

Transcription for

THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 9: PRESERVING ACCESS TO PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION AMID CRISES

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INSIDE HIGHER ED

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NARRATOR: This episode is sponsored by the ECMC Foundation, which supports building a postsecondary education system that works for all learners through its grant making focus areas of College Success and Career Readiness.

PAUL FAIN: Hello, you're listening to The Key with IHE. I'm Paul Fain, the host and a news editor at Inside Higher Ed. For this episode, I spoke with Cathy Sandeen, chancellor of the University of Alaska, Anchorage. The multi-campus open access university has had its share of challenges since Sandeen arrived 18 months ago. They include an earthquake that damaged all of the university's 70 buildings and severe budget cuts that spurred financial exigency declarations and merger proposals, all of this before the pandemic and the current financial crisis. Sandeen talked with me about how the university's coping and keeping focused on its access mission, while trying to avoid the creation of higher education deserts.

CATHY SANDEEN: We need to look at our future and our new reality. How do we preserve the core so that we can rise again when things get better?

PAUL FAIN: I also spoke with Brian Sponsler, vice president of policy for the Education Commission of the States to get a national perspective on these issues and the financial crisis that's facing many public colleges, and what comes next.

BRIAN SPONSLER: Pathways from education to work require there to be work, and at 20 to 25 percent unemployment, what do these connections between education and work look like?

PAUL FAIN: I'm going to get right into this conversation. Thanks for listening.

Chancellor Sandeen, thanks so much for talking with me.

CATHY SANDEEN: It's my pleasure to get to talk with you.

PAUL FAIN: So you've been chancellor at Anchorage for about 18 months, is that correct?

CATHY SANDEEN: That's correct. I started in the end of 2018 and it's been a wild ride here, one thing after another. I'm sure people have been reading in the trades what's going on in Alaska, but let me give you a little bit of the rundown, Paul.

So two months after I arrived, we have a major 7.1 earthquake in Anchorage, Alaska. We closed our campus. Every single of our 70 buildings had some level of damage, no structural damage, fortunately, no injuries, but we had to get people off campus so we could fix things. It was end of the semester. We ended up only being closed three business days, and we got students and faculty back on track. So that was the first thing.

Other things that popped up, you know, since I've been here, we had a major sexual harassment case that concluded and landed on my desk for a decision. We lost accreditation for a couple of our teacher prep programs, that was very traumatic.

And then our budget challenges kicked in with a huge proposed budget cut by our governor. Our board of regents had three separate votes for financial exigency. First they said no, then they said yes, then they terminated it. There was a huge restructuring move here that would have merged our campus, the largest university in the state of Alaska, under another one, and that was reversed.

And because of our budget that continues--it's not as bad as originally proposed by governor, but we still have significant cuts, and we've been going through and expedited program review process, leading to the elimination of some academic programs and tenure-faculty line.

So it's been a challenging year and we've just faced very challenge that has come our way, and this coronavirus, you know, in a way, is one in a series. And it's very serious, but we were able to just roll up our sleeves and get going on it. And I'm proud of the way that the university has responded.

PAUL FAIN: Well, I know you have California roots, and talking to some of your colleagues in California, obviously, they've had their share of natural disasters and other crises to deal with. And a similar attitude of we can take this on. And it sounds like, you know, I'm sure it's not always fun, but that's how you're approaching this next budget crisis and how you plan for it amid so much uncertainty.

CATHY SANDEEN: Well, that's true. It's not fun, but, you know, this is why they hire us is to lead through these difficult times.

One of the things that I think is great about University of Alaska, Anchorage, is we have a very focused mission. We are, again, the largest university in the state of Alaska. We're located in the largest city where more than half of the population of the state resides. We are open access, urban metropolitan connected university, and all of our faculty, staff, we are very focused on that mission, especially the open access part and supporting students. So when you have a clear mission and people are aligned around that mission, it's much easier to row in the same direction.

And yeah, our budget situation is still very serious. As I mentioned, we have proposed, unfortunately, the elimination of some academic programs. It still needs to be approved by the board. Their vote will take place in June and we'll see how that resolves, but that's very painful for students.

But we need to look at our future and our new reality. How do we preserve the core so that we can rise again when things get better? How can we focus our mission even more tightly on what we do, and we are focused on connected research and workforce development. We are creating the educated workforce for the state of Alaska. And if we focus on that mission, that really drives our decisions going forward.

PAUL FAIN: We at Inside Higher Ed kept pretty busy covering Alaska's budget actions and drama last year. It feels like a long time ago now, but, you know, adding on top of that, what you're dealing with now, how do you endeavor to protect the core, particularly against when you still don't know the magnitude of the budget challenge. I mean, I guess that's the real question. I mean, how much do you need to know at this point that you don't? How much uncertainty are you wrestling with?

CATHY SANDEEN: Well, we're trying to use data, that's part of our culture as well, to help us assess where we are and help predict where we expect that we're going to be. So in terms of the state budget, we do have a level of certainty, because our board chair and our governor negotiated a compact last summer, and that was a three-year budget cut, \$70 million total for the whole system, and it's divided over three years.

So the first year is finished. We had about a \$12 million cut here at University of Alaska, Anchorage. We're just completing our planning for the next fiscal year that starts July 1st, and that's another roughly \$12 million cut, and then we know in fiscal '22, according to the compact, we'll have another \$8 million or \$7 million. Now, that part is predictable. It's large, it's challenging, but at least we know what that cut will be.

Layer on top of that various revenue reductions because of COVID. Now that's something that we're looking at in terms of reduced revenue from tuition, student housing, auxiliaries, and so forth. That's something that we're analyzing now and trying to predict.

And then, in addition to that, if you look at what's happening in the economy, oil prices are way down, tourism is virtually stopped in the state of Alaska, and investment income is down. Those are the three biggest sources of revenue for the state of Alaska. So we are worried about what this will mean to our budgets going forward. And, you know, we do have contingency plans, but we're focused sort of on the mid-near term in terms of how we deal with our budget.

And we're really focused right on driving enrollment for our students. We know that enrollments were likely decline. We know nationally it's a prediction of about 20 percent decline in enrollments. And we're a little better than that right now, which is fortunate, and we're going full on in terms of making sure our students know this is still a great important thing for them to do their future.

PAUL FAIN: So what's the status in terms of your plans for the fall if folks have missed your decisions

there?

CATHY SANDEEN: Right, so last Monday, so May 4th, I wanted to inform our campus, because our faculty are unionized. They go off contract at the end of the semester and I wanted to make sure they heard it from me before they left.

We are planning on a mix, mostly remote. So larger courses will still be on alternative delivery and our faculty have more lead time now to plan those. Smaller courses and activities, labs, clinicals, graduate courses, if they're small and if they're within the guidelines for our state, which is now about 20 people at a time, and we can do it safely, we will offer for those in a face-to-face mode. We should be able to offer a little bit more housing for students. We currently have really restricted it to those students that absolutely need to live on campus. We might be able to open that up a little bit. So we're seeing... I'm hoping that we'll be able to do more student services safely in a face-to-face format. We do have a significant athletics program, mostly D2 but also D1. Of course, we're all trying to wrestle with what that looks like for the fall.

PAUL FAIN: Absolutely. Well, all of this plays into what I know for the system broadly and for your institution is just a huge service area, an area of students that you serve, and the challenge I would assume is pretty profound in trying to make sure that you don't end up in a situation where students lose access to public higher education. Can you talk a little bit about how worried you are about, you know, both the ability to return to the in-person instruction and the budget challenges, how worried you are about what that might mean for some of those students who, they don't have a lot of options?

CATHY SANDEEN: That's correct, Paul. And when I read about the definition of education desert, it usually is defined as an individual that lives more than 60 miles or one hour driving time from an institution of higher education. Well, in the vast majority of Alaska, there are no roads. So the idea of one hour driving time is funny, because the way that people get around is either by boat in the summer, by snow machine in the winter, or by small planes throughout the rest of the year.

So Alaska has had to grapple with these education deserts, and also health care deserts, for decades. And I think we're a little ahead of the curve. So let's look at health care--telemedicine has always been really big here in Alaska, because that's the only way the people in small villages can access that initial primary care or primary point of health care. People are used to that, and there's a system in place.

And likewise with education. You know, even though K-12 is local, there are local schools, even in small villages. And I should say, when we say small village, it could be as small as 400 people. So these are very, very small special communities. So education, we've been trying to figure that out for many years.

We do have remote campuses of the University of Alaska in some of the hub cities where people can access. University of Alaska, Anchorage, is the only health campus in the state, so we provide a nursing curriculum in these locations. We figured out how to do that through a combination of face-to-face, hands-on clinical practicum, as well as some online education.

The real issue for our students is access to broadband internet. So they really do not have the ability to participate in online, just because they do not have that access. In fact, that's one of the exceptions that we make for students to live in student housing. If they're from a remote village and they felt that they did not have the access necessary for them to be successful in their courses, we would make an exception to allow them to stay in Anchorage to complete their education.

The education desert and the access issue is very, very serious for us. It's something that we've been grappling with. I think we're maybe in a little bitter situation, but it still is a challenge for us and will continue to be. It's something that is top of mind.

I would like to mention, at UAA, we do have a program here that's been going on for 25 years now. It's called the Alaska Native Science and Education Program, or ANSEP. And what ANSEP does is reach out into the villages for talented students who have the potential to go on and earn degrees, and return back to their communities and contribute there. And they come to UAA, to Anchorage, and start to learn what it is to be a college student, as early as middle school now. Now, of course, that's all had to shift to a virtual format as well.

PAUL FAIN: Has the pivot to distance education accelerated any creative solutions for that broadband access issue, which, again, I can only imagine is as profound for any public university in the country for you all with those small villages that just don't have it?

CATHY SANDEEN: Well, I think that responsibility sifts to our elected leaders, so I know that the federal delegation is really working on getting funding to increasingly boost up both broadband internet and also cellular access. So I have faith in them that they're going to be able to do as much as they can to improve the infrastructure so that we can do what we need to do.

But I think our faculty are being really creative and realizing that we have to adapt. So maybe students won't be able to participate in Zoom meetings, so we need to provide viable equivalent alternatives for those students as we're designing those courses. Going back to the mission of student success and open access, that drives everything. So I don't really have to tell our faculty to do these things. They automatically do them because they really care deeply about that mission.

PAUL FAIN: Well, we'll end there. Cathy, thanks so much. I've appreciated the access and your thoughts beyond these last 18 months and I know we'll keep on calling. So thanks for your time.

CATHY SANDEEN: Well, thank you very much. And I really appreciate the podcast. I listen to it. It's great, just-in-time current information that we all need. And it does build a community, because we're all in this together, and our experiences are common. There will be light on the other side. We will eventually be over this period. I look forward to the time when we can get together at conferences and meetings and so forth. But in the meantime, I'm really proud of the higher education community and how we've so quickly adapted. We do noble work that's still important, and you're part of that too, Paul, and your colleagues are Inside Higher Ed. Thanks.

PAUL FAIN: Absolutely. Thanks so much for saying that. Cheers.

CATHY SANDEEN: Bye.

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I'm speaking with Brian Sponsler, vice president of policy at the Education Commission of the States. Brian, good to see you. Thanks for doing this.

BRIAN SPONSLER: Yeah, great. Thanks, Paul. Appreciate it.

PAUL FAIN: So not an easy time to be college leader right now. A lot of uncertainty to say the least, among them budget issues, not just questions about, you know, whether or not there will be another stimulus, but also the state funding picture, as well as the revenue, enrollment-driven revenue for the fall, all up in the air. What are you seeing? What are you hearing?

BRIAN SPONSLER: Yeah, well, I think to say these are uncertain times is an understatement for sure. And one of the things I think is different about the financial picture for colleges and universities this time than even say in the 2008 recession, you know, is that all three, or all of the major revenue streams for education are under pressure right now, right?

So we have questions about the viability of tuition revenue for tuition-driven institutions, uncertainty about what students are going to do this fall, you know, a lot of anecdotal survey evidence about what people are suggesting they're going to do, but questions about whether students are truly not going to enroll at any institution or just enroll at a different institution than they thought. And so that uncertainty around tuition revenue streams is one.

Clearly, the state support picture and the funding, state budgets are, you know, are and they're going to continue I think to be decimated. It'll probably be worse next year than this year as well a little bit of a lag in the tax collection process. So institutional and system leaderships have an uncertainty on that front.

You know, more familiar for the audience on this podcast, but less familiar from the general population is, you know, all the ancillary revenue that institutions, you know, get over the summer for camps or programming, or other types and ways in which, you know, funds are brought into institutions to support their activities. And, you know, right now, none of those streams is reliable or healthy or predictable. And so I think people are having to make some really hard contingency plans, and they're going to have to be able to pivot to what the realities end up being, you know, when we see that fall come around.

Certainly, at the state level, you know, one of the big challenges is the historic role, I think, of higher education as the balancing wheel of state budgets. How much room there is to make those adjustments moving forward is going to be very difficult. I think we've... Whatever your opinion about the decision, it certainly is proven possible over the past 15, 20 years for the cost of postsecondary education to be

shifted from public sector onto private individuals through loans and all the other programs. And again, there are complications and consequences to that. But it's remained viable. I'm sure in this cycle that that's viable, that there... 40 million people applying for unemployment in the last month, families are really, really struggling, and I'm not sure that even with loans, and are interested in sort of contributing as much as they have in the past, or able.

And so what do states do when they have, you know, mandatory expenditures in health care and K-12 education, requirements to balance budgets. It's a pressing and dangerous time for higher ed finance at the state level, and we're going to have to figure out a path forward in some way. But, you know, this one feels different, I think, to many of us in the space than the managing through the recession even of '08 did.

PAUL FAIN: So how does a system or college leader adjust their pitch to a legislature when, you know, so many questions are in the air, even about the state budgets? And as you mentioned, the numbers here are just impossible to get your head around, 20+ percent unemployment. And then you'll also got, you get some turnover coming in the states too among state leaders.

BRIAN SPONSLER: Yeah, that's right. I mean, I think there's two parts to that.

One is, you know, we've been working, our colleagues at SHEEO and other organizations to really encourage state, not just higher ed leaders, but state political leaders to be thinking, you know, holistically, strategically, and long-term when they're considering the budgetary both requests and then ultimate funding for higher education.

And we know it'll be important for the economic renewal that we're going to need to be juiced by, you know, appropriate levels of training and workforce placement, and reengaging and retraining dislocated workers, and historically, you know, our mission as community colleges and public colleges and universities, and the private sector played a huge role in making that happen and driving growth. So we want to be careful that we're not exacerbating what's already a really tough recovery picture, I think, by deeply underfunding institutions of higher education.

Now at the same time, there's only going to be a certain amount of money available for the budget, and, you know, the vast majority of state budgets are required and locked in. They're not discretionary. And higher education remains one of the few discretionary places. And so, you know, how they're going to

make that value proposition is going to really important. And so your point there, who they're making it to is likely to shift over time.

So, you know, we have elections coming up, obviously, at the federal level in November. You now, we have 12 gubernatorial elections and state legislative races all across the country in all 50 states, so we're going to see churn in leadership, even it is changes within the same political parties. It's going to be different people. You know, they may still be Republicans, they still be Democrats in control of legislative chambers, but committee assignments change, people retire. And so continuity of leadership in a time of uncertainty around education policy, I think, is going to be really important, and something the Education Commission of the States and our partners are thinking about beyond just this fall, but down into next legislative sessions that start in January of 2021.

PAUL FAIN: Do you envision, you know, I was just thinking about the turnover and the time that it's coming in, I mean, we're already seeing unusual shifts in the way lawmakers view higher education. I feel like at the federal level, Democrats being more aggressive in questioning the value of higher education, you know, legacy admissions, the whole Varsity Blues that now feels like three years ago, you know, it's almost like we're doing five years of change in a few months, and then potentially new folks coming in. I mean, do you seem potentially really substantially changed dynamics in the way higher education is viewed in some of the state?

BRIAN SPONSLER: Yeah, I think we are at an inflection point in, you know, conversations that up until March were largely driven about, you know, connectivity between education and the workforce, and finding ways to make that connectivity both long term and durable as its historically been through certain types of degree productions, certain fields of high need, but also more just-in-time, you know, for workers or industries to get the skills they need at the time they need them for a particular task. And the extension of apprenticeships is one example. CTE programs that have been expanded to address some of the historical inequities that were there for high school students.

Pathways from education to work require there to be work. And one of the challenges that I think we maybe run into is what CTE pathways to nowhere are good for nobody. And at 20 to 25 percent unemployment, what do these connections between education and work look like, and what are the impacts on the ways people perceive higher education and its value at the state level. You know, I certainly think that the workforce education connections have been robust enough that I think they're going to be durable and hold up.

One of the things I think has been a success in the higher education policy space in particular is an expansion of the type of person that thinks of themselves as a higher education policy maker. So the historical roles of SHEEOs, you know, institutions presidents, a couple of the legislators that maybe have made that their issue over time, I think we've now seen, you know, more interest in higher education as a policy domain from , you know, policy power centers in states, in the governor's offices, in the departments of labor. So there's more people interested in this. That can bring a complexity that may be a challenge, but I do think it helps shape and can help shape a more strategic narrative for the state moving forward, and on the hopeful side, perhaps that makes a broader base coalition makes a little more robust to some of the politicalization we've seen in the past of higher education as a policy issue.

PAUL FAIN: For this episode, as you know, I've spoken with Chancellor Cathy Sandeen of the University of Alaska, Anchorage, a place that has seen some pretty substantial budget challenges even before this began, and also really access-focused institution, where access is a challenge, where there are small villages very long ways away from accessible public higher education. When you look at the budget picture, the revenue picture in states, how worried are you as somebody I know who has looked into the education desert issue, about reducing access in really critical ways when we really can't afford it out in the country?

BRIAN SPONSLER: Yeah, well, you know, I mean, I think that the pandemic in particular has really surfaced some challenges that students have had pre-pandemic around access, but they may have been just largely unseen or unappreciated. And, you know, I think we have an opportunity to rebuild some education access pathways that might take away some barriers that have been there historically and cause us to question why they might have been there in the first place. You know, I think the digital divide that gets a lot of attention now and questions about access to high quality internet support and meaningful education experience, you know, we're wrestling with those questions with state leaders from early learning through middle school, high school, and into workforce retraining. This is challenge that's not germane just to postsecondary education.

But I do think, you know, we have thought for long periods of time about postsecondary access as, you know, some measure of the physical proximity you have to an institution.

You know, and now we're beginning to say, you know, physical proximity is a challenge in places like Alaska and other states, but there are plenty of places that physical proximity does not equal access. And communities that have long been underserved by institutions that may be right down the street. And so I think there's a different between an institutions that's in a rural area and a rural-serving institution. So are some distinctions that we're beginning to think through to make.

And then this question about broadband access, high quality access, is really, really important and a challenge for states. You know, I think we have to make sure that we're not equating, taking what was a physical classroom-based experience, putting it online, and call those two things analogous. But there are ways to build really engaging platforms, and to help provide access in places that don't have physical access to campuses. That's always been a challenge. I'm hopeful that because it's affecting more people now, that we might see some action on it.

You know, one of the things that I've been saying, you know, is this crisis has democratized pain in some ways. It hasn't spread it evenly. You know, there's huge differentiated impacts on different communities that are facing unique challenges, but as you and I were talking about, before, I have a kindergarten distance learner in my house, and I certainly didn't have that four months ago.

And so people who otherwise may not have been thinking about, you know, what is the responsibility to provide high quality distance education across the board are now having to think about it because it's in their house or it's in their children's homes, or it's with grandparents. And so, you know, that creates a window of opportunity for people to say, you know, how can we provide access to everyone, whether it's geographic-based or not in ways that provide meaningful education experiences. And there may be a more robust coalition interested in moving that kind of agenda forward than had been there historically when it felt like at times in the highered space it was always somebody else's kid who was going to take online education. Now it's all our kids and we need to think about that moving forward.

PAUL FAIN: Really good point. You know, as somebody who is obviously very fortunate and privileged, the fact that I have more a more strong view of the challenge of childcare and working before. You know, hopefully, you know, it makes all of us a bit more aware of inequities in our system.

Well, Brian, I feel like we barely scratched the surface, but I learned a lot here and I really appreciate you taking time to talk with us.

BRIAN SPONSLER: It's been great, Paul. Thank you very much.

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PAUL FAIN: That's it for this episode of The Key with Inside Higher Ed. Thanks for listening. I'll be back next week. Couple of possibilities for that episode in the works. I'm a journalist, so, you know, we like to do this at the last minute. But I'll be back and I hope you'll listen. Thanks again.

VOICE: This episode is sponsored by the ECMC Foundation, which supports building a postsecondary education system that works for all learners through its grant making focus areas of college success and career readiness.