

Chapter 5.12

Social Implications of Distance Education in Alaska

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ABSTRACT

Alaska is the largest and most sparsely populated state in the United States of America. Extreme weather patterns and extreme cultural diversity compound the challenge of delivering quality education to state residents in remote areas. E-learning technologies have emerged as a cost-effective, interactive means of delivering quality teaching to even the most isolated locations in the state. Additionally, the ability to archive content and to access it at will, in an asynchronous manner, is highly suited to the different learning styles and different learning rates of the various populations in the state. This chapter introduces the challenges associated with delivering e-learning in Alaska, reviews the historical evolution of distance-learning networks, and summarizes present achievements and future opportunities. The analysis

includes K-12 education, higher education and professional continuing education.

INTRODUCTION

Alaska is a state faced with special circumstances, in particular limited availability of basic infrastructure, extreme weather and wide cultural diversity. By offering low-cost access from almost anywhere, the ability to archive content and being able to randomly access any section of this content, and ability to deliver multimedia over a variety of bandwidth channels, e-learning technologies have become critically important in Alaska, from elementary school to post-graduate levels. Most of the social implications are positive, but we point out some of the negative consequences of e-learning as well.

GEOGRAPHY AND DEMOGRAPHY OF THE STATE

In January 1959, Alaska was the 49th state to join the United States of America. Among U.S. states, it has the largest area (572,000 square miles equaling one-seventh of country's total area), but a comparatively tiny population: 627,000 inhabitants in the year 2000 or 0.2% of the U.S. population (Alaska, 2000). The population density in Alaska in the year 2000 was 1.1 people per square mile, as opposed to the U.S. average of 79.6 people per square mile. Roughly half of the state's population lives within driving distance of the three largest urban centers: Anchorage (271,000 inhabitants), Fairbanks (31,000 inhabitants) and Juneau (31,000 inhabitants). The rest of the population lives in rural areas, many in small villages of just a few hundred inhabitants. Many of these small and remote communities are accessible only by airplane and some are accessible seasonally by boat. There are fewer than a dozen roads Alaska and they primarily connect the major population centers. The state capital, Juneau, is not on the road system.

Although Alaska is part of a "first world" nation, many Alaskan citizens live in conditions more typical of "third world" countries. Many of the small villages do not have indoor plumbing, have limited and unreliable electric utilities, and have a telephone system that may not operate in extreme weather. Extreme weather is often the norm rather than the exception.

As in many other areas of the United States, part of the population diversity is due to immigration. More intriguing, the ancient inhabitants of the area, the ancestors of the Alaskan Natives themselves exhibit extreme diversity. Alaskan Natives are a diverse group of people, speaking 20 languages across seven language families. Beyond the language differences, hunting, fishing, and social habits also make the Alaska Native cultures of Yupik & Cupik, Inupiak, Athabascan, Aleut

& Alutiiq, Eyak, Tlingit, and Haida & Tsimshian stand out from each other.

The Alaska Native Lands Settlement Act (ANCSA) of 1971 granted approximately one-ninth of Alaska's land and \$962.5 million in cash compensation to Alaskan Natives in exchange for land claims to most of Alaska. There are 12 Regional Native Corporations, endowed with land and financial resources, with shareholders living in the respective regions, as well as a 13th corporation "at-large," which includes Natives not living within any of the Regional Corporations areas. This 13th entity was endowed only with financial resources but no land. Beyond just representing the local interests of Alaskan Natives, these corporations have become significant economic players in the state (some even nationwide) and have adopted significant roles in better serving the educational needs of the regions where they operate.

All three urban centers have local colleges and universities, as well as satellite locations of these campuses in neighboring communities, but many villages can only access these urban centers by air. A 1998 study by McDiarmid, Goldsmith, Hill, and Hull found that 60% of Alaskan students live within 20 road miles of one of the three main university campuses, while another 25% are within 20 road miles of one of the satellite campuses. This leaves 15% of the state's students unable to attend university courses within a daily commute. Given the almost equal split between urban and rural populations in the state, these statistics indicate an under-representation of the rural population in education. Still, interestingly enough, Alaska's percentage of the population aged 25 and older who are high school graduates is 88.3%, higher than the 80.4% U.S. figure. The percentage of people with bachelors' degrees or higher is 24.7%, also higher than the U.S. average of 24.4%. Part of the reason for this relatively high percentage of educated citizens is an extensive network of distance-education facilities throughout the state.

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