

Post secondary rural education

(Editor's Note: Three weeks ago, Laury Roberts looked at the status of elementary and secondary education in rural areas. As a followup, Roberts gives an overview of post-secondary and adult learning in the bush.)

In the past couple of years Alaska has ranked nearly the lowest in the nation in the growth of financial support for education. And it looks like the next couple of years won't be any different.

"There has been no new academic or vocational programs in the last three years of any substance," says Pat O'Rourke, University of Alaska (UA) chan-

cellor for community, colleges and rural education. We're just trying to keep pace with expanding enrollments."

Post secondary rural education faces the same problem as the lower grades: although facilities may be available, money to bolster academic programs within the buildings is not.

With a 15 per cent enrollment growth, a 16 per cent budget hike request for next year will do little more than allow the community college system to keep pace with inflation.

And, in order to raise additional cash, the UA Board of Regents will soon endorse a tui-

tion increase, meaning it will cost students about \$185 per semester to even walk through the classroom doors.

O'Rourke is responsible for 11 of the 12 community colleges in the state: Northwest (Nome), Prince William Sound (Valdez), Kuskokwim (Bethel), Mat-Su (Palmer), Kotzebue, Sitka, Fairbanks, Ketchikan, Anchorage, Kenai and Kodiak.

O'Rourke's main priority for 1980 is to hire faculty for the Kotzebue and Valdez sites. His next agenda item is to beef up staffing in the 10 UA rural extension centers, which provide basic adult education, and to
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establish a new center in McGrath.

Under Gov. Jay Hammond's "hold the line" budget, it is doubtful that those new positions will be granted.

"You can't say education in rural Alaska is cost effective, particularly ~~whom~~ compared to urban education," says O'Rourke. "But we just take a broader perspective and take advantage of talents in the village so we can reach that delicate balance of rotating programs without saturating our clientele."

But money is not the only problem confronting rural secondary education. "Every community wants a college," says O'Rourke. "But the numbers aren't adequate. I'm not sure that's the best method."

"Since the first thrust in 1972, there hasn't been a continuing philosophic thread on rural education because of the reorganization of UA," he continues. "Frankly, there's been a

lack of planning for rural education. It's been a shotgun approach."

Under a bill introduced in the state Senate this session, high schools would be given the authority to offer adult basic education courses, which could place another question mark over the purview of UA.

The chancellor says the ultimate plan is to organize all adult rural education as a separate college of UA which can offer accredited degree programs.

One lawmaker who has been a force behind getting rural education programs through the legislature is Sen. Frank Ferguson (D-Kotzebue). Ferguson contends the bush has never been served well by UA. He has introduced a bill establishing two grades of free adult education beyond grade 12. The measure would also provide education for pre-schoolers.

"O'Rourke says we need more studies," observes Ferguson, "but that slows down the possibility of doing something

by at least five years."

Ferguson says his bill is for those who will continue to live in their home village. He says it would allow drop outs to pick up on vocational skills and offer extra schooling to young adults before they go on to college.

"UA is very reluctant to put more programs out there. They're basically looking at expansion in Fairbanks and Anchorage," Ferguson says.