

Statement of Concern from the UAS TLTR Group, 03/11/2014

Potential impact of educational technology issues on rural and disadvantaged Alaskans

Background

- Use of technology for the delivery of distance education at UAS has changed over the years. Courses that were once delivered through audioconference, fax and US mail now are based upon online access; course activities are largely computer mediated.
- Student demographics may also be changing. Historical data from some courses shows a decrease in the percentage of rural students enrolled. Some instructors report increased levels of frustration with technology issues, especially among rural students. Our concern is that increased use of online and computer-based teaching tools may contribute to a technology divide. Students who own laptop computers and have high speed, reliable Internet access are likely to have a very different eLearning experience when compared to students who share access to a family computer and who lack reliable Internet service. This difference may impact student success. It may impact whether or not potential students choose to enroll in distance courses.

Technology issues that may impact rural or disadvantaged Alaskans

- Groups at increased risk of negative impact from technology access and ease of use issues
 - o Rural
 - o Economically disadvantaged
 - o Older
 - o Cultural or family backgrounds with limited technology use
- Ways in which there can be negative impacts
 - o Internet access and ease of use
 - o Hardware access and ease of use
 - o Comfort level
 - o Registration issues including credit card issues
 - o We note that actual Internet access for rural students can be much more challenging than community websites imply

Recommendations

- University-wide awareness of technology accessibility and ease of use issues faced by rural and disadvantaged students
- Instructional design that takes into account technology access issues and ease of use issues when possible
- Carefully planned, well-funded study to better understand impacts of technology access and ease of use on student recruitment/success. A statewide approach is most appropriate.
- We recommend awareness of options/impacts; we do not seek to dictate technology choices

Summary

- Alaska has a unique population structure with many remote villages, largely populated by Alaska Natives. Alaska does not have a state-funded community college system and UA distance education plays a very important role in these villages. We at the University of Alaska Southeast would like encourage a statewide approach to better understand and improve eLearning opportunities for rural and disadvantaged students. Is there a growing technology divide in Alaska in terms of access to distance education? The TLTR group suggests that statewide initiatives and grant funding may help us address the question and improve educational access. Understanding the magnitude of this issue and finding ways to mitigate it should be a priority.