

UAA Minorities and Justice Careers faces budget axe

by Jim Benedetto

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Alaska's only minority legal training program is headed for the cutting block this year, another victim of shrinking revenues which threatens to dash the hopes of Alaska Natives who would like to someday help to shape policy in the state's justice system.

The University of Alaska-Anchorage's Minorities and Justice Careers program, in the four years since its inception, has provided a door to justice professions for over 60 minority students, most of them Alaska Natives. Now the program may be doomed, say university officials, after years of fighting for last-minute appropriations and bureaucratic shuffling.

The Minorities and Justice Careers Program is an intensive four-week course designed particularly for minority students (especially Alaska Natives), and for all others seeking a practical introduction to the justice field. During the first part of the summer offering, students receive an introduction to legal study and participate in a legal writing and research

skills seminar. These classes are designed to provide individual guidance in the development of the verbal and analytic skills necessary to those who choose careers in the justice system.

During the second part of the program, students serve as interns in justice-related offices. In past years, students have worked in the Public Defender's office, the District Attorney's office, with the Alaska State Troopers, the Judicial Council, at the Eagle River correctional facility and in various private law offices. The internships give students a realistic appreciation of the daily work and responsibilities of justice professionals.

The sixty-plus students who have participated in the program came from all over Alaska. A number of these students hold professional positions in justice-related entities; many more are continuing their education in the justice field.

The Minorities and Justice Careers course has received extensive favorable publicity throughout the state, and enthusiastic support from Alaska Native and other minority

leaders.

Professor Stephen Conn, the head of the program, received the 1984 Chancellor's Award for Innovation in Teaching for his work in this course and others.

But the program is now faced with a new university administration policy requiring summer programs to be self-supporting through their enrollment.

"The program offers a broad view of the justice system. It is a small program with a targeted objective," Conn said. "Many programs promise the undeliverable. This one offers a chance to work into entry level legal positions. It provides a vehicle for minorities to become active in Alaska's justice system and possibly work into positions to make policymaking decisions in the future."

According to Mel Kalkowski, UAA director of public affairs, this program is at the tail end of the university's budgeting list, as are all the other summer programs.

"We've raised tuition, cut out programs and classes, and trimmed as much fat as possible. The university's goal is to offer programs in the highest demand," Kalkowski said. "This is

a very valuable program and we intend to do everything we can to provide funds. However, with shrinking budgets, this program lends itself best towards someone or an organization to endow or underwrite it."

In past years, scholarships to attract students to the program have largely come from a grant program administered by the university's cooperative extension service. In some cases, regional and village corporations funded students.

School of Justice estimates for the cost of this summer's program stand at \$26,457. With the prospect of grant programs drying up sooner than usual, Conn says it may be time to ask the state Legislature for a direct appropriation for the program's cost.

The program's potential is exciting to Conn, who is prepared to instruct students through the state's teleconference system.

"We need time to show people this (program) is valuable to the Native community. We need a more solid funding base to teach people they have a choice," Conn said.

Freelance writer John M. Ingold contributed to this article. □