

Founding the University of Northern British Columbia

Ken S. Coates

The creation of the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) remains one of the most important steps ever taken in Canada to promote teaching and research related to the Canadian North. Officially opened to great fanfare in August 1994 by Queen Elizabeth II, UNBC defied its early doubters, enjoyed marked success in initial student and faculty recruiting, and vaulted to the top of the list of small universities in Canada (fourth in the 2006 *Maclean's* magazine annual rankings of primarily undergraduate universities). Student numbers grew steadily through its first decade and new buildings were added to the country's most impressive campus—the only degree-granting institution in the country specifically designed for a northern setting. By any measure, UNBC exceeded its founders' dreams and emerged as a major player in northern and Aboriginal research.

When the government of British Columbia announced in 1990 that it was planning to open a university in Prince George, skeptics across the country had a field day. Prince George, after all, was the quintessential resource town, a ten-hour drive from the closest major city and known for producing more pulp and paper than any community in the world. The self-proclaimed "Capital of Northern British Columbia" had a reputation for fetid air, tense Aboriginal-newcomer relations, and an unstable, boom and bust economy. Skepticism soared when Canadian academics learned that the university was not intending to follow the "single campus" model popular across the country, but instead planned to build on the proposal outlined by Swedish academic Urban Dahloff for a distributed university. The president of Prince George's College of New Caledonia, Charles McCaffray, emerged as one of the principal supporters of the project, enraging college faculty members who repeatedly railed against the creation of the university and predicted its early demise. The preconditions for a failure in northern social and academic engineering seemed well placed.

The success, and indeed the existence, of UNBC owe a great deal to its unique origins. Early in 1987, a public meeting was organized in Prince George. Proponents called for the creation of a university in the city, arguing

that the northern two-thirds of the province needed local degree-granting capacity if they were to achieve economic growth and stability. The idea found considerable support from local politicians and community leaders, resulting in the establishment of the Interior University Society in December of that year. Prince George organizers realized that they needed strong regional support if they hoped to sway the provincial government, so they immediately reached out to politicians, educators, and community leaders across the North. Bruce Strachan, the local member of the legislative assembly and minister of state for the Cariboo region, supported the initiative and provided initial funding for research on the feasibility of creating a university in the region.

The key, however, was the mobilization of the people of northern British Columbia. Provincial elected and government officials, including Stan Hagen, the Social Credit minister responsible for post-secondary education, were almost dismissive of the idea, suggesting that there was no need for a university in the provincial North. The Interior University Society commissioned a report by Swedish academic Urban Dahloff on the challenges and opportunities of a northern university. That study, "Building a Future of Excellence: A University of Northern BC," became widely known as the Dahloff Report, creating widespread hope and expectations across the region. Dahloff, who had extensive experience in the development of post-secondary education in Scandinavia, argued in favour of a distributed university, with departments and faculties located throughout northern British Columbia in line with local needs and regional specializations. This model, importantly, mirrored the approach taken by the three community colleges in the region, Northern Lights Community College, the College of New Caledonia, and Northwest Community College, all of which had extensive multi-campus operations and strongly supported the model of distributed education. The message was appealing: an institution based in the North, serving northern students who had long needed to leave the region for post-secondary education and often decided not to return, at great cost to themselves and their family. University research, they hoped, would focus on northern questions and courses would feature relevant, northern themes.

Proving the educational value of a northern university emerged as the least of the Interior University Society's problems. Skepticism ran high in the provincial capital of Victoria, particularly in the department responsible for advanced education. The Society turned its attentions, instead, to the mobilization of public opinion. Proponents, particularly McCaffray, Prince George lawyer Murray Sadler and local businessman Tom Stedman, traveled throughout the region speaking to community groups and promoting the concept of a northern university. Within a year, the Interior University Society had secured formal endorsement of the idea by every local government, First

Nation, school and hospital board, and Chamber of Commerce in northern British Columbia, a task made more impressive given both the vast scale of the region (larger than France and Germany combined) and historic community rivalries that had often interfered with northern progress. Armed with a professional survey that demonstrated overwhelming support for the university concept, the Interior University Society took their appeal directly to the public. They sought signatures on a petition supporting the northern university, charging people five dollars for signing on. Remarkably, they secured 16,000 signatures—an impressive result in a region with only 300,000 people.

The government of British Columbia seemed unmoved. As northerners pushed for a full-service university, the province appeared headed in a different direction. The Bullen Report, released in 1989, favoured the creation of university colleges, and called on the government to expand several existing community colleges (which offered two years of university courses articulated to the three provincial universities) into degree granting institutions. College faculty, including those at the College of New Caledonia, immediately supported this approach. The Interior University Society, even with strong college representation, disagreed strongly. They wanted a full-service university, with a strong emphasis on regionally relevant research and graduate studies, and were not placated by the prospect of a minor expansion of the College of New Caledonia. While the debate continued with provincial officials, the Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology established the Implementation Planning Group—with substantial representation from southern British Columbia, including the existing universities—to advise the government on the steps forward.

It appeared as though the university proposal was flagging. While northerners remained convinced, the provincial government forged ahead with its university-college model, creating expanded institutions at the University College of the Cariboo, University College of the Okanagan, Malaspina University College, and Kwantlen University College. Northerners worried that their region would be next and their dream of a free-standing institution would be reduced to an enhancement of the College of New Caledonia—a concept that would have been a profound disappointment to people both in Prince George and throughout the region. To their surprise, they received a major boost from an unexpected quarter. Stan Hagen, minister of advanced education, was interviewed by the *Globe and Mail*, a national newspaper, about the education plans for the North. He dismissed the Interior University Society dream in a remarkably offhand way: “In the interior...people don’t think of education beyond grade twelve. The questions they ask at the end of the day are ‘How many trees did you cut today?’ or ‘How were things down in the

mine?” Howls of protest erupted across the North, and over 3,000 people wrote to the government about this astonishingly stupid insult, all the more stinging because there was some truth to it.

The tide turned almost overnight. Bruce Strachan, one of the early proponents of a university in the North, became minister of advanced education in November 1989. Early the following year, Strachan announced that a university would be established in the North, centred on Prince George but with region-wide responsibilities. On 21 June 1990, Bill 40, the UNBC Act, brought Canada’s newest university into existence. The government created the Interim Governing Council (IGC), with extensive regional, First Nations, and southern academic representation, giving the Council the powers of both a university board and senate, and charging them with responsibility for building the university. Northern college representatives figured prominently in the early planning for UNBC, with key roles played by Charles McCaffray (president of the College of New Caledonia), Horst Wagner (chair of the board of Northwest Community College), and Charlie Lasser (chair of the board of Northern Lights Community College); one of the first contract employees of the fledgling university society was Michael Hill, vice-president academic at Northwest Community College and a student of Urban Dahloff. (The then University College of the Cariboo, now Thompson Rivers University, centred in Kamloops, had a regional campus in Williams Lake, which was inside the UNBC target region, but figured less prominently in the founding discussions.)

Work started quickly. A presidential search resulted in the hiring of Geoffrey Weller, vice-president academic of Lakehead University and a long-time northern specialist with a particular interest in the role of universities in regional development. He arrived in Prince George—famously, as he liked to report, on a day when it was minus fifty-one degrees Celsius—in January 1991. A site was selected overlooking Prince George (and, less politically wise, looking down on the College of New Caledonia) and staff recruitment began. The Interim Governing Council forged ahead, preparing an Academic Plan. A draft, including a proposed calendar, was in place before the first academics had been hired; it was dropped in favour of a broader planning process. The IGC planned a strategy for serving the regions of northern British Columbia, and hired the initial staff for the new university. It is relevant to this volume to note that the senior administration at UNBC made a concerted effort to recruit Aron Senkpiel from his position as dean of the Arts and Science Division at Yukon College. Aron was intrigued—he was from Prince George and had followed the progress of the institution very closely. Ultimately, however, he decided that he was too wedded to the College, to his teaching, and to

the Yukon to relocate, even if it was to be part of a new university whose emergence he heartily endorsed.

The fledgling university faced formidable challenges. Much effort was devoted to regional promotion, for among the greatest challenges facing the fledgling university were an exceptionally low participation rate (8 percent as against a national average of 24 percent) and the commitment to serve the educational needs of the First Nations population in northern British Columbia. UNBC was fast-tracked, with the opening scheduled for September 1993, with many tasks to be completed before students could be admitted.

Beginning in 1991, UNBC had to recruit a full complement of staff and faculty, design and build a campus (budgeted initially at over \$130 million), recruit students, develop academic programs and secure professional accreditation, determine how to best serve the needs of all the regions of northern British Columbia, build a suitable library, and otherwise get the university ready for opening. Behind the scenes, tensions emerged between the Interim Governing Council and the academic and professional team assembled by President Weller, particularly over matters relating to the community colleges and regional delivery. In a pivotal development, the Social Credit government lost the 1991 provincial election to the New Democratic Party (NDP) led by Michael Harcourt. Faced with the prospect of losing their place on the Interim Governing Council, the initial Social Credit appointees asked the new government to leave them on. The premier agreed, but added a slightly larger number of NDP appointees, creating a large and somewhat unwieldy Board. Long-time university proponent Murray Sadler remained as the Board's chair.

The other major challenges included developing a regional strategy and placating the community colleges. While UNBC proponents argued that the advent of the university would raise the profile of post-secondary institutions, increase participation rates, and thus secure the enrollments at the colleges, college faculty in particular were highly suspicious. Complex negotiations ensued, as UNBC negotiated access to regional campus facilities, discussed opportunities with skeptical college faculty, and sought to develop long-term relationships that would sustain the post-secondary enterprise in the region. The faculty at the College of New Caledonia and Northwest Community College were particularly hostile, with several of them taking their protests into the public realm, and with the College Institute Educators' Association of BC (now the Federation of Post-Secondary Educators of British Columbia) lobbying a receptive provincial government on matters relating to UNBC. The college faculty protest did not begin to die down until the last weeks before the opening of the university. The demands of some faculty that UNBC be required to hire college faculty as a group was unacceptable to the university

administration. Another faculty concern that UNBC would erode enrollment in college university transfer courses was not borne out.

The regional strategy was another matter altogether. UNBC had been founded on a commitment to serve all of northern British Columbia. The Dahloff Report, in calling for a distributed model, raised expectations throughout the region about the likely local impact of a new university. Northern politicians, supported by several key IGC members, lobbied the university to have departments, faculties, facilities, and special programs located in their region. The university administration, while buying into the regional concept, had also been charged with establishing an academically credible campus in Prince George and building the research and teaching profile of the institution. Within the IGC and within the administration, lengthy and often passionate debates ensued about how best to serve the unique educational needs of the people of northern British Columbia. IGC members wishing a close integration with the community colleges found themselves at odds with the administration and other board members who wanted greater autonomy. There was, however, a general consensus that the university would strive to be markedly different from other institutions in two principle respects:

- A commitment to a different approach to working with Aboriginal communities, best exemplified by UNBC's important partnership program with the Nisga'a institution, the Wilp Wilxo'oskwhl Nisga'a (or Nisga'a House of Wisdom), the university's First Nations Centre, and the substantial integration of Indigenous ceremony and culture into the life of the campus.
- A commitment to be present, through programs, research activities, collaborative ventures, facilities, and faculty members, throughout northern British Columbia. This included basing the university's cooperative education effort in Fort St. John; placing full-time faculty and regional coordinators in Quesnel, Fort St. John, and Terrace; offering graduate degrees in smaller centres on a rotating basis; and developing collaborative programs with the regional colleges.

The University of Northern British Columbia moved quickly toward its official opening although this proved to be a moving target. Early in 1992, the provincial government announced a one-year delay in the opening, to September 1994, and required the university to launch a Quick Start degree completion program in three communities (Prince George, Terrace, and Dawson Creek). The hiring of the initial faculty members—the "First 40" as they came to be known—commenced that year, as did program and service planning, building design and construction, and the initial stages of university recruiting. Perhaps the most pivotal transformation occurred in the fall of 1993

when, at a time of considerable tension between the administration and the Interim Governing Council, the provincial government agreed to disband the IGC and turn over the management of the university to the Board of Governors and the academic affairs to the newly constituted Senate.

To the surprise of critics and the delight of supporters, the University of Northern British Columbia opened its Prince George campus in August 1994. While there was considerable internal laughter about Premier Michael Harcourt's claim that the university had been built "on time and on budget" — the former was true but the latter was not, as escalating costs had forced the university to scale back on its construction plans and borrow money to build the residences and parking lots—there was much to celebrate. The university had graduated its first group of graduates in the spring of 1994, hired over one hundred full-time faculty members and twice that number of support staff, developed and implemented a full range of undergraduate and graduate programs, and established a substantial presence throughout northern British Columbia. Perhaps most importantly, UNBC attracted over 1,100 students its first year, almost double the pessimistic early estimates of the provincial Ministry of Advanced Education and well over the seven hundred and fifty students that the IGC had assumed would join the university in its first year.

The University of Northern British Columbia subsequently built on the fundamental strengths of its initial founding: broad community support, a shared vision of a university designed to serve the North "in the North and for the North" in President Weller's oft-repeated phrase, generous government funding that recognized the costs of working in a northern and remote region, a consensus on the exciting possibilities of collaborating with First Nations, and a determination to be part of the international network of circumpolar universities. By 2006, UNBC had grown to over 3,500 full and part-time students, had over 150 faculty members, had remained in the top ten universities in its class in the *Maclean's* university rankings every year but one, worked collaboratively with the University of British Columbia on the development and offering of a northern medical program, added new recreational facilities in collaboration with the City of Prince George, maintained a significant regional presence, and taken a firm place among the leading small universities in Canada and as one of the most active members among the circumpolar universities.

UNBC, like Aron Senkpiel's Yukon College, was founded on the belief that northern regions have different post-secondary needs than southern areas, that northern jurisdictions require and deserve a university specifically designed to meet those needs, and that a post-secondary institution can be a significant engine for social, economic, and cultural change in the region. The University of Northern British Columbia succeeded, beyond the expectations of even

its most passionate early supporters, in large measure because it aligned its planning, programs, hiring, and regional commitments with the aspirations of northern Canada. Perhaps most significantly, UNBC overcame the resistance of strong opposition inside and outside the region, the former showing a not-uncommon lack of northern confidence and the latter the long-standing southern assumption that the North did not need or deserve the full range of services and facilities that southerners take for granted. UNBC provides a superb illustration of the benefits of regional mobilization, collaboration between communities, and the grassroots belief that advanced education is pivotal to the continued evolution and improvement of northern societies.

Ken Coates was the founding vice-president (academic) of the University of Northern British Columbia. He is now professor of history and dean of the Faculty of Arts, University of Waterloo.

Key documents relevant to the founding of the University of British Columbia can be found on the Northern Review website <www.yukoncollege.yk.ca/review>. These documents include:

Constitution, Interior University of British Columbia, 1987

Interior University Society, "Building a Future of Excellence: a University for Northern British Columbia, 1989

Interior University Society Pledge Form

University of Northern British Columbia Act, 1990

Report of the Interim Governing Council Committee on Regional Policy and Implementation, 1993