

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
FACULTY CONVERSATIONS with the PROVOST
Fall 2015 - Spring 2017

At the request of Provost Gingerich, CAFE coordinated twelve opportunities for him to talk with and learn from a range of faculty cohorts at UAA between Fall 2015 and Spring 2017. The conversations were well-attended, highly successful, and candid, offering an opportunity for sincere exchanges that provide insight into a wide range of faculty experiences and perspectives. Faculty expressed great appreciation for the chance to come together with UAA's Chief Academic Officer to share their experiences and concerns and have interactive contact with upper administration.

FACULTY GROUPS

Two of the sessions were open to all faculty. The remaining ten targeted specific cohorts: New Faculty (hired in AY 2015-16 and in 2016-17); Second-Year Faculty (hired in 2015-16); Newly Promoted and Tenured Faculty; Faculty at UAA 15 or more Years; Adjuncts and Terms, 3rd and 4th year faculty (hired in 2012-13), mid-career faculty, Chairs and Associate Deans, Community Campus faculty. Ranging in size from 6-30 participants, the groups included faculty from a wide range of disciplines, including: Health Sciences, Business, Education, Anthropology, Biology, Chemistry, History, Engineering, Journalism and Communication, Political Science, WWAMI, Nursing, Management and Marketing, Theater and Dance, Accounting, Justice, Mathematics, Diesel Mechanics, Library, Culinary Arts, English, Environmental Sciences and Geography, Geomatics, Social Work, Art, and more. A few faculty from Community Campuses participated by phone and in person during the sessions not specifically dedicated to that group, as did a representative from the United Academics faculty union.

QUESTIONS

The Provost posed two general questions to each group and then opened the discussion to any additional comments or concerns. The questions were:

What is working well at UAA?
What needs to be improved?

THEMES

Here are the general themes that emerged across the groups:

WORKS WELL

Collegiality and a Welcoming Atmosphere

UAA (and Alaska in general) is a collegial, friendly, welcoming place to work.

Quality and Diversity of Students

The student body at UAA contains many highly-motivated, talented, intelligent students from a very diverse set of backgrounds. Several faculty compared high performing UAA students favorably with those from Ivy League institutions, recognizing that geographic and/or economic factors, rather than academic capacities, were dictating their choices. They pointed out that the range of support available for students who may be less prepared for college has improved in recent years.

Quality of Faculty

Many faculty praised the quality, commitment, collegiality, dedication, and willingness to volunteer of their colleagues, citing long hours of often uncompensated effort on behalf of their students and the greater community. They lauded their fellow faculty for a genuine, deep and widespread commitment to student success, even when the definition of student success might vary.

High-level Opportunities for Students

UAA students often move from the university into prestigious jobs, fellowships and graduate schools, and several faculty noted how many exciting doors are open to students at UAA, as well as the benefits of a mix of traditional and non-traditional pathways of study. Opportunities for undergraduate research were also cited.

Library Services

Faculty praised the availability of resources, service to the greater community, and helpfulness of the Consortium Library staff as a definite plus at UAA. Concern about loss of these resources (including Interlibrary Loan) was voiced numerous times.

Faculty Development

Faculty in every cohort expressed appreciation for the assistance and multitude of faculty development opportunities provided by CAFE. Adjuncts and terms were grateful that those opportunities were extended to them as well as to tenure-track faculty; New Faculty Orientation was specifically cited as extremely useful, as was the Difficult Dialogues program. New faculty said they felt the University did a good job of helping them feel supported and prepared to teach; faculty with more tenure expressed gratitude for the opportunities available at UAA that do not exist elsewhere and the opportunity for interdepartmental learning.

Support for Academic Technology

Many faculty offered their thanks for the enthusiastic and accessible support they receive from Academic Innovations and e-Learning for assisting them with integrating various academic technologies into their courses. There is agreement that it is very important not just to have online classes that meet students' schedules, but they must be of very high quality.

Communication by/with UAA Administrators

Efforts by administrators to stay in touch with faculty, particularly during these stressful fiscal times, were welcomed and appreciated. These conversations with the Provost were cited as a great example of a positive effort to connect administration with faculty. Some faculty had positive examples of communication from leaders within their respective colleges, schools, and departments.

Support for Research

A few faculty indicated that they received strong support for their research. Being in Alaska/the Arctic was cited as an advantage, and faculty indicated that UAA has unique opportunities to become a leading university in Arctic research.

Flexibility of Service

A number of faculty greatly appreciated the flexibility around service commitments at UAA, citing the opportunity to direct their own service paths as a unique and important benefit. Community Campus faculty expressed gratitude for their inclusion in UAA-wide committees and other service opportunities.

Community Campuses' Ability to Respond to Needs

Many community campus faculty cited their ability to respond in a direct, tailored way to student and community needs as a strong positive on those campuses. The smaller scale of these campuses made possible highly customized responses to these needs.

Collaboration

Where it existed, faculty lauded efforts at collaboration and cooperation between departments and across campuses and MAUs, citing positive benefits for students and everyone involved.

Community Engagement/Support

The many ways UAA engages with the wider community – whether through formal community partnerships and engaged courses or through informal interactions and service efforts – were noted as highly fruitful and successful for all parties. In addition, faculty noted that “the community wants our graduates. They support them while they are on campus and hire them after they graduate”. Several faculty shared their experiences with how Anchorage’s business and alumni communities want to give back to UAA.

Increased Student Interest

More prospective students seem to be considering UAA as a first choice; in addition, many of our current students seem highly engaged in the campus community.

NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

Research Support

The overwhelming preponderance of research faculty cited problems with and lack of support from the UAA system. Bureaucracy, limited support from the designated office, paperwork and processes being offloaded onto faculty, delays in travel funding and reimbursement, and difficulty getting and keeping graduate students were noted as particular problems. Problems with the IRB were epic; concern was also expressed about an overemphasis on patents in the Innovate awards and the decision to award a few large grants rather than several smaller ones that could serve as seed money for larger research projects. Some faculty expressed difficulty with accessing grant funds that they had been awarded, even though the funds are ostensibly in the system.

Leadership

In some cases, faculty experienced highly problematic interactions with upper leadership, especially Deans and Associate Deans. They cited instances of lack of consideration and inclusion in decision-making, and negative, abrupt and/or inconsistent communications, particularly with respect to communicating “bad news” and changes to programs, workloads or support services. Concern was also expressed about the need to offer training to leaders and potential leaders and to ensure that a pipeline of successors is being developed. Finally, faculty voiced requests for leaders to actively

support innovation and intervene on those who obstruct growth and creativity, including individuals who actively “bully.”

Marketing and Connecting with Community

A very larger number of faculty believe UAA needs to be doing more to market itself as a high-quality choice to a multiplicity of student populations: local, statewide, Lower 48 and international. A wide swath of suggestions was offered for how to accomplish this goal, ranging from supporting more efforts to connect with local high school students to advertising UAA as a “destination” college with extraordinary opportunities for outdoor and indigenous education to increasing the number of “salons” in local homes to which parents and prospective students can come for informal chats. In addition, a desire was expressed for UAA to issue responses more quickly when it was attacked in the political arena.

Bureaucracy/Lack of Administrative Support

TEMS/Travel – Difficulties with travel and travel paperwork at UAA appeared to be legendary. Criticisms about delays were legion.

General student experience – Daunting student challenges navigating the enrollment and financial systems at UAA were mentioned by several faculty, as were late notification about key deadlines, lack of monitoring of graduation status, and other advising issues.

Hiring processes – Faculty complained that the extraordinary number of steps required to complete hires too often resulted in delays and lost prospects.

General administrative support – Some faculty stated that too much time is taken up with chairs/faculty doing data entry, scheduling, textbook orders, etc., and what administrative support does exist is often located in another building.

Facilities

Faculty in leadership positions cited numerous occasions of frustration and high cost getting help maintaining the physical plant in their departments. Many requested additional basic custodial and facilities help (trash, painting, carpet, mice control, etc.).

P and T Process

Those who had most recently gone through the P and T process noted many challenges, ranging from the overwhelming nature of the paperwork to a desire for mentoring and models to a hope for more efficiency, less paperwork, and a more reflective, big-picture approach. The Provost encouraged the faculty to lobby for these changes amongst their colleagues.

Faculty Diversity

Several faculty noted that UAA needs to ensure that its population mirrors the demographics of the state. Support for women’s studies was also requested.

More Time for Professional Development/Service/Research

Newer faculty expressed a desire for more time for the administration and pursuit of research funds, the pursuit of professional development opportunities and community service. They urged a

more focused and efficient approach to university committee work, citing Evergreen College, in which committees sunset after a few years' work.

Fear and Uncertainty Due to Budget Cuts

Inevitably, many faculty voiced fears and concerns about the future in terms of positions, programs and general resources at the university (e.g. library, research support, etc.) and the potential impact of budget discussions on student decisions. Appreciation was expressed for efforts to be transparent and keep faculty well-informed about what was expected to happen in coming months and years.

Faculty Workload/Recognition

Many faculty expressed concern that more and more administrative and teaching duties were being shifted onto their shoulders without much in the way of training and/or support. Simultaneously, the institution seemed to be cutting back on faculty recognition for good work.

Divisions/Disrespect Amongst Faculty

Some faculty noted that some departments convey a deep sense of disrespect and disregard for contingent faculty, both adjuncts and terms. They described what they called a "class" divide between the various tracks of the faculty community (tenured and tenure-track vs. contingent [term, adjunct]) that has become more pronounced and fraught with recent reductions in some term contracts.

Community Campuses: Collaboration vs. Competition

A number of community campus faculty questioned whether the main campus has a culture of collaboration with respect to Community Campuses, with the expectation that information be shared in a timely fashion and reaching out to faculty on these campuses is a built-in assumption. They indicated that a lack of collaboration and coordination often negatively impacts students who can't or don't wish to move to Anchorage and who may choose other campuses, or even outside programs, due to their inability to complete the courses they need. The question: "And how does that work for a student outside of Anchorage?" needs to be built into the culture the way universal design is now embedded in academic work; geographic accessibility is as important as all other forms of accessibility. Many indicated that they want Anchorage departments not to view online offerings as taking away from face- to-face enrollment on the main campus, but instead as making it easier for "place-committed" students to enroll.