

Programs offer help to rural students

by Sen. John Binkley
for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — A bachelor's degree is the minimum requirement for most professional jobs these days, and the University of Alaska is on the right track in the programs it has developed to ensure that more rural Alaska students have a better chance at competing in the workforce by earning a college degree.

OPINION

While not representing the total effort to recruit and assist rural students, four programs the university is pursuing strike me as especially interesting and helpful to rural students: the Rural Alaska Honors Institute, Rural Student Services, Native Student Services and the Della Keats Summer Enrichment Program.

The Rural Alaska Honors Institute, which the university developed with the Alaska Federation of Natives in 1982, is a summer program designed to identify and recruit rural high school students who show promise as potential college students.

These students, at the completion of their junior year of high school, are invited to participate in an intensive academic enrichment program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. The program looks for students with an interest in specific professional careers, such as business management, natural resources, science, engineering and teaching.

The coursework itself is designed to provide study in areas that will be

necessary if the student is to enter college and succeed. By the time the six-week program is completed, most of the students will have been accepted into UAF, and when they actually begin college classes a year later, the university attempts to "fast-track" them through their degree programs.

The RAHI program also assists students who choose to attend other institutions, including Lower 48 schools.

The university's ongoing study of RAHI participants indicates these students have enrolled in college in much higher numbers than their counterparts, and they're staying in college longer, with a significant number attaining degrees.

Surveys also indicate that 95 percent of the RAHI students found the program "very helpful" in preparing for college, and 92 percent said they would recommend it without hesitation.

The Della Keats Summer Enrichment Program is another effort to recruit and assist rural students while they're still in high school. Also six weeks long, this program in 1991 will recruit 24 Native junior and senior high school students interested in pursuing a career in health.

The program primarily will focus on students interested in attending the University of Alaska Anchorage, which is the designated health science school in the state university system.

Students will be selected based on their grade-point average, depth of high school coursework (especially math and science), an essay and letters of recommendation.

The six weeks of intensive study for those selected will focus on math, anatomy and physiology, chemistry, English and study skills.

While at the university, students also

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will receive a full campus orientation, and perhaps more important, will learn skills critical to overcoming the many difficulties many rural students face in coping with the transition to life in a busy urban setting.

Once enrolled in classes in Anchorage, rural students can also find continuing assistance through the office of Native Student Services.

This effort to help rural students includes providing admissions assistance and financial aid advice, information about housing and tutoring possibilities and typewriters and computers.

Similar services are offered at the University of Alaska Fairbanks through the office of Rural Student Services.

These services were first offered 20 years ago in an effort to reduce the high dropout rate of Native students at the Fairbanks campus and now are part of a comprehensive program that includes recruitment and retention of Native students.

Rural Student Services works close-

ly with rural school districts to both recruit and retain students, offers new students counseling with Native elders and Native student peers who are both experienced and successful in their college studies and provides developmental courses to shore up the skills rural students need to successfully complete a degree program.

Rural students also are offered frequent information sessions in which they can learn more about specific careers they're interested in.

Perhaps the best thing about all of these programs is that they approach the idea of providing assistance to rural students from both an academic and social footing.

And while the university acknowledges there is still a long way to go if we are to provide full higher education opportunities to the eager young minds in rural Alaska, I'm glad these programs are available, and I encourage rural students (and their parents!) to take full advantage of them.