

Director: Education empowers people

by John Creed

Chukchi College

KOTZEBUE — Chukchi College is located in this ancient Inupiat Eskimo settlement at the tip of the Baldwin Peninsula in Northwest Alaska, 30 miles above the Arctic Circle.

Guided by the idea that education empowers people, Chukchi functions more like a junior college with a strong academic tradition than your basic community college.

"The overriding philosophy of this institution is that degrees are extremely important," said Lynn Johnson, Chukchi's acting director.

A two-year school offering an associate of arts degree, Chukchi rarely strays from its strict academic curriculum, he said.

Johnson, 43, an anthropologist who worked on Native American reservations in the Lower 48 before settling in Kotzebue nearly a decade ago, estimates there are 400 or more professional jobs in the NANA region of Northwest Alaska.

"By and large, those jobs are taken by whites with degrees, and there is a high turnover," he said. "My philosophy is that the only way a region can be truly autonomous is if it has its own people fill professional positions from within. Although it's not conscious, the situation now is neo-colonialism."

Johnson doesn't believe in what he calls the "workshop" mentality, which has permeated the region in the past.

"People come in from outside and teach a one-week class and you get one credit," he said. "This became accepted as education for people. I call

it a 'Band-aid' approach. No workshop in the world is going to train someone to be an accountant or a school teacher."

Since Chukchi re-opened in 1982 after a two-year closure, the school has graduated 28 local residents, from a population of less than 6,000. Sixty percent earned their degrees from outlying villages. Many Chukchi graduates have gone on to higher degrees.

"I don't want to hear that the education at Chukchi is substandard because it's not," Johnson said. "We're putting people on campus in Fairbanks who are not just doing OK."

For example, he said, recent Chukchi graduates Yelma (Booth) Jones of Noatak made dean's list both semesters last year in Fairbanks, and John Fields of Deering made the chancellor's list — all A's.

Conventional education couldn't survive at Chukchi, Johnson said.

"Most of the students we attract are older, and they have jobs and families," he said. "They're not 18-year-old kids right out of high school going off to college."

With family and community responsibilities, it's next to impossible for the majority of Chukchi students, who live in outlying villages, to move to Kotzebue for college.

So in addition to audioconferencing and its new electronic chalkboard system, all of Chukchi's village learning stations are hooked into the University of Alaska computer network.

Chukchi instructors travel by snow machine or small aircraft to the villages a few times each semester to

work one-on-one with students.

In addition, students can connect to more than 1,400 university information systems around the world, including a 500,000-volume data base containing the holdings of the Rasmuson library in Fairbanks and the Alaska State Library in Juneau.

"The only way we can be successful is to take courses to the people," Johnson said. "I mean, why can't education take place at the kitchen table in somebody's home? Is there something scared about a lectern and row of students for a quality education?"