



James R. Evans | UAA

Rooms Full of Leaders

UAA's Alaska Native Business Management program

By Jesse Leman

When the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act established corporations to facilitate land transfers, one of the objections to the federal law was that Western corporate structures were alien to the Indigenous way of life. Fifty years of struggle and success have demonstrated that Alaska Native corporations can thrive under self-determination. A critical part of their history and path forward is finding and developing leaders within their ranks.

Joining in that mission of nurturing business acumen, UAA offers its Alaska Native Business Management program.

"It's a small, fledgling program," says Sharon Lind, an assistant professor of management. "We are still in a growth phase. When I left UAA two years ago, the program was actually growing. We're trying to reinvigorate and reactivate that interest."

After a two-year hiatus from the program, Lind returned as its director, and she found that recruitment had dwindled. "The program was kind of in limbo during those two years," she says, "so we're working really hard to change that and get the word out. I'm working nonstop on recruitment."

To streamline recruiting, Lind built a statewide database that includes all of the Alaska Native regional and village corporations, their nonprofit affiliates, and even individuals that Lind has spoken with at events like the Alaska Federation of Natives convention, where she set up a booth with the focus of outreach.

Flying the Flag

It helps to have unofficial ambassadors of the Alaska Native Business Management program, such as alumni Zach Dunlap and Francine Moreno. Whether presenting at a showcase in Rasmuson Hall for the College of Business and Public Policy (CBPP) or meeting with Senator Dan Sullivan, Dunlap and Moreno are always willing to volunteer their time and energy toward making sure people know how impactful the program has been for them.

For the past fifteen years, Dunlap has worked at Doyon, Limited, where he is also a shareholder. When he and his wife both decided to go back to school, they came across the minor in Alaska Native Business Management through their degree program. With each working for Native corporations, they thought it was worth looking into, and after the first class Dunlap knew it was a great fit.

"I had done other professional development sort of similar to this, and this program specifically was geared exactly towards what we do every day at work," says Dunlap. "It's so uniquely Alaskan. It's a big business community, as far as the Native corporations go, but there isn't a whole lot of opportunity for this kind of academic pursuit. You just have such great exposure to people in Alaska Native businesses. It was definitely the highlight of our academic career."

When Lind found out she was going to be out of town last fall during the CBPP showcase, she asked Dunlap if he would present on her behalf. "It was a pretty good experience to sort of fly the flag [for the program] and mingle with people throughout the business community and tell them what the university can offer, especially as people are trying to recruit and grow local talent," says Dunlap. "I was able to present to a room full of business leaders, including Governor Bill Walker. I definitely did a lot of networking and ran into a few people that had gone through the program after me."



Koniag President Shauna Hegna teaches BA A402, Alaska Native Corporation Leadership.

Kerry Tasker

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"I want students to enter into the classroom and leave and be able to immediately apply the information they learned to their day jobs."

Shauna Hegna, President, Koniag

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Representing the program at the AFN convention. Pictured from left to right: Kalani Tucker of Southcentral Foundation (a past graduate); John Nofsinger, Dean of the UAA College of Business and Public Policy; Sharon Lind; Francine Moreno of Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (a past graduate); and US Senator Dan Sullivan.

Sharon Lind

Minor Achievement

Moreno found going to college challenging initially. "I was working toward my bachelor's degree, and I was really interested and passionate about going to school at first. I had a lot of years of work experience, and translating that to college courses telling you how to give a presentation, how to write a document, how to write a proposal... I'd done all of that through work. It started turning into, 'Let's just check the boxes and get these classes done,'" says Moreno. "Until, in one of my classes, somebody came in and said, 'Hey, there's this new Alaska Native Business Management minor program; you can attend a weekend class and you'll get one credit. It's an introduction class, and if you're interested you can sign up to have this as a minor in your degree.' So I did it, and I found that I was extremely passionate, and it reinvigorated my interest in attending and finishing college."

The passion that Moreno has for the program was the topic of conversation when she met with Sullivan at the Alaska Federation of Natives convention in October. Upon running into Lind at the event, Moreno was asked if she would like to meet with Sullivan along with another alumna, Kalani Tucker. "When he asked about the program, Kalani and I both shared

our experience and the reason why we minored in the program and how impactful it was for our education. I let him know that I wouldn't have gotten this foundational knowledge without this program," says Moreno.

Upon coming back to UAA, one of Lind's first tasks was to create a certificate for those who aren't enrolled in a degree program, which is the only way students can minor in Alaska Native Business Management.

"That was a huge accomplishment of the program this year," says Lind. "I spent hours upon hours on making the certificate, and when they told me it couldn't launch in the fall of 2022, I said, 'It has to. It just has to!'"

Working through the Undergraduate Academic Board, a curriculum for the certificate program was approved in the nick of time.

"So now, not only do we have an eighteen-credit minor in Alaska Native Business Management, we also have a sixteen-credit occupational endorsement certificate in Alaska Native Business Management," Lind explains. "It's a unique program. No other university in Alaska offers a minor and a certificate on Alaska Native corporations. UAA does."

Master Plan

One thing Lind would like to

add is an emphasis area for UAA students pursuing a master's degree in business administration. "A lot of graduate students are interested in these courses. In fact, my 401 class [Alaska Native Corporation Business Management] is pretty much filled with graduate students this semester," she says. "How can we build sustainability into the program? That's one thing that I have to look very seriously at, to make sure that this program has longevity, just like Alaska Native corporations have longevity."

Also on Lind's wish list is a named professorship, like CBPP's Distinguished Rasmuson Chair of Economics. "One of the things I'm preaching to UAA leadership right now is that we cannot let this program die just because you have a different faculty member," she says. "We have a working committee, and we are brainstorming ideas."

While she says it's premature to discuss some of the ideas that the committee is looking at, Lind maintains that it is all for the improvement and efficiency of Alaska Native corporations. "I would love to have some of the board members of both regional and village corporations in my classes," she says. "Once a year we invite the twelve chairs of the Alaska Native regional corporations into the classroom. At its height we had ten of the twelve chairs in the classroom working with students. We want to do more with these chairs."

Humble Beginnings

The program has plenty of room for growth, coming from humble beginnings. Not long after its inception in 1997, the board of directors of the ANCSA Regional Association—that is, the presidents and CEOs of the twelve Alaska Native regional corporations—voiced their opinion to UAA that there was a lack of curriculum in the area of Alaska Native corporations and the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971. They formed an education committee headed by Sheri Buretta, board chair of Chugach Alaska Corporation, that included former CBPP dean Elisha Baker and the late George Geistauts, former director of the MBA program at UAA.

"They remembered several papers I wrote in my MBA program about Alaska

Zach Dunlap of Doyon, Limited (right) rubs shoulders with former Governor Bill Walker while presenting as a past graduate of Alaska Native Business Management.

Zach Dunlap



Native corporations, knew I was heavily involved, and asked me to come talk with them," Lind remembers. "Quite honestly, I didn't love what they were saying about the program, but I did like what they were proposing about adding curriculum in this area. I was hired in 2011, and it started with one single class. By 2014 we had a minor in Alaska Native Business Management."

The minor and certificate program now boasts four courses. One of them, BA A402 Alaska Native Corporation Leadership, is taught by Shauna Hegna, president of Koniag.

"We are so fortunate to have Shauna this spring," Lind says. "Shauna has participated in this program previously as a guest speaker, and I just look at her and see this incredible, charismatic leader who can mentor the next generation in a phenomenal way."

In addition to being the president of Koniag, Hegna is a shareholder of Koniag and Afognak Native Corporation and is an enrolled tribal member of the Native Village of Afognak and the Native Village of Port Lions. Hegna grew up in Port Lions, a village with fewer than 200 people on Kodiak Island that is still deeply rooted in traditional values and a subsistence lifestyle. "I have very fond memories of fishing and hunting for ducks and deer growing up. Still today,

three generations of my family get together to go deer hunting every fall," Hegna says.

"My father is a very traditional Alaska Native man, so he doesn't say much, but when he does speak, you're expected to listen," she adds. "And I remember one day he just looked at me and said, 'You're going to go to college, and you're going to get a degree, and you're going to help your people.' My father knew that I needed to go to college to best help our community, but he didn't understand what that would entail. And growing up in those traditional values really shaped who I became as a professional."

Theories of Leadership

Hegna has volunteered as a guest speaker at UAA, Alaska Pacific University, and UAF in courses related to Alaska Native corporations for several years.

"Sharon Lind has been encouraging me to teach, and I finally said yes, and I am so excited," says Hegna. "The reason why I said yes is because of the uniqueness of the class itself. It speaks specifically to Alaska Native corporation leadership, from the boardroom to executives. I feel that it is a topic that has a lot of areas for robust dialogue with students and a lot of opportunity to find similarities and

differences in the way in which Alaska Native corporations are led versus other for-profit corporations that you might see in America."

The Alaska Native Business Management program wasn't offered when Hegna was in school. "The closest thing that would position me for Alaska Native corporation leadership—besides a business major, which I chose against at that point in my life—was to major in history and minor in Alaska Native studies," Hegna explains. "That was the only way I could cobble together a strong knowledge base in traditional Alaska Native cultures."

Hegna added to her undergrad studies with a graduate degree in rural development. "I was able to maximize the courses that were available through UAF that really helped to inform my leadership style and that I could also immediately apply to work," she says. "And that's my vision for this course. I want students to enter into the classroom and leave and be able to immediately apply the information they learned to their day jobs."

Her course covers contemporary theories of leadership, but with a twist. "Like comparing and contrasting traditional Alaskan Native values with modern corporate leadership theories," Hegna says. "Some of the course is going to be talking about leading sustainable change in an organization. And I'm really excited to engage the students in dialogue about that and talk with them about both effective and ineffective change that they have seen led in their own organizations."

One change coming to the program is expanding its online offerings. Lind admits it's a hard transition, and while Hegna sees potential challenges as an instructor, both are excited about reaching students who might have otherwise not been able to access the program.

"I think that it's really empowering for the next generation of leaders. You find leaders in communities—whether they're tribal administrators, presidents and CEOs of regional corporations, or schoolteachers—all of those leaders have a huge impact on their community," says Hegna. "And when we can create opportunities to learn, and they can stay at home, that's a win/win for Alaskans." **AB**