

Den Nena Henash - Our Land Speaks

Ut Kah neek - Informing and Reporting

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Native student skill levels

To Sen. Willie Hensley:

I recently testified in Kotzebue before your committee on effective rural schooling. I addressed how the University of Alaska can offer college courses to advanced high school students. Chukchi College's premise remains that *advanced* students in rural Alaska can benefit greatly from taking University of Alaska classes while still in secondary school.

In any case, I would like to clarify and elaborate on some of the issues your committee raised in follow-up questions to my testimony. For example, you asked about the skill levels of Native students.

Yes, Native and rural students generally do come to Chukchi and other university campuses with gaps in their reading and writing skills. As you know, either non-standard, "village" English or a Native language prevails in rural Alaska, where, in addition, no real legacy of rigorous academic standards yet exists.

Even our most advanced, older Native students at Chukchi with many years professional experience often suffer from basic grammar problems stemming from speaking either non-standard English or a completely different first language. The stark truth is that a thorough understanding of English takes constant study even for standard English speakers.

In addition, few rural high school graduates come to us ready to tackle college-level reading and writing. Consequently, Chukchi and other branch campuses of the university have developed a system of developmental courses to prepare students for freshman-level academia.

You also asked about the level of rigor in Chukchi's writing classes (and

presumably throughout the rural campuses) and how they compare with the same courses offered on the urban campuses. I cannot speak for all rural post secondary writing instructors, but I believe my writing students work as hard or harder than their urban counterparts.

While many rural students have problems with basic skills, another situation emerges as well: Skills vary widely in rural post secondary writing classes. So, to answer your question about rigor: yes and no. Yes, Chukchi writing courses are just as rigorous or more so than those on urban campuses. And no, not all Chukchi students finishing writing classes have the skills they need to keep from slipping back into old bad habits.

The latter situation creates a dilemma for the professor. For example, I have students who work like crazy all semester, gain tremendous self-confidence, and even get an essay or two published in the *Tundra Times* or other publications. Nevertheless, their writing is still plagued with deep, basic mechanical problems. So what grade do they deserve? A "B" because they have improved, or a "D" because they still have a long way to go?

Although rural university teachers must employ keen sensitivity for the pressures of village life, ultimately, we demand college-level performance. Students must *earn* diplomas and degrees and not be given them simply by virtue of attending classes.

Writing becomes a powerful tool for self-determination when, of course, it is done well.

Yours sincerely,
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