

Establishing the Northern Research Institute: A Personal Recollection

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Prologue: The Problem of the South

The following is an excerpt from the editor's introduction to the first issue of *The Northern Review* (Senkpiel and Easton 1988:20).

Some time ago several of us at Yukon College were sitting around and trying to think of ways to get financial support for a number of research projects in which we were interested. It was ground we had covered before, and new ideas were as slow as a northern spring in coming.

"I know," said one, "it's perfect; let's create ACCESS!"

"ACCESS?" queried another, "What is ACCESS?"

"What we need in the North, of course, the Association of Canadian Colleges Engaged in Southern Studies."

"Southern Studies?"

"Yes, Southern Studies. Look, even Hamelin admits that the South is the North's number one problem—didn't he ask, 'Is it an exaggeration to suggest that one of the major problems of the North is the South?' and argue that any effort to understand the North's past, present, or future requires reference to what people in Base Canada are thinking and doing about 'their' north? . . . Doesn't it follow then that in order to understand what's going on here, we have to know what is happening elsewhere, in the South, in Ottawa?"

In the next hour or so we engaged in a fanciful, tongue-in-cheek "romp" about ACCESS . . . We talked about the great funding possibilities. We would approach the federal government for money to set the association up. We could hold Southern Studies conferences in the North each year, alternating between Iqaliut, Yellowknife, Whitehorse, and Fairbanks. We would set up scholarships so that promising students could come North to study the South. And, of course, we would have to set up research stations in the Near, Middle, and Far South. These would help offset the enormous costs of conducting southern research—travel expenses alone could be crippling—and thus ensure that our southern specialists could manage to spend at least a month or two each winter in the South. Oh, and we would have to undertake a major educational campaign to familiarize southerners with our plans; after all, they should be fully appraised of what we were doing and even be given an opportunity to participate in our activities. And that reminded us that we would have to give some thought to developing a code of ethics to which members engaged in southern research would have to subscribe.

Aron's Vision

It was Aron Senkpiel who actually came up with the concept of ACCESS (Association of Canadian Colleges Engaged in Southern Studies), pitching it to the small group of researchers associated with Yukon College meeting in the cafeteria of the old Yukon Vocational and Technical Training Centre on the east side of the Yukon River, next to the Robert Campbell Bridge (the Yukon department of education offices occupy it today). I believe it was the spring of 1987, and the main conspirators involved at this time were Aron, Tim Topper, Grant Lowey, and myself, all supported by the indomitable administrative assistance of Deby Chubb. The five of us formed the core staff of what was then called the University Transfer Program at the college.

I had arrived in the Yukon in January 1986. By March of that year I had secured funding to serve as director of research for the Yukon Underwater Diving Association's Yukon Underwater Heritage Resources Inventory and I approached Aron with the notion that it would be appropriate for the college to support the research program in some material way; specifically, I was looking for office space and a computer, which at that time was still generally restricted to mainframe monitors and keyboards. Aron enthusiastically took up my request with then-president John Casey and by May I had a small office with a huge bookshelf; by September I was teaching anthropology courses and writing reports on our field season at the college. The following year I began work with Ruth Gotthardt on the Fort Selkirk Culture History Project, which formalized much of what is now commonly called "community-based" and "participatory action research." Besides consolidating my identity as a faculty member actively engaged in research, it demonstrated to us the need to develop the research mandate and infrastructure of the college. I admit the effort was initially self-serving from my perspective; I was a young academic with high scholarly ambitions and there seemed a nice symbiotic opportunity to make my mark in a grand initiative to "decolonialize" northern research by giving it a local home.

It is almost inconceivable today to imagine the state of independent research in the Yukon at that time. Most local-based research conducted by Yukon residents was government funded and policy—if not outright politically—driven. This is not to say that their research did not strive for high standards of scholarship—many did and much was achieved (Julie Cruikshank's work for the Council of Yukon Indians, John Ritter's linguistic documentation with the Yukon Native Language Centre, and Dave Mossop's and Manfred Hoef's work with the Yukon Department of Renewable Resources, come quickly to mind). But true academic freedom was often constrained. Independent research was the purview of the handful of

southern universities with northern interests, in particular the University of British Columbia (principally the geographer John Stager), the University of Calgary through their Arctic Institute field camp at Kluane Lake (dominated by glaciologists and biologists), the University of Toronto's Northern Yukon Research Program (directed by William Irving), and the inter-institutional Yukon Refugium Project, and more transient, though devoted, scholars such as Catherine McClellan, Ansen Balicki, and others. While many of these projects and researchers strived to include local community members to some degree in their work (the northern Yukon archaeologists particularly stand out in this regard), the principal goals and primary benefits of research were derived from and accrued to the south.



Figure 1. Grant Lowie and Norm Easton establish the first infrastructure of the Northern Studies Research Centre, June 1989.

The irony that most of us at Yukon College were southern expatriates ourselves was not lost on us; it bothered us immensely that we might only be engaged in the sort of post-colonial practices of ex-pats everywhere—the mere replication of imperial structures of power at the local level, but this time in “northern” hands and not “southern.” What we needed was an institutional framework out of which a northern research agenda could emerge organically from local residents. Aron, ever the thoughtful pragmatist, found the solution in embedding the goal of developing an Indigenous northern research capacity within an Indigenous northern post-secondary education system; de-colonialize a generation of young local scholars, went

our thinking, and let them set the agenda. It was an integrated vision of considerable proportions: build a locally-derived educational program—what became the Northern Studies Program; develop a public voice for the participants—*The Northern Review*; and provide the infrastructure to assist in the maturation of local research capacity—the Northern Research Institute (NRI).

Both Aron and Amanda Graham have documented the development of the northern studies program at Yukon College. The story of the *Northern Review* remains to be fully told, but I worked closely with Aron, Deby Chubb, Ken Coates, and two students, Barbara Hayduck and Patricia Toleman, to bring that to fruition as the first managing editor; Number 1 came back from the printer in May 1988 while I recovered from pneumonia brought on by exhaustion. Meanwhile, the staff of the college was moving into the new Ayamdigut campus on the hill above Whitehorse to begin the first year of a comprehensive northern studies diploma program, which was soon joined by the Yukon Native Teacher Education Program, what I believe was the first four-year bachelor's degree taught entirely in the North.

In August 1990 we submitted a major grant proposal to the Donner Canada Foundation for \$280,000, to fund a research institute at Yukon College for three years, which would become “a structure that will encourage the indigenization of northern scholarship, facilitating northern research that is done “in the North, by the North, and for the North.” In 1991 our grant was approved and in the fall of 1991 I took up a three-year secondment as director of the Northern Research Institute. The Industrial Research Assistance Program (IRAP) officer, at that time Jurgen Korn, was transferred to the institute by the federal government, Jo-el Buerlen provided secretarial support, and Erling Friis-Baastad worked as editor of publications; after they returned to their Yukon College positions, both of the latter were replaced by Helen Voogd. Our offices were established in the recently erected Northern Building Science Centre, set in the forest behind the main college buildings, and we set about our work. The building provided an appropriate home, having been constructed to test and demonstrate a variety of northern building techniques, including high efficiency heating and insulation, a ‘monocoque’ permafrost building design, and the integration of alternative energy self-sufficiency through the application of a hybrid photo-voltaic and wind energy generation system.



Figure 2. Norm Easton, Helen Voogd, and Jurgen Korn in front of the Northern Building Science Centre, the first office of the Northern Research Institute at Yukon College

Much of that first winter involved us developing the policy framework for the NRI's activities and disbursements of research fellowships from the \$1,000,000 Research Endowment Fund set up by the Yukon government in 1989 by then Premier Tony Penniket and Minister of Education Piers MacDonald. This was accomplished with the invaluable help of an advisory committee consisting of Dr. John Stager, Professor of Geography at the University of British Columbia; Ruth Carrol, an aboriginal Gw'ichin language specialist; Cheryl McLean, coordinator of Land Claims Implementation for the Council of Yukon First Nations; Linda Johnson, Director of Library and Archives for Yukon; Dr. John Sibert, President of the Alaska Science and Technology Foundation; and Dr. Dave Sharestone, Director of Scientific Investigations of the Science Institute of the Northwest Territories (see figure 3).

In order to communicate our presence and activities we began a newsletter and occasional publications series. A biannual newsletter, *Northern Research and Education at Yukon College*, reported on current research initiatives involving the NRI, while the monograph series published information pamphlets and brochures, essays, reports, and monographs on northern research. The latter included the first Athapaskan-English glossary in the Kluane dialect of Northern Tutchone, written by Daniel TI'en, a publication still used in the College's native language teaching today; and Mrs. Annie

Ned's first convocation address to the graduates of the new Yukon College campus explaining her choice of *Ayamdigut* as the name of the campus.

In an attempt to develop a clearer understanding of community research needs we embarked on an effort to travel to each Yukon community to meet with residents to discuss their perceptions of how research might contribute to their communities. This Yukon Community Research Needs Assessment was never fully completed due to budgetary limitations, but meetings held in Whitehorse, Haines Junction, Watson Lake, Faro, Ross River, Burwash, and Beaver Creek did identify a number of opportunities for the NRI. One that really needed a truly independent and non-biased research perspective was the development of a forestry management plan for the region of Watson Lake. Our overtures to coordinate such an effort were rejected in 1993 by local resource managers based on their assurance that a plan developed internally was near completion. Ironically, their plan was received poorly by almost all stakeholders and withdrawn; in the late 1990s, they had still not reached consensus. This particular failure is illustrative of the structural resistance of state bureaucracies to release their sense of control over community agendas that has plagued the NRI's development from the outset, and to the extent that this resistance continues, it hampers the NRI's further development.

This is not to say that the NRI did not receive enthusiastic support from some quarters of government. Willard Phelps, while territorial justice minister, asked us to conduct an external review of employee perceptions of his department's performance, for one example of many; but there was in those early days, and to some extent remains, a reluctance by bureaucrats to utilize the considerable nascent capacity of the NRI for unbiased research for the very reason that it is unbiased and contrary to internal agendas. Fortunately, over the years this attitude has softened, and today the NRI is regularly involved in baseline data collection and analysis of a range of public policy issues.

The NRI also sought to build strategic alliances with external research organizations through seeking and receiving membership in the Association of Provincial Research Organizations (APRO) and developing memoranda with other external organizations. This was not without difficulties, as some organizations, which had traditional northern research activities, were resistant to the possibility that the NRI might usurp their own interests in the Yukon, or simply viewed us as young kids on the block over our heads. Others sought to use an NRI alliance to boost their Yukon presence to their sole advantage; the failed water-quality testing facility imbroglio comes to mind as a good example of our naiveté in the face of exploitation. But we also had some successes too. The Alberta Research Council cooperatively

assisted in several phases of testing the efficacy of locally manufactured spruce siding for Yukon buildings, while the executive director of APRO was a valued advocate of the NRI at a national level and in Ottawa. And many external institutions aligned young scholars with the NRI as research associates in pursuit of graduate degrees, to the benefit of all.



Figure 3. Some early members of the NRI Advisory Committee: (L to R) Gary, Dave Sharestone, John Stager, John Sibert, Cheryl McLean, Nicolas Poushinky, Spring 1993.

One of the under-appreciated accomplishments of the NRI in its early years was its role in the development of the Internet in the Yukon. With the presence of the Industrial Research Assistance Program office, the NRI was in a position to form a strategic alliance with CANARIE (the Canadian Network for the Advancement of Research, Industry, and Education), and to direct funding to the vision of Richard Lawrence and Jim Tousignant in order to provide support for the establishment of YKNET, a community-based Internet service provider that was dedicated to, and accomplished, the delivery of Internet access to every community in the Yukon at an affordable price.

But probably the most rewarding aspect of my work at the NRI was the solicitation and development of successful local applications to the Northern Research Endowment Fund. It was quite amazing what a small grant of money allowed a large group of Yukoners to accomplish: supporting Robin Armour's work in the development of what would become a national

exhibition of the historic photographs of Claude Tidd, documentation of the Klondyke Mines Railway and Hydraulic Ditch, Greg Hare's excavations of the Annie Lake site, Grant Lowey's work on the geological history of the Dezdeash Formation, Chris Scherbarth and Barb Joe's collaborative oral history of native birthing tales, Steve Smyth and Lynn Ogden's development of a Yukon constitutional history, Alice Carlick's project to adapt Yukon First Nations legends for use in local drama curriculum, Scott Gilbert's work with northern lemmings, Lee Mennell's groundbreaking study of frog populations in southern Yukon, Ingrid Johnson's graduate research into Native beading styles, determining the levels of PCBs and DDT in the Lake Laberge subsistence fishery by Karen Kidd, and assisting Luwelyn Johnson in the archival research required to publish the "lost" Post journals of the mid-nineteenth century Fort Selkirk.

I could list many more, and while a simple enumeration of the NRI's support for research would also include many southern based individuals, the point remains clear—the Northern Research Institute has indeed cultivated the emergence of an "Indigenous northern scholarship," one predicated on research in the North, for the North, and by the North.

Much has occurred between then and now, but today the NRI, ably steered by Clint Sawicki and Elaine Austin, is growing further into new arenas of development and capacity. To refer to it as a powerhouse of northern research is perhaps just a little precocious, but to my mind it is certain that the NRI has fundamentally altered the practice and focus of academic articulation with the North in nothing but positive ways, and the day is quickly approaching when northerners commanding the northern research agenda will far out-number our respected, but southern, peers.

My involvement in this initiative will always remain as one of the highlights of my academic and personal life.

Author

Norm Easton is lecturer in anthropology and northern studies at Yukon College and the founding director of the Northern Research Institute (1991–1994).

References

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