

In the North, For the North: Post-Secondary Education in the Provincial North

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Abstract: For generations, promoters of northern political and economic development have emphasized the importance of post-secondary education. These northern advocates have lamented the absence or narrow scope of post-secondary institutions in the North. Canada is the only circumpolar nation without an Arctic university, and there is ample evidence that the region and the country are much the poorer for the lack of northern research, education, and training capacity. It is not that Canadian institutions have ignored the region. Northern tier community colleges have played key and innovative roles in responding to regional needs. Southern universities have, through a variety of undergraduate, graduate, and professional outreach programs, provided some degree options in the North. The University of the Arctic represents an innovative circumpolar effort to address northern needs across the Circumpolar North. Focusing on the University of Northern British Columbia, which opened in 1994, this article demonstrates how responsive, regionally-aware post-secondary institutions can have transformative effects on their host communities and regions, and it deals with some of the controversies surrounding the opening of the university.

In August 1994, Queen Elizabeth stopped off on her way to the Commonwealth Games in Victoria to celebrate the opening of the University of Northern British Columbia in Prince George. It was a signal event in the history of the region, capping a long effort to develop a university in the vast central and northern district of the province. The well-attended ceremony, conducted outdoors in the agora that formed the centrepiece of the new campus, celebrated the special role northern communities had played in the institution's development. At the pinnacle moment of the formal proceedings, a large banner listing all of the communities in northern British Columbia (BC) was unrolled from the top of the library. It was an ideal touch, connecting this pivotal moment in the educational history of the Provincial North with the cities, towns, villages, and First Nations communities that

had sustained the drive to build the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC).

The important part of the story behind UNBC, quite unusual in the history of Canadian post-secondary education, is that the institution was not the creation of a provincial bureaucracy or even a cynical vote-grabbing initiative by a political party. Started by a Social Credit government and completed by a New Democratic Party (NDP) administration, UNBC represented a triumph of northern boosterism over provincial planning, southern myopia, and the conservatism (one might say selfishness) of the traditional universities. That arguably the most important educational institution to that time in all the Provincial Norths—one with an unabashed northern focus and commitment—emerged from the mobilization of regional support and a full political battle with southern authorities, was an important symbol of the ongoing struggle to develop post-secondary institutions in the Provincial North.

It is now axiomatic that a modern, competitive society—a complete social and political system—requires access to advanced education. Across North America and throughout much of the world, governments, business, parents, and young adults share a commitment to post-secondary education and formal preparation for entry to the workforce. This represents a substantial change from the way people thought about northern regions in the 1950s and 1960s. As the resource and development boom rolled out across the Provincial Norths through the post-war period, low-skill, high-wage work dominated the regional economy. Major projects came along with regularity—the Kemano power project, Kitimat aluminum smelter, and W.A.C. Bennett dam in British Columbia; major forestry, hydro, and mining projects across the prairie provinces; mining and forestry developments in northern Ontario; Quebec’s province-changing investments in northern hydroelectric generation and mineral development; and the highly controversial Churchill Falls hydro project in Newfoundland—fueling the rapid expansion of the population of the northern provinces and raising the standard of living among the non-Aboriginal communities.

The resource-based economy did not put a high premium on regional education. Engineering and design expertise rested largely with the construction firms, mining companies, and government offices in the south. Much of the northern work required little formal education, but nevertheless produced high incomes and, during the boom years, steady work. Northern companies only occasionally complained about the absence of skilled workers and university-trained employees. The blue-collar expansion of the Provincial North brought the region to the nation’s attention—W.A.C. Bennett

showed up on the cover of *Time* magazine in celebration of his audacious vision of northern development—establishing an image of high wages and prosperity along with short-term commitment to the region. Workers and their families cycled in and out of the North with the construction activity; the emergence of major company towns (Kitimat, Uranium City, Cassiar, Thompson, Elliot Lake, Schefferville, Labrador City) and regional centres (Prince Rupert, Prince George, Prince Albert, Thunder Bay, Jonquiere/Chicoutimi, Goose Bay) provided a measure of stability, although even that could be short-lived.

Post-secondary education, not surprisingly therefore, came late to the Canadian North. The system began in the late 1960s when, as part of a massive national wave of institution building, community colleges focused on practical skills and the trades began to open across the Provincial North. The dispersed nature of the population presented the system with significant challenges. In British Columbia, where inter-community rivalries prevented collaborative initiatives, the northern colleges (New Caledonia, 1969; Northwest, 1975; Northern Lights, 1975) established local branch campuses rather than concentrating their educational services on one large main institution.

There were also, of course, three institutions in the territories that did not grant degrees, but that did offer university-level courses and a variety of programs aimed at local needs and interests. These institutions were unquestionably northern both in character and in focus: Yukon College (1983, which has thirteen campuses including one at the Yukon Correctional Centre); Nunavut Arctic College (1995, with three campuses and twenty-four community learning centres); and Arctic College in the Northwest Territories, now Aurora College (as of 1995, also with three campuses and twenty-four learning centres).

Southern universities had long provided extension, regional-delivery, and online/distance education programs targeted at northern residents. Specialized programs in education, social work, and nursing were provided for northern residents. Some offerings, like the University of Saskatchewan's Master of Northern Governance and Development, respond to very specific regional needs. Brandon University's long-running Brandon University Northern Teacher Education Program (BUNTEP) and the Tri-University programming delivered in northern Manitoba are among the targeted, cohort-based offerings designed to meet specific northern needs. Brandon's BUNTEP program trained teachers in and for the North by sending instructors to their communities in a sequence of courses that culminated in an education degree.

The development of the community college system reflected two important trends: the establishment of larger and more stable cities in the North, and the growing need for regionally available skilled labour. Colleges, closely connected to regional businesses and focused substantially on career-focused programs, prepared students for the many construction, mining, forestry, and related service jobs associated with the northern resource economy. In some provinces, particularly British Columbia and Alberta, the colleges also offered first and second year university courses, giving local students the option of starting their university careers close to home.

The universities came later. Lakehead University, based in the amalgamated city of Thunder Bay and arguably the first university created in the Provincial North, came in 1965. In this instance, the university emerged from earlier post-secondary institutions starting with the Lakehead Technical Institute, created immediately after the Second World War, and the non-degree granting Lakehead College of Arts, Science and Technology. Northern specialists have long debated the appropriateness of including Thunder Bay inside the Provincial North; the institution itself has been historically ambivalent about being a north-centred university. The size of the city, its location on main transportation corridors, the fact that it is actually south of the forty-ninth parallel, its industrial economy, and strong government presence made it markedly different from other clearly northern communities. Its claim to be northern and its motto (“A Northern Vision”) caused skepticism and even some hilarity among more obviously northern institutions. The Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, established in 1969, brought advanced education to the Petit Nord in Quebec, although the institution focused on the immediate Saguenay region and did not position itself as the education centre for Quebec’s vast northern areas. Laurentian University, based in Sudbury, Ontario, opened in 1960; it is not generally considered to be a northern institution, although the university’s emphasis on central Ontario and the mining sector make it comparable in operations and programming. (We could stop here for a prolonged debate on what makes a community “northern.” Sudbury, at 46.30 degrees north, is south of Paris, Zurich, and Vienna ... but this debate is for another time).

Labrador, as of 2012, does not have a full-service university, though Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador has launched a significant research unit in Goose Bay. In 2004 Manitoba converted Keewatin Community College, itself established in 1969, to the University College of the North, maintaining the college function that served most of the institution’s students but expanding university course and program offerings. Its campuses in The Pas and Thompson (and twelve regional centres), and

the fact that it offers its own degrees (it offers, among other things, a Bachelor of Midwifery), make it Canada's most northerly degree-granting institution (The Pas is slightly south of Prince George's latitude, and Thompson is north of it). Neither Saskatchewan nor Alberta has a northern university, unless you count Athabasca University. Most significantly, community pressure for the creation of regional universities remained minimal. In sharp contrast to southern cities, where pressure to create universities have brought universities to communities as diverse as Sydney, Nova Scotia; Orillia, Ontario; and Kelowna, British Columbia, northern residents appeared to be content with the services provided by community colleges.

British Columbia bucked the trend. Starting in the late 1980s, northern residents across the region began to organize for the purpose of attracting a university to the North. Northern BC had a strong network of community colleges, all offering university transfer courses. Prince George and its allies wanted a "proper" university, a proposal greeted with chagrin by college instructors, who lobbied strongly and unsuccessfully first to block the university, and then when its founding appeared inevitable, to make it an outgrowth of the college system. The northern university movement accelerated because of a combination of smart strategy and political gaffes. In the first instance, organizers secured 15,000 northern signatures, each signer paying \$5, on a petition calling on the provincial government to fund a university. The group later secured statements of support from every community and First Nation in northern British Columbia. A gaffe by Stan Hagen, then minister of advanced education, gave strength to the campaign. The veteran politician was quoted in 1989 as saying that northerners didn't care much about post-secondary education: "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?'" Northerners were incensed. They clamoured for government action, and the embarrassed Social Credit administration moved ahead quickly with a plan for the campus.

UNBC quickly became more than a university in the North; it was created as an institution for and of the North. The hiring of Lakehead University Vice-President (Academic), Geoff Weller, who had made an effort to highlight Lakehead's northern credentials, such as they were, ensured that the new institution would not try to simply replicate southern universities. The University of Northern British Columbia focused on northern and Aboriginal issues, and opened regional centres in Williams Lake, Quesnel, Fort St. John, Terrace, and Prince Rupert, as well as Prince George, with specialized programming and research operations in other communities. The university established strong connections with other circumpolar

institutions and emerged as one of the most committed northern universities in North America.

Alberta took tentative steps toward the creation of another possible northern university, but in a very different way than BC. The creation of Athabasca University (AU) in 1970 represented a major commitment to distance learning. Placing the campus in Athabasca, a small community of 3,000 some 150 kilometres north of Edmonton, appeared to reflect a commitment to northern education. The dream soon faded. Most academics would not move to Athabasca, working from home or university offices in Edmonton. Athabasca did not emphasize northern-related programming and did not highlight efforts to provide educational services to northern residents. The university is still headquartered in northern Alberta, but offers not a single course in its home community; it could just as easily be anywhere. Instead, AU, whose administrative buildings happened to be in northern Alberta, serves the people of Alberta and beyond through distance learning.

The history of the founding of the University of Northern British Columbia, the first public degree-granting university opened in Canada in a quarter century, highlights many of the issues involved with specifically northern and remote institutions. First, it was unusually political: founded by the last Social Credit administration, it came into being under the new NDP government. Its initial governing body, the Interim Governing Council, was made up of members of both political persuasions as well as some non-political people: small-town mayors, community representatives, a couple of veteran academics, and representatives of the existing colleges. The NDP thought that such boards should be broadly representative of the community, and some of their appointees were hostile to traditional universities and suspicious of academics. More than one of them had a particular vision of what a new university should be like, and there was, to put it mildly, a considerable clash of views.

Looking back, it is possible to see the main areas of contention as issues that would very likely be present in the founding of any degree granting institution in a northern or remote region. First, was the question of to what extent UNBC should concern itself academically with fields of particular interest to its region. It certainly seemed reasonable that it should focus on northern (and circumpolar) studies, not only because it was in the North, but because northern studies tended to be badly neglected at other Canadian institutions. First Nations studies also seemed a logical field, given the presence of First Nations people in the region, though of course there were other Canadian universities with strong First Nations studies programs.

The same was true of environmental studies, given the resource-based economy of UNBC's region. The choice of international studies reflected British Columbia's growing connections with the Asia-Pacific region (as well as the interests of UNBC's first president), though other provincial institutions also had concentrations here. Less obvious was the choice of Women's Studies as the final field of concentration, but this reflected the internal political dynamics of the IGC and the zeitgeist of the 1980s. In all cases, interdisciplinary study and co-operation was emphasized.

Second, was the question of how flexible the university should be in its academic standards. The word "innovative" was often used in the early days, and it was expected in some quarters that UNBC would break free of the stifling regulations of older universities and become more responsive to the needs of the area's residents, especially as concerned the granting of credentials. It was for this reason that an instructor in one of the trades programs at a regional college phoned and asked what he had to do to get an MSc. When asked what field his BSc was in, he replied that he had never been to university, but needed a Master's degree for career advancement. When told that the system didn't work that way, he replied crossly that he thought the place was supposed to be innovative. A suggestion that the MA thesis in First Nations studies should be oral, since Indigenous culture was oral, led to a similar exchange of views. The same was true with proposals to grant degrees for a portfolio of "life experiences" and to credit a program in aircraft maintenance that was almost entirely practical and hands-on.

Probably the most politically contentious issue was the physical diversification of the university. The university proposal had received wide support across the region, from the small communities from Fort St. John to Prince Rupert, and south to Quesnel and Williams Lake—a very large area. One of the reasons for this support was the widely-floated idea that the physical campus might be located in different towns—not a central campus with regional learning centres, but the Arts Faculty in one place, the Science Faculty in another, the library in a third, and so forth. This idea was given life by a report commissioned early on, written by a European educator named Dalhoff who had personal connections to the IGC, that said such an arrangement was perfectly feasible. Regional communities, sensing new construction and jobs, were excited, and Houston pondered whether it should insist on hosting political science or economics. Of course, even if this idea had been put into effect, there would have been disappointment, because there are more small towns in northern British Columbia than there are pieces you could conceivably carve a university into. But when it became clear that the idea was not going to be put into practice at all, there

was a good deal of hard feeling across the region that took some time to die away. The university did and does have a regional presence of a more traditional nature, with teaching centres in Fort St. John, Quesnel, Terrace, and Prince Rupert. A more interesting innovation was the partnership with the Nisga'a First Nation that resulted in a degree-granting program centered in Gitwinksihlkw, in the Nass region of northwestern BC.

One could sum up these three issues in this question: to what degree should the university try to replicate other universities, and to what degree should it attempt to be different from them? It turned out that nearly everything associated with the start-up of the university militated against doing things differently, and that most academics were quite conservative where their own careers were concerned. Faculty members wanted to be assured that they were coming to a proper university, not some experimental place. Nor did they wish to move to Chetwynd (whose mayor was a member of the IGC), a town of 2,600 between Prince George and Peace River. Luckily for the university, it was hiring in a buyers' market and the quality of the faculty was excellent, an important reason in its success. It also helped that there were jobs for both members of academic couples, and about ten such pairs were hired. Students wanted to be assured that their degrees were as good as those from any other university. British Columbia has what is called the "transfer environment," which means that it is very common for students to take courses from several universities, either moving around, or taking them by distance education. This is particularly true of older students and ones from rural and remote areas, and it was thus essential that UNBC's courses be acceptable to the other universities. The degrees had to be acceptable, too, for entrance to professional schools and graduate study elsewhere.

Thus UNBC proved to be an example of the principle of institutional entropy, a word Webster defines as "the degradation of the matter and energy in the universe to an ultimate state of inert uniformity." "Inert" is rather unkind, but over a fairly short period the university reached uniformity with other Canadian institutions, largely because that was what almost everyone connected with it wanted. The last example of this was the use of the word program instead of department. The original administrators had wanted to avoid the usual departmental rivalries and instead to group academic disciplines into programs of study. This proved impossible to do in practice, for rather interesting reasons (it's curious how different the thought patterns of historians, political scientists, and linguists prove to be when they really get to know each other), and eventually the term department crept back in. The only real innovation that survived was that instead of having every

departmental discipline that one would find at a big university, it was decided to have fewer but larger departments. Thus philosophy was not taught, except sessionally, nor was French, and there was no department of sociology.

Another example of entropy was the four core courses (humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, physical sciences), which were compulsory for first year students. The majority of students resented them (“I came here to study forestry, not art”), and they were eventually made optional, and then abandoned.

To the surprise of the government, the southern universities, and even the IGC, all of which had low expectations of the place, UNBC proved to be a huge success. It did well in the *Maclean's* ratings the first time it was rated, and has been in the top three for the small university category for the past several years, beaten only by Mount Allison and Acadia (which have powerful and wealthy alumni whose donations form one of *Maclean's* measuring categories). In 2014 it came second. The major reason for this critical success was the faculty, which was and is of high quality. UNBC also scored well in several categories: first year classes were not sloughed off on sessional instructors; classes were small; the faculty all had doctorates and active research programs; and a great deal of money was spent on the library. Its enrolment has been flat for several years, mostly because the province has opened another major university in the Okanagan, and has permitted several of the former colleges to offer degrees (e.g., Vancouver Island University, formerly Malaspina College, et al.), a policy which has diluted the market considerably.

A few more points can be made about the establishment of post-secondary education in Canada's North:

- Southern governments have been reluctant to invest heavily in northern post-secondary education, responding belatedly to northern demands for services comparable to the rest of the provinces.
- Institutional development has followed economic and population growth, rather than preceding and focusing development efforts in the region. The latter model, followed successfully in Scandinavia, has not yet been a feature of the development of the post-secondary systems in the Provincial Norths.
- Southern institutions were, for decades, prepared to offer limited services to the North, but expended little effort promoting post-secondary education in the region or recruiting northern residents to attend the institutions.

- The large and important Aboriginal population has significant challenges at the elementary and high school levels, which attract more attention and resources than post-secondary education does.
- Career-focused community colleges have enjoyed considerable success in training students for the resource and construction-based northern economy.
- The desire of governments and northern leaders to improve professional capacity in the North—and to offset the transiency of imported southern professionals—resulted in the creation of cohort-based programs in education, social work, and nursing, all with considerable success in preparing northern and Aboriginal peoples for northern service.
- Presented with access to a regional institution, northern residents attend post-secondary education at rates comparable to southern cities and towns. Contrary to the long-standing image of the North, experience shows that there is no inherent anti-education bias in the North and, indeed, consistently strong interest among Aboriginal communities for northern-centred and North-based programming
- Universities have been at the vanguard of connecting the Provincial Norths to social, economic, and political developments in the Circumpolar World. These connections are embryonic at present and remain somewhat tenuous, but have the potential to transform regional self-awareness and understanding of northern issues and challenges.
- The post-secondary system has not yet ensured that the scientific and technological developments associated with academic research and advanced training have been focused on northern issues. The Provincial North lacks substantial research capability and therefore faces difficulty in ensuring that the region benefits from fast-moving science and technology creativity and commercialization.

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