



UAF news and information

Friday Focus: Navigating rapid change

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Provost Anupma Prakash, right, speaks during a Faculty Senate meeting Monday. Faculty Senate President Sine Anahita sits to the far left, with Chancellor Dan White in the middle. UAF photo by JR Ancheta.

— by Anupma Prakash, provost

I find it hard to believe that in a group of just 23 people there is a 50% chance that two people will share the same birthday; if the group size grows to 57, this probability rises to 99%. Statisticians know this all too well. Author Patrick Dixon hit the nail on the head when he said, “Strange this happen more frequently than you believe. Your world changes faster than you can call a board meeting.”

For the past several months, our university community has lived through many strange changes: political upheaval, funding uncertainties, media chaos and internal challenges that stem from such external pressures. Business analysts call this VUCA, short for an environment that is characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. Volatility involves being subject to frequent, rapid and significant change. Uncertainty is a component of that situation, in which events and outcomes are unpredictable. Complexity stems from multiple interconnected issues and factors. And ambiguity is manifested in a lack of clarity and the difficulty of

understanding exactly what the situation is. It surely feels like we saw more than our fair share of all these elements.

Business analysts also emphasize that to plan for the VUCA world there is a need to collect and analyze data, engage and communicate with stakeholders, roll out plans, have contingency plans, and demonstrate agility in decision-making. Addressing rapid changes pushes us toward shortened decision cycles and causes enormous stress and anxiety that in turn erodes engagement. This is particularly true when applied to higher academia, which is rooted in deep scholarly thinking, takes pride in shared governance and thrives on its own rhythm.

At the Oct. 7 emergency meeting, the University of Alaska Board of Regents voted to push the brakes on two ongoing processes: (i) the planning for a one UA that would function under a single accreditation and (ii) the systemwide expedited academic program reviews. Concerns voiced by faculty, staff and students, which were also echoed by our regional accreditors, prompted the Board of Regents to take this action. The pause on these ongoing processes has provided relief to overburdened students, staff, faculty and administrators. It has given us an opportunity to step back, breathe, listen, think, thoughtfully choose a direction, and then again move forward with increased focus and energy. It has given us another chance to feel the pulse of the university and together chart a path forward. Together, we have navigated this storm, and together we are ready to take UAF to new heights. A big thank you to each of you for your many contributions. In Tuesday’s student forum, Chancellor White referred to the dialogue agreement “In every chair, a leader.” Remember as we move forward that all opinions are needed and all voices deserve our full attention.

Friday Focus is a column written by a different member of UAF’s leadership team every week.