The Northern Research Endowment Fund and Fellowship Grants, 1992–2007: Reflections on the Initiative for Northern Studies in the Yukon

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Research is, of course, something that everybody does even though what happens—the process, the type of outcomes—are quite different. Looking up information or finding answers is research. Making observations and collecting data, invoking notions or theory, testing propositions and concluding with new knowledge is what we are familiar with as the more traditional research that is associated with science or the arts—and often found linked with higher education or private and government agencies.

Back in the 1980s, the Yukon was not without a research heritage since it was part of the government's mandate to manage its resources and affairs with the best information and data available in order to provide leadership and direction. Within the private sector, individuals and companies were already contributing research results, and the "new" Yukon College, by nature of its mandate, sought to discover new opportunities and offer better service to the community through research. When college programs evolved into academic based education, first with a teacher-education program linked through the University of British Columbia, and later in association with other colleges and universities in Canada and neighbouring Alaska, the natural need for a compatible research function was very apparent.

Developments in this direction easily moved to northern studies. It was natural given the Yukon's northern location, perspective, and relevance in Canada—a northern nation—that one of the college's first initiatives was to establish a Northern Research Institute. But it was the second initiative, the Northern Research Endowment Fund, which opened research opportunities more broadly in the Yukon, touching a wide spectrum of resident research capacity and attracting collaborating scientists and students in companion universities in the rest of Canada and elsewhere. It is on this part of the initiative that what follows will mainly report.

Northern Research Institute

The Northern Research Institute (NRI), supported by a three year start-up grant from the Donner Canadian Foundation, and with fiscal and infrastructure commitments by Yukon College, was launched in 1991 (after the first insfrastructure was unofficially set up in 1989). It opened offices at the Ayamdigut campus of Yukon College in 1992. The NRI's creation allowed Yukon College to formalize its institutional commitment to research, and the institute was conceived as a virtual "northern" centre to promote, coordinate, and undertake research activities that pursued excellence in all areas of the Yukon and northern studies.

Since the beginning, the institute has consistently pursued research opportunities in the humanities, and the social, applied, and pure sciences, with a particular emphasis on research that arises from defined community needs, including those of First Nations, but which may not have attracted the attention of other existing researchers or research organizations. It placed emphasis on research by Yukon College faculty and students who collaborated with outside researchers and agencies, as well as other local citizens either affiliated with the college as research associates or pursuing independent research and professional activities.

The Northern Research Endowment Fund

In a unique act, the Government of Yukon established the Northern Research Endowment Fund at Yukon College by donating $1 million. It did so to mark the founding of the NRI and to launch a fellowship program that would stimulate "scholarly research in the humanities, social, pure, and applied sciences that is directly relevant to Yukon," as described in the terms of reference and as expressed by the NRI at its opening. The college would manage the fund, and the return on investment was to be divided each year with one half to support fellowships, and the second half to be reinvested, along with the principal, to allow the endowment to grow—and this would protect the needed returns for ongoing fellowship grants. Since the first competition in 1992, up until 2007 inclusive, over $753,000 have been awarded in fellowships.

To make the granting process operational, the college appointed an advisory and awards committee that devised the terms of reference for advertising an open competition for applicants. At first, the committee took a conservative, college/university-oriented direction by offering a "regular fellowship" of up to $8,000 to any applicant for research expenses, or a salary replacement fellowship for Yukon College faculty to allow a term of research

leave, or an outside scholar grant for established scholars working outside of the Yukon, who would receive an $8,000 grant plus travel expenses to come to the Yukon to study.

It very quickly emerged that this was far too structured and elite to bring any useful interest, and the committee softened and broadened the terms. To aid the judgment calls, applicants were asked to provide their affiliations, credentials, research topic and context in knowledge, field or research plan with equipment, travel and/or support, budgets—including what portion was requested from this program—and suitable and timely reports of results from successful candidates. As applications and grants settled with time and experience, the committee suggested that most grants would not normally exceed $4,000; it became more and more apparent that, for the majority of projects, applicants could expect only partial support given the size of their research budgets.

Grants: Where the Money Went

Given the endowment's investment policy, it follows that over the fifteen years since the program began, the amount of money available for grants has reflected the earning power each year. With changing economic conditions and interest rates, therefore, the pattern of granting has been quite variable.

Table 1 shows funds granted by year from the beginning of the endowment. In the first four years to 1995, between $50,000 and $80,000 was awarded annually, with the average grant higher than the median grant during the program. This reflected "good" times. In 1994 it reached a high of 50, and it took a bit of time for the number of applications to settle.

In terms of the money available for each competition, the early "good times" meant that $81,000 was available in the second year. A second period of good interest rates was 2000 and 2001 when $90,000 and $80,000 were available—the highest consecutive amounts in the entire program. With more money available, success rates during these two years were also the highest in the program at 75 percent and 63 percent respectively. The number of applications subsequently rose slightly in response. At the same time, the average grants at this time were higher than the median grant for the program. As time passed, we can see a tentative link between the number of applications and funds available, with a lag to allow the news about success to circulate back to potential applicants.

It should be pointed out that the grants did not always cover a project's full funding. In some instances, more likely with independent applicants and very local topics, the only source of support was the NRI granting program.

But in government-partnered research and university-based applications, the full costs of projects were well beyond what could be granted from the NRI, and such projects went ahead because of support from other sources. No statistics are readily available about how full or partial funding emerged, but it might not be too far amiss to suggest that about one-third of the projects depended entirely on NRI grants, and two-thirds had multiple funding. This does not, however, take away the importance of the program in stimulating research interest in and about Yukon.

Table 1. Grants received, grants made, and total and average funds dispersed (total grants = 267).

Year	# Received	# Granted	Success Rate	$ Granted	Average
1992	36	15	42%	$50,200	$3,347
1993	48	18	38%	$81,500	$4,528
1994	50	21	42%	$61,050	$2,907
1995	40	20	50%	$52,500	$2,625
1996	37	13	35%	$34,000	$2,615
1997	37	13	35%	$36,400	$2,800
1998	31	18	58%	$44,300	$2,461
1999	36	15	42%	$50,800	$3,387
2000	32	24	75%	$90,150	$3,756
2001	41	26	63%	$80,500	$3,096
2002	41	23	56%	$55,000	$2,391
2003	37	11	30%	$28,000	$2,545
2004	36	11	31%	$21,500	$1,955
2005	27	13	48%	$20,500	$1,577
2006	25	14	56%	$25,000	$1,786
2007	22	12	55%	$22,350	$1,863
	Totals	267		$753,750	$2,823
				Median Grant:	$2,620

Most of the researchers who were funded only received a single grant. Some came back when the research project needed another year and they were funded again. But some researchers developed ongoing programs and asked for help again and again. Figure 2 displays the repetition by showing the proportion of researchers receiving multiple grants.

By far the largest number of researchers—125 or 75 percent—received only one grant. Twenty-one people received two grants, eleven got three

grants. One person received five grants, three people had six each, two people had eight apiece, and one even had twelve. The high repeaters were generally in "science" areas where fieldwork and long-term data gathering were most important. Archaeology, geosciences (permafrost), and biosciences, with population or vegetation studies, were the most frequent topics. Such successes, while based on the worth of the subject matter, were also supported because of their Yukon focus, Yukon College connections, and frequent use of local field assistants.

Grants: What was the Research and Who Sponsored It?

Table 2 brings together the nature of the research and how it originated. Broad subject categories have been used to group the projects with like interests. The private or institutional links of researchers are also shown through declared sponsors. The table permits a review of how many topics were studied within subjects and their relative proportion, and by whom the work was sponsored or where it originated.

Table 2. Research Fellowships awarded 1992–2007 by subject category and sponsors. Total fellowships = 267.

	Sponsors									
	Yukon local independent projects		Yukon government and agencies		First Nations		Yukon College		Universities	
Subject Category	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
History, Heritage, Literature	15	25	8	12	10	38				
Sociology, Economics	16	27	17	27	3	12	5	19	15	16
Archaeology, Cultural	5	8	1	2	7	27	4	15	9	10
Geoscience	2	3			2	8	2	7	24	26
Bioscience	21	37	37	59	4	15	16	59	44	48
	59		63		26		27		92	
	22%		24%		10%		10%		34%	

History / Heritage / Literature

In the history category, oral history was a dominant theme for First Nations. Work on Tagish, Kwanlin Dun, Kaska, Glenlyon Mountains, and Kluane and Hutshi histories were converted to the record. Tahltan history was recovered from fieldwork as early as1912, along with native birthing tales and other First Nations life stories including Bahá'í legends and Watson Lake oral history. Studies of more contemporary interest included life and times of Wind City, community development of Faro, histories of Dawson City Fire Department, and parts of the Overland Trail and Ridge Road. Conventional history took up the Fort Selkirk journals, work of Robert W. Service, Bishop Bompas, Captain Paddy Martin, George Black, the story of the Yukon Pioneers (and specifically Victoria Anna Belle Faulkner), and more about women on the northern frontier.

On the heritage side, studies of Kaska grammar and Kaska artists, Kluane traditions, Aboriginal watercraft, river heritage from Dawson to Fortymile, traditions from Blackstone Uplands, traditional trails of Scotty Creek, backgrounds on fur parkas, Athapaskan footwear, and packsaddles in Yukon transport are examples of the diversity. Literature per se was not a chosen topic although some editorial work was supported.

Sociology / Economics

Table 2 shows the relatively high interest in this category of research topics. Almost one-quarter of the total research was social sciences research. Independent, Yukon-based researchers offered most of these projects, although some were related to formal Yukon agencies or Yukon College. University work in northern social sciences has almost always been much less prominent than the life and geosciences. Topics were highly varied but included: plays about the North, land claims experience, community justice, Yukon museums, Whitehorse architecture, Gold Rush labour markets, constitutional development in the Yukon, tourism, northern fruit culture, city planning with climate change, traditional knowledge and Parks Canada policy, and the art of Mrs. Gertie Tom.

Such variety reflects the breadth of interests, intellectual curiosity, and research capacity that is present in the Yukon, much of which might not have been activated without this fellowship program.

Archaeological / Cultural

By its nature, archaeological research is rarely a one-season enterprise. Of the twenty-six separately funded projects, most were parts of long-term and multi-season fieldwork at a couple of sites in the Yukon. One set of studies

in the Scottie Creek area is linked to Yukon College where resident expertise is present. Another set of studies by a local independent archaeologist is at the McIntyre Creek site. First Nations have also contributed work partly through bringing to publication results from their work at Fish Lake, Pelly Lakes, Lake Laberge, and the Tadry and Kelly lakes areas.

While there may be a focus on recovering and reconstructing early Aboriginal roots to present society, the findings have much broader implications when the grand picture of the peopling of North America is approached.

Geosciences

Geoscience projects are for the most part university based. There were a couple of fellowships for independent scientists, another two each for First Nations and Yukon College, and the rest went to university researchers and sponsored students. The sites at which the work was done are relatively few because the nature of the research tends to require multiple visits and long-term inquiry. Although certain areas have geology that is in itself scientifically intriguing, it will not come as a surprise that included here were a set of studies related to permafrost, which is of interest for its own sake, but which also has practical implications for applied land use or development.

Biosciences

Within the entire fellowship program, almost half of the grants went to projects in the biological sciences. Within that field, topics for research were about evenly divided between botanical and zoological studies, and the sponsoring agents for the research were mainly Yukon government, independent Yukon scientists, some from Yukon College, and the largest group were from universities.

Yukon-based research was weighted more to the zoological side. One could speculate that rising environmental, sustainability, and First Nations interests favour interest in wildlife in some form, but when the topics are reviewed we see expected concerns for caribou, Dall sheep, moose, wolves, and grizzly bears—not just for their own sakes, but for human encroachment and environmental impacts. Concern also exists for small mammals like lemmings, ground squirrels, pikas, and shrews, and perhaps unusual, interest in bats at their northern extremity. Some studies turned to northern amphibians, mainly frogs. Several studies were targeted at avian populations, songbirds, and forest birds with respect to migration patterns and timing, or cavity nesting problems; and raptors and their environment/population dynamics. There was also active interest in mosquitoes and butterflies. Some

work was aimed at knowledge of stream ecology and fish populations, such as lake trout in the southern lakes, as impacted by recreational use, climate change, or airborne chemicals.

Botanical research was mainly ecology based. Funded projects studied wetlands and forests with attempts to understand impacts of clear cutting, herbivore cropping, wind throw, insect damage, fire, planting and growth, and some documentation of refugia vegetation. There was rather more specific research on such things as fungi, mosses, alfalfa, sweet clover, and even contaminants. A few attempts were make to record and recover past vegetation changes to further understanding of the changing climate for future forecasts. All this work was on sites in the Yukon.

Conclusion

From this review, it can be concluded that research in and about the Yukon has a healthy source of intellectual strength in people within the territory who are both interested and active in professional ways. It could be argued that without the research endowment and the fellowship program, this talent might not have been stimulated or focused, and might not even have become engaged.

The opportunity to be supported to undertake research has been a real strength in helping to build the research capacity of Yukon College, and has given the Northern Research Institute, the home of the program, greater prominence and success not just at home but more widely in the national research community. This is underscored by the strong participation of universities, not just in Canada, but in the USA, England, and Finland, as partners in building a research tradition where it had not previously been so strong.

Author

John Stager is professor emeritus of geography at the University of British Columbia. He has been a member of the Fellowship Review Committee since the beginning of the program, and has chaired the meetings for most of that time.