

# “Deaning” in the North: Personal Reflections on the Contributions of Aron Senkpiel

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Aron Senkpiel, the founding dean of the Arts and Science Division at Yukon College, played a pivotal role in the development of higher education, first in the Yukon, and then in the circumpolar world. His achievements attest to the sincerity of the statement he made in the resume accompanying his application for a teaching role in the Yukon in 1980: “I am keenly interested in the betterment of the North through education.”

The following reflections on his contribution are personal, and in themselves do not constitute a complete accounting of his work. Rather, I wish to describe selected elements of our professional relationship that can inform future generations of educators and administrators, and to capture some of the unique qualities of northern academic leadership.

Much of Canada’s post-colonial northern history isn’t “historical” in the popular sense of the word. The idea of history evinces the salutary effects of the passage of time as a way to glean what is important or permanent from all that transpires. With the ending of the colonial period only a generation ago, northern institutions and the societies of which they are a part are in a state of constant flux. The twin forces of devolution and self-determination are shaping something new out of old assumptions and practices. The field of higher education is particularly affected because education underpins human capacity-building in the region. It is breathtaking, really, to be part of this.

I had the pleasure of working with Aron in his capacity as dean of the Arts and Science Division at Yukon College. He was one of the first members of staff to welcome me as the new president, and did so, most alarmingly, on his knees. (It was typical of Aron to acknowledge the potential of his physical height to overwhelm by adjusting it downward.) My first impression was indelible. Time would prove that this almost courtly gesture was a surface manifestation of the deeply democratic and sensitive character structure that served him so well in his work.

The overly romanticized rugged individualism of northerners is ultimately less important in the creation and nurturing of new northern institutions than the capacity to deeply understand the complex truths about the region. Comprehending the diversity of cultures; the individual and social consequences of historical traumas; the community volatility created by boom and bust economies; new forms of governance; the national hinterland experience; and the dreams, wisdom, and aspirations of northern peoples, are all essential prerequisites for building something enduring here. He wrote the following words in 1988, as a seven-year resident North of 60: “There are as many norths as there are people living here” (Senkpiel, 1988). He urged a complex rather than a stereotyped appreciation of northern-ness, and one that resonates in local curriculum:

We must redirect some of our energy—especially those of us who teach. We must not only give our students a sense of this land’s past—of both our mistakes and our successes—but inculcate a realistic sense of the present. Only then will we be able to pursue the promise of the future. (Senkpiel, 1988)

Aron provided me with an ongoing tutorial about the real North, for in 1994 I was from Outside and required orientation if I was to enable the work so ably begun by those who lived here. This bottom-up dynamic is, in itself, one of the qualities of “deaning” in the North. Presidents and other senior figures from southern climes tend to come and go more frequently than those in more established jurisdictions, requiring those who wish to build something of permanence to put significant and continuous effort into two fronts simultaneously. The normal “middleness” of the dean’s role (Fagin, 1997), that most challenging position between faculty and senior administration, thus takes on an additional aspect: the enculturation and education of the boss.

Aron’s passion for relevant undergraduate education inspired programming that continues to meet the rigorous academic requirements of major southern universities, while ensuring that our students come to know themselves as citizens of the northern region. In this respect, the recruitment and encouragement of faculty members from diverse disciplines, but with a similar commitment, was a feature of his tenure, as was his role in creating this multidisciplinary journal. He was also a leading architect of the Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies, the defining program of the University of the Arctic. A northern dean, then, must have a cosmopolitan orientation when it comes to navigating the strictures of post-secondary systems, and also be a champion for regional knowledge and its accredited transmission to students. Few appreciate the breadth of knowledge and depth of commitment that this entails.

The traditional role of dean, as passed down in western European universities from medieval times, is one of wise stewardship. Faculty members,

the true heart of an educational institution, have been served and led by deans for centuries. Generally speaking, however, deans have responsibility for groups of faculty sharing a common discipline. Small northern institutions differ dramatically from this model. Aron's faculty were (and are) diverse in scholarly background, most frequently one of a kind. Further, within the context of a comprehensive institution, knowledge of other forms of adult education and training is of critical importance in assuring seamless access for students and appropriate academic advising. Northern deans are perforce interdisciplinarians, working with colleagues whose academic traditions vary radically, and with a faculty whose teaching and research interests are frequently on the cutting edge of their respective fields by virtue of their northern context.

Discussions with Aron frequently turned to his dream of strengthened resident scholarly capacity. By this he meant the patriation of northern research and knowledge to the residents of the region. We often discussed the debilitating effects of researchers visiting the Yukon, conducting research here, and then disappearing to distant cities, often without leaving the benefit of their findings as a legacy for the people and communities who hosted them. Worse still, the research questions pursued, more often than not, are not the ones that are needed here. The proposal that ultimately supported the creation of the Northern Research Institute (NRI) at Yukon College was entitled "In the North, For the North," and included the following observation: "the 'northern research community'—which is largely situated at universities in southern Canada—has been slow to recognize that the North is not just a frontier, but... a homeland" (Yukon College, 1990). The NRI was conceived as a research centre, closely linked with the Arts and Science Division, fostering research in the service of northern research priorities. The knowledge gained was to be shared with students and communities, and the conduct of the work was to encourage a new generation of researchers. The development of resident northern scholarship required a suitable vessel. Northern deans frequently need to create structures as well as programs, be organizational architects as well as leaders.

Beginning as an English teacher, and always wistful about being one again, Aron never lost his affection for the classroom. Did he plan to be a dean? Probably not. As Mary Cullinan says:

No one grows up wanting to be a dean. A teacher, yes. Or a basketball player, doctor, musician or accountant. A dean, no. You probably don't even hear about dean until you are in a college—and then it's when someone says, "You'll have to see the dean." (Cullinan, 2001)

His legacy to Yukon College and to the North is real, and far more extensive than this short paper can convey. When a suitable descriptor was

sought for Yukon College's Web site, Aron contributed the following: "Yukon College—one of Canada's outstanding small colleges." He helped to make it so, in any latitude.

*Sally Webber was president of Yukon College from 1994 to 2006.*

### **References**

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