

# Opinion: Time for a Northern University?

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*Karen Barnes*

Is it time? Is it finally time to overcome the insufficiencies of the past: the loss of culture and language through residential schools, the division of families as young people chose to move to southern Canada, the dominance of southern curricula, the superfluity of Northern Studies programs at southern universities, the loss of traditional knowledge as Elders passed away, and the lack of adequate teaching facilities in remote, rural communities?

Since arriving in the North just over three years ago, I have been struck by the number of northerners who have gone south or offshore to gain work experience and education, and have chosen to return to their northern communities. I hear from my colleagues that this phenomenon is new, and it is growing as more and more young, educated adults, born in the North, return home to work.

Coinciding with this return has been the maturation of the northern territorial colleges. Building on the vocational adult learning centres that were created in the 1960s and 1970s to fill the gaps in high school completion and job skill acquisition (and on initiatives like the Yukon Native Teacher Education Program, which had begun training teachers locally in a Government of Yukon partnership with the University of British Columbia), the northern colleges have evolved into thriving community colleges. All three colleges have become involved in applied research activity, collaborating on projects with Canadian and other circumpolar universities, as well as northern-based industry partners.

Yukon College and now increasingly Nunavut Arctic College and Aurora College are delivering university-level programming both through partnerships with universities in southern Canada or on their own. A number of full degrees are offered through the colleges entirely North of 60. All three colleges have membership in either the BC Council of Admissions and Transfers (BCCAT) or the Alberta Council of Admissions and Transfers (ACAT), which allows their students to take part or all of their coursework on to other Canadian post-secondary institutions.

So is it time? Is it time to build further—to build a university that will employ these young people who have returned, to engage them in research and learning? Is it time to build institutes at a northern post-secondary university that will preserve and celebrate northern knowledge and tradition? Is it time to build a place where young people coming from remote communities can engage in research that will address the issues they face back home such as depleting food stocks, climate change, and environmental damage? Is it time to use the technology available to connect the people in northern Canada to their circumpolar neighbours through scholarship that emerges from an institution of learning embedded in northern communities? Is it time for the northern studies programs of the south—to move north? Yes it is.

**Author**

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