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## Gendering human capital development in Western Alaska

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### Abstract

This article posits that conventional human capital development theory as applied to economic development lacks a consideration of cultural context. In developing regions of the world, life decisions at the postsecondary educational level are often less driven by individual choices and “rational” cost–benefit analyses and more by the continuing importance of family, community, and place-based values. Results from an examination of postsecondary educational outcomes among rural, coastal peoples of Western Alaska demonstrate how human capital development stimulated through a regional economic development program is gendered: More women than men are pursuing higher education. They are often motivated by a desire to “give back” to both their families and their communities. The study also finds a lack of participation in formal vocational training programs despite the applicability of vocational skills to resource extraction–based industries in rural Alaska. Policy recommendations include economic development organizations creating value in postsecondary educational pathways that most benefit Bering Sea communities, such as those both in caring labor and in the skilled trades. This focus could help validate rural Alaskan commitments to family, community, and sense of place.



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