

An educator takes issue with new university plan for rural ed

Editor's Note: The following commentary was published in the August 17 Tundra Times. It provides background about the fears that some have about the University's reorganization.

By FRED BIGJIM

The recent announcement by the University of Alaska Board of Regents to reorganize the University of Alaska will effectively dissolve the Rural Educational Affairs division as it now exists. This action will also dilute the rural voice in the University system. The rural voice could be called the Alaska Native voice in the U of A System.

The Rural Educational Affairs division and a vice president's position were established on July 1, 1975. The Alaska Federation of Natives and numerous Native educators urged the University to establish the Division so that higher education could be delivered to rural areas of Alaska. This was a positive move by the University and was accepted by the rural Native Alaskans as an answer to a much needed deficiency within the University.

The deficiency was the University's seemingly blatant policy to ignore the higher educational needs of Rural Alaska. The REA action was the beginning to provide education and opportunities to rural Alaskans on a more serious and permanent basis. The Vice President's position was a voice amongst the hierarchy of the University policy decision makers, a voice equal to others responsible to deliver higher educational opportunities to all Alaskans. The Vice President's voice was considered the voice of rural Alaskans; or further yet, the voice of rural Native Alaskans.

It is unfortunate that the University has chosen yet another reorganization in the attempt to resolve the problems of rural education. Rural Native educators are aware of the political pressure that has been gen-

erated by the unionization of community colleges to force the Board of Regents to allow the community colleges to become an entity of their own. If the Board of Regents bows to this demand and destroys the original request by Alaska Natives to create a Rural Educational Affairs division, they are in a sense doing away with the original and only Alaska Native voice in Alaskan Higher Education.

It was a personality conflict within the University and not a poor rural education organizational plan that resulted in negative feelings toward REA's ability to administer and deliver higher educational opportunities to rural Alaska. A change in the organizational structure is not likely to ease feelings of conflict and cooperation within the University.

It now seems inevitable that the four rural community colleges, Kodiak, Kenai, Kuskokwim and Northwest will be removed from the rural affairs division and dumped in with the urban community colleges under one chancellor.

What remains of Rural Education will be assigned to a Vice Chancellor under the Chancellor for Community Colleges.

The present Rural Educational Affairs division's administration should be re-vamped. It is staffed mainly by non-educators with no formal rural education experience. This is an area where, hopefully, the new administration of REA will make some changes. There are many competent rural educators, both Native and non-Native, that should be positioned in decision making offices within REA.

I would like to suggest that the University of Alaska Board of Regents establish a Chancellor for all rural University units responsible for University activities not directly connected to community colleges or senior college jurisdiction.

This would help keep the rural Alaska Native voice prominent in decision making circles of the University.