize the university system, consolidating all operations—community colleges, baccalaureate, and graduate programs — into three separately accredited regional universities headquartered in Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Juneau. The community college and open access missions would continue within the framework of a new University of Alaska Anchorage under a single accreditation. The institutions in Anchorage, Mat-Su, Kenai-Soldotna, and Kodiak became UAA campuses. (Prince William Sound Community College would retain its separate accreditation until formally combined with UAA in 2014). This formed the UAA that exists today.

The period from 1988 to 1998 proved not only to be challenging as the university struggled to align and strengthen its multiple missions, but also to be a fiscal “decade in the desert” as state funding and support stagnated. This ended with the convergence of new UA leadership in President Mark Hamilton, improved oil revenue, a more favorable political climate from state government, and new leadership at UAA. This leadership embraced a philosophy of resilience, adaptation, and continuing development in the face of adversity. This lesson proved effective and over the following 10 years UAA saw growth in academic programs, information technology, and new construction.

In the 21st century all of the UAA campuses have continued strong ties to their communities, enhanced by community-engaged instruction and research on each campus while also adopting new technologies to broaden access through online learning opportunities. New initiatives to encourage scholarship and research have enhanced UAA's reputation as an institution where a student can gain valuable hands-on, real-world experience while pursuing a degree or work credential. In a single decade, 11 students were awarded Fulbright scholarships and 5 received Truman scholarships, attesting to UAA's academic quality. And in 2012, UAA began offering doctoral programs.

Oil prices reached a new all-time high in 2008, fueling another building boom that included the first campus housing and a state-of-the-art Tech Center at Kenai Peninsula College, the Glenn Massay Theater at Mat-Su College, strengthening its position as an emerging cultural center in the community, and a new engineering building and sports arena for the Anchorage campus. Private donations also grew during this time, supporting
academics with endowed chairs, specialized programs, equipment, and new facilities. The present University of Alaska Anchorage, the product of crisis, creative adaptability, and change, has developed into a major regional university with high quality programs in every part of the complex and comprehensive mission inherited from its predecessor institutions.

UAA is now the largest university in the state serving the most populous region in Alaska. It generates more credit hours and serves more students than all other UA system units combined.

UAA stays true to its roots by continuing to offer courses and programs to develop Alaska's workforce. UAA began by serving the military community and continues that tradition, earning national recognition as military friendly. It has not wavered from its open access mission. The long commitment of each campus to active engagement improves instruction and student learning, as well as individual communities. This engaged community focus resulted in UAA becoming one of the first to receive the National Carnegie Foundation designation. Supporting strong academic programs, faculty development, and research advances UAA's university heritage. Stewardship of the campuses' physical infrastructure and honoring the dedication of staff and faculty demonstrate a commitment to providing a safe and collegial experience.

As historian and professor emeritus W.A. Jacobs wrote in his history of UAA, “The history of UAA demonstrates that an institution thrown together by financial crisis and without much in the way of initially shared vision can in time become a great success for its communities, the state, and above all, for its students.”

SOURCES:


Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Office of Research and Analysis, Historical Census Data by Borough/Census Areas.

UAA Office of Institutional Studies reports, 1955-1987, Archives and Special Collections.


“Anchorage Community College, Historical Data Summaries, FY82-FY86,” Statewide Office of Institutional Research.
Anchorage Community College (ACC) created.

Alaska becomes 49th state.

9.5 Good Friday Earthquake

Oil discovered on North Slope.

Construction of Trans-Alaska Pipeline 1975 to 1977. First oil royalties received in 1979 as oil prices skyrocket.

Oil prices drop below $10 a barrel in 1986 creating a state fiscal crisis and resulted in deep budget cuts that lasted into the 1990s. Oil production peaked in 1989.

In response to state budget crisis, UA reorganizes. "The Merger"

Hat or declining budgets. "The decade in the desert."

UAA among first in nation to receive new "engaged" university designation from the Carnegie Foundation.

Steep decline in oil prices triggers new budget crisis for Alaska and the university.

UAA received approval from NWCCU to offer doctoral degrees

Key Moments in UAA History 1954-2017

- Anchorage Community College (ACC) created.
- Alaska becomes 49th state.
- 9.5 Good Friday Earthquake
- Oil discovered on North Slope.
- Construction of Trans-Alaska Pipeline 1975 to 1977. First oil royalties received in 1979 as oil prices skyrocket.
- Oil prices drop below $10 a barrel in 1986 creating a state fiscal crisis and resulted in deep budget cuts that lasted into the 1990s. Oil production peaked in 1989.
- In response to state budget crisis, UA reorganizes. "The Merger"
- Hat or declining budgets. "The decade in the desert."
- UAA among first in nation to receive new "engaged" university designation from the Carnegie Foundation.
- Steep decline in oil prices triggers new budget crisis for Alaska and the university.

UAA received approval from NWCCU to offer doctoral degrees