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## From the Executive Director/ Executive Officer

Welcome to the re-launch of *ACPE Update*, the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education's quarterly briefing to leaders, policymakers, and other key stakeholders. With this and future issues, ACPE's focus will be providing state leaders and stakeholders with briefings on the Commission's mission-centered initiatives. The lens for this first edition is on the Alaska Performance Scholarship and the Commission's research and analysis initiatives.

While primarily distributed electronically, *ACPE Update* will also be available in paper format upon request. Each issue will also be available online at [AKAdvantage.alaska.gov](http://AKAdvantage.alaska.gov). Check out the Website, or call my office at 465-6740 with your comments.



### Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education Alaska Student Loan Corporation

The Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education, funded by the Alaska Student Loan Corporation, promotes access to and success in education and career training beyond high school.

The Commission provides:

- programs creating early awareness of the importance of preparing for success in higher education
- education planning tools and resources
- advocacy and support for postsecondary participation in Alaska
- financial aid for college and career training
- education consumer protection through institutional authorization and complaint investigation

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## New Alaska Scholarship: An Invitation to Excellence



**REWARD OFFERED**

Up to \$4,755 a year for Alaska's hardest-working students.

*“The Alaska [performance] scholarship program is established to provide scholarships for high school graduates who are Alaska residents to attend a qualified postsecondary institution in the state.”*

This 27-word preamble to the recently passed Senate Bill 221 sets out the purpose of one of Alaska’s most significant education programs in recent years – the first statewide performance-based scholarship. The Alaska Performance Scholarship (APS) will allow qualifying Alaska students to more easily pursue a postsecondary education in the state, providing funds to help meet costs of attendance.

Proposed by the Parnell Administration and created by the Legislature, the APS is an invitation to excellence. Extended to Alaska students and schools, the invitation calls upon students to work hard in high school in exchange for APS awards of up to \$4,755 per year at approved Alaska postsecondary institutions. As part of that invitation to excellence, APS goals include improving high school performance and better preparing Alaskans for postsecondary education and career success. In short, the APS invites all students to step forward and academically challenge themselves, at the same time Alaska parents and schools are invited to create an environment within which students can maximize their opportunity to benefit from education and training after high school to secure economically viable lifelong Alaska careers.

The APS will first be available to the high school class of 2011. Recipients must be Alaska residents who graduated from high school in Alaska, and who meet the following eligibility criteria:

- completed a rigorous high school curriculum
- achieve a high school GPA of at least 2.5, or equivalent
- earn a minimum score on a qualifying college or career readiness test
- are enrolled at least half-time, in good standing, in a certificate or higher program at a qualifying Alaska institution
- have qualifying unmet costs of attendance after considering all other non-loan aid
- have not received more than eight semesters of Alaska Scholarship Program aid

To facilitate any needed modification in high school schedules, the specific high school curricular requirements are being phased in over time. Scholarships are available for a total of eight semesters of study, and must be used within six years of high school graduation.

The statutes implementing the APS (AS 14.43.810-849) charge the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (EED) with setting student eligibility requirements, the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development (Labor) with determining eligibility of career and vocational education programs, and the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education (ACPE) with administering the scholarship program. To accomplish these charges, the three organizations have collaboratively addressed promulgation of regulations, public communications, and program implementation, to ensure efficient and effective scholarship program deployment.

Awaiting legislative action this session are SB43/HB104, which will formalize the Alaska Performance Scholarship name; create a funding mechanism managed by the Department of Revenue from which APS awards will be made; and make tax credits available for donations to the APS fund. Also under legislative deliberation is the Governor's FY12 budget request, which includes \$8.2 million in funding for 2011/2012 scholarship awards.

Passage of SB221 also marked the creation of two related legislative task forces, the Higher Education Scholarship Funding Task Force, which issued a report in December which included APS funding recommendations; and the Higher Education and Career Readiness Advisory Task Force, which is expected to report its findings and recommendations in April of 2011.

For more information and updates about the scholarship and links to the legislative task force reports, visit [APS.alaska.gov](http://APS.alaska.gov), or visit ACPE online at [AKAdvantage.alaska.gov](http://AKAdvantage.alaska.gov) and click on the *Grants and Scholarships* tab.



# How Will The Alaska Performance Scholarship Affect Alaska Students?

*How many additional Alaska high school graduates continued their education because they received an APS?*

*How many Alaska high school graduates decided to pursue their postsecondary education in Alaska so they could receive the APS?*

*By receiving an APS, were students better able to afford school and, therefore, able to work less?*

*Did certain groups of eligible students take advantage of the APS more than others?*

*Do APS recipients, having met the academic performance requirements for the program, perform better in their postsecondary studies? Do they take fewer remedial classes, and do they complete their studies more quickly than non-recipients?*

The class of 2010-11 will soon be experiencing life after high school, and, for those students who meet the APS requirements, there exists the opportunity to have their postsecondary education costs reduced by as much as \$4,755 per year for up to four years. So, will the scholarship change students' behaviors? In order to answer that question, one has to know what students would have done if the scholarship program didn't exist. One of the best ways





to determine that is to measure students' behaviors today, to create a benchmark for use in comparing the behavior and outcomes relative to APS recipients.

During 2011, ACPE's research partners are preparing data to measure the behaviors of earlier graduating classes. With this information, we will have a better understanding of the choices that APS recipients made, and how the scholarship appears to have affected their choices. While it will be at least 2017 before we can determine the full effects of the APS on this year's graduates, we will be tracking recipients each year and comparing their progress to our benchmarked population and analyzing any differences in behaviors. The first

report on the characteristics of APS recipients will be prepared in January 2012, followed by regular updates as APS recipients pursue their postsecondary studies.



## ACPE's Newest Unit – Research & Analysis

-  *How many Alaskans pursue postsecondary education but do not finish their program? Do these students have identifiable characteristics which differ from program completers? Was there an identifiable risk factor they shared that, with appropriate interventions, might have led to a different outcome?*
-  *What factors are most likely to limit a student's success in school and work? What are the best ways to go about minimizing or eliminating these risk factors?*
-  *What are the greatest impediments to students completing their educational programs, and could these impediments be eliminated or minimized to improve the chance of success?*
-  *What information do students need in order to make the best choices in their educational and career pursuits?*

Answers to these and other questions related to advancing educational attainment in Alaska are critical not only to making sure ACPE is achieving its mission, but more importantly to ensuring Alaska's efforts and resources invested to improve education are properly focused. While there has been a history of cooperation among ACPE and various state departments to answer these types of questions -- most notably the departments of Labor & Workforce Development, Education and Early Development, and the University of Alaska -- there has not been a research unit dedicated to answering them.

Last summer ACPE began an effort to fill that void with the hiring of Brian Rae for the newly created position of Assistant Director for Research and Analysis. The new unit will conduct research projects to help decision-makers maximize educational opportunities for Alaskans by preparing them for the requirements of the working world and for future success, beginning with our youngest Alaskans. Rae's background is as an economist with the Research and Analysis Section at the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, an important research partner in tracking students' performance. With ACPE, he is initially concentrating on identifying which are the most crucial unanswered questions with regards to education in Alaska, and determining how best to answer them.

ACPE's need to build internal research and analysis capacity became apparent when the agency pursued a U.S. Department of Education grant to create a Statewide Longitudinal Data System, or SLDS. The SLDS would allow ACPE to access data and analyze Alaskans' educational and workforce outcomes, beginning at preschool and extending through their working careers. Access to such rich information would allow ACPE to measure the effectiveness of its various student aid and outreach programs and identify at-risk populations that might benefit most from specific interventions. Although Alaska did not receive a grant award at this time, the need to increase outcomes reporting capacity still exists, and ACPE and our research partners continue working to identify and create the most important aspects of an Alaska SLDS.

Research and analysis regarding the Alaska Performance Scholarship is also a new mandate for the executive branch. Outcomes on the program’s success must be annually reported to the legislature and the public. The program’s impact on students’ readiness to participate and succeed in postsecondary education will only become clear over time. To ensure compliance with the reporting requirement, ACPE must act now. In order to track the impact of the scholarships over time and reach a conclusion on how they affect the lives of recipients compared to those who do not participate in the program, we will need to begin considering information from many different sources along a continuum, and not just about recipients but the entire student population. Building such a longitudinal database will be a challenging undertaking. ACPE is committed to begin the work of creating an early education-to-labor force database in order to reach informed conclusions on the effectiveness of our programs.

Given limited resources, work will most immediately be in those areas important to the educational community. Step one was to identify what specific research topics are of greatest common interest. To do so, the research unit created a survey to help identify the most pressing needs of Alaska’s educators, policymakers, parents, and students. (Survey results in sidebar one)



With key research topics identified, ACPE will work with its partner agencies, including the departments of Education, Labor, Health & Social Services, the University of Alaska, and local school districts to bring together information required to measure program outcomes.

## Focusing Educational Research Survey Results

In August 2010, ACPE conducted a survey to gain insights into the research areas deemed most important in education and education outcomes in Alaska. One hundred sixty-six stakeholders from various Alaska organizations, including teaching professionals and school administrators, government agencies at both the state and local levels, private and public postsecondary institutions, Native organizations, advisory committees for education programs, and public and private research entities were contacted. Recipients were asked to share the survey link with other appropriate parties, and a total of 229 recipients responded.

Recipients were asked to prioritize among five different areas of research, and within each of the five areas there were three specific questions to consider. Survey respondents were surprisingly consistent in their priority areas. The five research areas, presented in order of highest to lowest priority, were:

- 1) Determining why certain students do not achieve their full potential or even drop out of the educational system.
- 2) Gaining information on the “success” of educational programs and interventions.
- 3) Measuring students’ “success” after they leave an Alaska secondary education program.
- 4) Determining what information students need/desire to make informed decisions regarding postsecondary education and careers.
- 5) Identifying where students decide to pursue their education or their career after they leave secondary education in Alaska.

The complete survey results can be found on our website under the Research topic, or by clicking [here](#).



# Data Rules!

*Beginning with this issue of ACPE Update, we'll begin an irregular and somewhat light-hearted look at certain rules that, if ignored, can lead to dangerous mishandling of information, including the possibility of reaching incorrect conclusions.*

**RULE 1. Like a gun, treat all data as if it's loaded, even if someone tells you that they've checked it.**

When we're presented with a chart or a table, it sometimes feels like we've been given a test or a puzzle, and our challenge is to interpret what the data's telling us as quickly as possible, hopefully before someone has the opportunity to point it out to us.

For example, if someone gave us these actual ACT scores showing the average scores for five states and the U.S. as a whole, some conclusions might immediately pop into our minds:

**Average State ACT Scores, 2010**

	Composite	English	Math	Reading	Science
Maine	23.2	23.2	23	23.6	22.5
New York	23.3	22.7	23.6	23.3	23.1
Alaska	21.1	20.3	21.2	21.7	20.9
Florida	19.5	18.6	19.7	20.1	19.1
Colorado	20.6	19.9	20.4	21.1	20.7
<b>US</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>20.5</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>21.3</b>	<b>20.9</b>

I'd probably recognize quickly that the shadings had relevance, and figure out that the green boxes highlighted scores above the US average, and the red highlighted those below. My first conclusion would be that Maine is doing a very good job of teaching its students, at least with regards to answering questions correctly on the ACT. And, if I were a parent of school-aged children living in Colorado, I might be looking to relocate. Obviously, some states are doing a better job of preparing their students than are others.

However, I'd be more than slightly confused when I was subsequently presented with the following data on SAT scores:

**Average State SAT Scores, 2009**

	Reading	Math	Writing
Maine	468	467	455
New York	485	502	478
Alaska	520	516	492
Florida	497	498	480
Colorado	568	575	555
<b>US</b>	<b>501</b>	<b>515</b>	<b>493</b>

Why would there be such a large difference? Are Maine teachers “teaching to the test,” and choosing to teach to the ACT while ignoring the SAT? Is there rampant cheating in Colorado on the SAT tests, since the Colorado results are at least 60 points higher than the U.S. averages?

Hopefully it’s none of the above. The problem is most likely that not all of the important information has been disclosed to us, so we lack a full understanding of the test results as they’re presented.

Colorado is one of only six states that tests 100% of its students using the ACT, while two other states test nearly all of their students using it. Conversely, in Maine only 10% of the students decided to voluntarily take the ACT, but 90% of students take the SAT. These differences in the populations taking the test are the most likely cause for the differing results.

***Percent taking:***

	<b>ACT</b>	<b>SAT</b>
Maine	10	90
New York	27	85
Alaska	28	46
Florida	65	59
Colorado	100	20
<b>US</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>46</b>

To be fair, both testing firms warn against making such state-to-state comparisons of the test results, even though both firms also publish tables with results presented for each of the states. Sometimes, even though we know we shouldn’t do something, it’s just too tempting not to. And, we should take heart that, at least in most of the areas tested, Alaska test takers were above average.

*SOURCE: ACT Profile Report-Alaska: The Condition of College & Career Readiness, Class of 2010 and The College Board State Reports 2010-Alaska.*

## AlaskAdvantage Education Grant Outcomes Report Released

The AlaskAdvantage Education Grant Program (AEG) was authorized by the legislature to “provide financial assistance to eligible students to enable them to attend, or continue their attendance at, postsecondary educational institutions.” Since the first grant was awarded for the 2005-06 academic year, nearly 4,500 students have received AEG funds that reduced their out-of-pocket cost of attending a postsecondary institution in Alaska.

Still, how successful has the program been in enabling students to attend or continue their education? That was the focus of ACPE’s most recent research project which incorporates a survey of AEG recipients to whom that question was posed. And, while students expressed support for the AEG program and were very appreciative of the benefits they received, several challenges were confirmed:

- 1) With limited available funding, only those students with very high unmet costs of attendance receive a grant. Over the last several years, the AEG award accounted for less than 10% of the average student’s unmet need.
- 2) Awardees are much more likely to be in their senior or junior years – very few awards are made to freshman students.
- 3) On average, a student received a grant for one and one-quarter years, though many were enrolled in four-year programs, which might not be sufficient to affect their attendance behavior.
- 4) Also as a function of the limited funding, compared to the total student population, a disproportionately large number of awards go to independent students, since these students generally have lower income/higher costs and so higher unmet costs of attendance.
- 5) Many students are unaware that they will receive an AEG until after they have applied for and begun attending school.

The complete report, *An Analysis of the AlaskAdvantage Education Grant Program*, can be found on our website or by clicking [here](#).

# The Alaska Higher Education Forecast: Perfect Storm or Perfect Opportunity?

At the January 2011 ACPE meeting, David Longanecker, PhD, President of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), presented an overview of Alaska's unique position relative to higher education challenges and opportunities. The presentation was part of ongoing Commission interest in focusing expertise and analysis on Alaska-specific issues, to better inform Alaska higher education policy.

Specifically, Dr. Longanecker noted that Alaska is poised for change based on the convergence of three "waves" and asked if Alaska was prepared to take action to transform that convergence into the perfect opportunity, or to fail to act and face the perfect storm?

The three waves are 1) the national and state economies, 2) Alaska's demographics and current performance level, and 3) Alaska's resources available to take advantage of the perfect opportunity.

Relative to the current economic wave, Alaska differs from the nation in that Alaskans' incomes remain higher than the nation's, despite lower levels of higher education attainment. The challenge for Alaska is transforming the economy from resource-based to knowledge-based, with the need for that change increasing as natural resources available for extraction are depleted. The concomitant opportunity is that the comparatively robust economy puts Alaska in the position of being able to leverage higher education to avoid economic downturn, rather than an after-the-fact response to such downturn.

The second wave relative to Alaska's demographics and higher education performance is that the state experiences both low continuation into higher education and low throughput (completion) in multiple demographic segments – a daunting prospect. However, research indicates that emphasis on academic rigor in preparation for higher education and on financial aid will positively impact Alaska's dismal statistics. Notably, Alaska is already taking those first steps with the implementation of the Alaska Performance Scholarship.

The third wave has to do with allocation of resources: where should Alaska invest limited higher education access dollars to effectively and efficiently transform the current challenges into new opportunities? Although Alaska continues to lack a coordinated and funded statewide higher education access strategy, the good news is that the state has the resources both to perform the analyses that will indicate what strategies are successful, and to grow those programs that efficiently meet policy goals.

Dr. Longanecker concluded by noting that the convergence of these three waves may be a perfect storm or a perfect opportunity – Alaska's action or failure to act will determine its outcome.

For a copy of the full presentation, contact the Commission at 465-6740.