

Universities and Northern Economic Development

John F. Young

Abstract: The politics of economic development in northern, resource-based communities can be exacerbated by a wide number of challenging dynamics. These dynamics go well beyond NIMBY and BANANA responses to development, but also include the pronounced “us vs. them” perspective where development is frequently understood to be driven by exploitative interests external to the communities that are directly impacted. This discussion paper wrestles with questions related to the role of a university in economic development in northern British Columbia, Canada. The University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) is situated amongst multiple development initiatives related to oil and gas, mining, and hydroelectricity. Disparate and competing interests either in favour of, or in opposition to, development often look to the university for leadership and engagement. Exploring how a university might best respond to competing interests provides insight into many challenges of economic development in the North. The paper is part of a special collection of brief discussion papers presented at the 2014 Walleye Seminar, held in Northern Saskatchewan, which explored consultation and engagement with northern communities and stakeholders in resource development.

Introduction

On March 3, 2014, Northwest Community College, centred in Terrace, British Columbia, announced receipt of a modest \$15,000 donation from the Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipelines to establish six student bursaries. The college press release noted that “many people across northern British Columbia lack the highly technical skills that will be required to work in the growing resource sector.”¹ The college highlighted that resolving this perceived labour shortage was a shared responsibility among industry,

government, and the communities themselves. Yet less than three weeks after this announcement, and after more than seventy local students had applied for the new bursaries, the college's board of governors passed a motion to reverse the institution's receipt of the donation, return the money to Enbridge, and revise college policy regarding future donations. This very public reversal by Northwest Community College received significant local news coverage and ample discussion in online forums.

The Northern Gateway Pipeline project, which dominates a significant portion of civic (and non-civic) discourse throughout northern British Columbia and beyond, is an estimated \$8 billion project to construct a 1,177 km pipeline to transport half a million barrels of bitumen daily from Bruderheim, Alberta, across the province to a port in Kitimat, and then via tankers to Pacific markets.² The pipeline is key to exporting product from the oil sands of northern Alberta and Saskatchewan, and is projected to garner approximately \$300 billion in generated revenues over the next thirty years, of which an estimated \$75 billion would feather federal and provincial government treasuries. The Enbridge pipeline, however, is controversial for a number of reasons. Aside from a long list of potential environmental risks and concerns, there is also a palpable antipathy among many opponents towards the product itself.³ Local communities, especially many Aboriginal communities, question whether the pipeline would bring any real local benefits. That the proposed pipeline would cross unsettled and sometimes competing Aboriginal land claims is the source of additional complications. Questions of jurisdiction also animate provincial concerns: the Province of British Columbia is asked to assume the preponderance of environmental risk for what it deems a minority share of financial returns. Public opinion polls suggest that British Columbians are divided in their support for the project, with roughly one-third in favor, one-third opposed, and one-third in favor of delaying the pipeline until further environmental assessments and guarantees are made.⁴ Northern British Columbia (BC) is very much a patchwork quilt of varied degrees of support and opposition. Corporate advertisements on television highlight claims of great sensitivity to environmental concerns in planning the pipeline while, at the same time, thousands of blue lawn signs declaring strong opposition to the project dot the landscape of communities throughout the northwest. In this light, even modest contributions by Enbridge to support students at Northwest Community College are radioactive with political controversy.

This discussion paper examines a university's role in such a political environment. While the example drawn from Northwest Community College might appear unique, the broader themes related to economic development in

resource-based communities are hardly uncommon. Multiple and competing interests in favour of, and in opposition to, development often look to public institutions, such as a university, for leadership and engagement. How a university can best respond to such disparate and competing interests may provide greater insight into the dynamics of economic development in the provincial North. First, we will review the political context of northern British Columbia—not because this context is unique, but because this landscape shares common contours with other northern or remote jurisdictions, and some of this detail is helpful in understanding the challenges for a university in a polarized environment. We then explore the role of a university in economic development, first generally and then specific to the University of Northern British Columbia, and draw attention to how these specifics may or may not fit well with the general literature on the role of universities in economic development.

The Context for Economic Development in Northern British Columbia

While British Columbia prides itself on its enduring status as a “have” province in Canadian federalism, provincial GDP per capita now pales beside the other have provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Newfoundland.⁵ The British Columbia provincial government in Victoria does not receive equalization payments from Ottawa, and its economic output is rather middling among Canada’s provinces. In light of the rapid growth and economic prosperity in neighbouring Alberta and Saskatchewan, the provincial government in BC has identified the natural resources in the provincial North as key to economic growth. The northern regions currently account for one-quarter of the province’s economic base, a share that can be expanded through additional development. Victoria is now banking on the development of a number of megaprojects to grow provincial revenues. Accordingly, concerns follow that BC risks returning to the frontier economics model of the 1950s and 1960s, when rapid economic development and province building was predicated on government subsidies and discounted Crown tenures for water and land. Such development led TIME magazine to put then BC Premier W.A.C. Bennett on its cover in 1966.⁶ Despite the early enthusiasm and prosperity under Bennett, bust followed boom and the social and environmental costs of such growth were understood much later.

Controversy over pipelines is but a sample of the much larger challenge of large-scale economic development in northern British Columbia. The New Prosperity gold and copper mine project (\$1.5 billion) near Williams Lake, planned for more than two decades by Taseko Mines, was finally annulled by the Canadian federal government in February 2014, after millions of dollars

associated with multiple environmental reviews.⁷ While Taseko now seeks judicial review of the decision, opponents of the mine included Aboriginal communities and environmental groups with concerns regarding fish habitat and the environment of nearby Fish Lake. An August 2014 breach of the tailings pond from the Mount Polley copper and gold mine that sent millions of cubic metres of waste water into Quesnel Lake and central BC waterways, has heightened concerns over the environmental impact of mining.⁸ The province will now suspend environmental reviews of other mining projects until further review of the incident. Likewise, criticism of the provincial government's proposal to expand hydroelectricity by building a third dam along the Peace River in northeast British Columbia (Site C) also faces strong environmental and Aboriginal opposition. The \$7.9 billion project would generate an additional 4,600 gigawatt hours of electricity, to add to the more than 16,000 gigawatts from the first two dams upriver, built in 1968 and 1980 (Stueck and Hunter, 2014). The largest development initiative, however, is the development of a liquefied natural gas (LNG) industry that consists of more than a dozen proposed projects that, combined, are worth more than \$35 billion in total private sector capital investment.⁹

Such projects find both support and opposition within local communities. Here, it needs to be highlighted that northern British Columbia does not have one common identity. British Columbia's provincial North has some twenty two towns and cities with populations greater than one thousand.¹⁰ While many of these communities have geography in common, many are also linked to specific and distinct industries, such as forestry, mining, energy, or agriculture. Some of these communities are in direct economic competition with neighbouring communities for investment. BC's North is likewise made up of distinct populations: Aboriginal populations with a keen attachment to traditional lands; third and fourth generation residents, whose ancestors came decades earlier either to pursue ranching and agriculture or as a consequence of disparate employment opportunities driven by natural resource extraction; and more recent immigrant communities seeking new employment opportunities, either in the resource sector or various service industries. Segments of each of these towns and regional groupings are in favour of economic development, with the expectation that such investment will create additional jobs and economic and social benefits throughout the provincial North. Critics of such projects note, however, that these projects are designed to maximize the profits of people with limited or no interest in the North and invite long-term environmental risks (Cayo, 2013; Hunter and Bailey, 2014; More, 2012).

Aside from the oil and gas sector in the northeast, northern British Columbia has not been a vibrant economic frontier for some time. The earlier heydays of frontier economics in the mid-twentieth century are quite distant, and prospects for the forestry industry no longer elicit the same degrees of optimism and enthusiasm as in the past. In the northwest and central regions of northern BC, current economic growth is predominantly speculative and associated with fluctuating prices for natural resources and the potential of increased export through expanding ports in Kitimat and Prince Rupert. The recent economic buzz does not match up well with the real declines in population throughout most of the North. Although the provincial North in BC had 11 percent of the provincial population in 1986, that share declined to 7 percent in 2011, and the area witnessed an outright decline in population of more than 10,000 people (3.2 percent of the northern population) between 2001 and 2011.¹¹ Of the four regions in northern BC, only the northeast has seen positive population growth in the last decade. It is in this context that the provincial government's plans for economic growth through investment in and development of the provincial North can be understood. The North is key to British Columbia's prospects for prosperity.

What is the Role of a University in Economic Development?

Almost 100 years ago, in a work titled *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Businessmen*, Thorstein Veblen (as cited in Collini, 2012) described the role of universities:

In a general way, the place of the university in the culture of Christendom is still substantially the same as it has been from the beginning. Ideally, and in the popular apprehension, it is, as it has always been, a corporation for the cultivation and care of the community's highest aspirations and ideals. (86)

Aspirations and expectations have clearly changed over the past century, particularly as we are told we now live in a post-Christian era. Yet contemporary defenders of the university maintain a claimed privilege of a secluded space in order to pursue thoughts and ideas regarding a community's highest aspirations and ideals even as those aspirations and ideals may be undefined or have become tangential to the university's purpose. To wit: what are a community's highest aspirations and ideals? Is it economic development, as an end in itself? Perhaps nostalgia influences an interpretation of what such aspirations used to be: the preservation, cultivation, and transmission of cultural traditions; the socialization of civic

values; research to enhance knowledge and skills (especially medical and technological); and social mobility (Collini, 2012).

To borrow from Stefan Collini (2012), spokespersons for contemporary universities often become rather defensive as they attempt to justify a university's purpose: "we realize that we seem irrelevant or self-indulgent, but actually we contribute to economic growth more than you might think" (87–88). Data are then typically introduced to demonstrate that university graduates earn higher salaries and/or to summarize the total amount of research dollars that the university has attracted. For their part, government ministries seek to have universities conform to their workforce planning, to ensure that public investment in higher education will produce workers for the economy. Such justifications are not entirely misguided or necessarily illegitimate. But they do beg questions regarding the relationship between the university and economic development. Some of the rationale seems to be tautological: the government invests money derived from taxes to fund a university, which returns to the community some of the money the government extracted from the community in the first place. Such repurposing does fund jobs and does create new opportunities. Universities do act as economic multipliers in the communities they serve. But is this actual economic development? Can universities stimulate and facilitate real economic growth in addition to the mere reallocation of resources?

Those who seek to articulate the role of universities in economic development will go far beyond the standard justifications and stereotypical data about salaries, research dollars, and government spending. They highlight how a university can both attract and help retain talented and skilled people to the community, including international students. They focus on the university as think tank, with analysis and evaluation of public policy important to the community. Universities can cultivate and incubate local businesses, commercialize research, and partner with industry (Breznitz, 2014; Campbell, 2013; Shaw, 2013). Shiri Breznitz (2014) has recently pointed out that a university's role in economic development is not connected to any common formula that might be universally applied across institutions of higher learning, but is very much determined by regional interests and opportunities as well as multiple factors internal to the university itself.¹² This is an important point, particularly in light of the "triple helix" model of regional economic development, which places universities together with government and industry as prime agents of economic development. Working together and through reciprocal linkages at different stages of knowledge development and transfer, these three actors facilitate scientific research and product development, capitalize the knowledge and technology

they co-develop, and cultivate both technology transfer and corresponding public policy development.¹³ Increased attention to the importance of regional interests and the local context invites questions regarding how applicable the triple helix model is to those areas where natural resource development, rather than innovative technology design or biotechnology, are key ingredients for university-industry-government collaboration. Incubators, science parks, and/or venture capital firms might fit better in large urban universities, while universities located in communities where natural resource development dominates the regional economy may need to navigate different landscapes and find other ways to engage with industry and government.

It is in this light that the question raised above—what are the community's highest aspirations and ideals?—is fundamental to conversations about the role of a university in economic development in northern British Columbia. It is doubtful that there can be a single and simple answer to this question, as the contestation of values is fundamental to any pluralistic community. And yet economic development is likely to vie with other potential answers for a common response and create particular predicaments for a university. In the case of the University of Northern British Columbia, with local interests that both support and oppose the development of new mines and hydro dams, oil pipelines and LNG exports, all amid contested priorities for the settlement of long outstanding First Nations land claims, navigating this landscape is much more challenging than fostering technology innovation and marketization.

A different example might also illustrate this point. As with other universities in North America, UNBC finds itself under pressure from advocates to divest endowed funds from funds related to oil and gas. In their own words, advocates usually recognize that divestment is unlikely to cause any financial hardship for the energy sector and instead highlight the educational opportunities, the public relations gains, and the moral cause directed against the energy industry. They desire the university to join the cause to lead social change.¹⁴ And yet energy is a core industry in northern British Columbia, and the prosperity of the region is connected to the industry. Even as corporate headquarters are outside the region, such corporations are willing to invest in and collaborate with universities and colleges. The example of Enbridge at the beginning of this paper is but a modest example of the tensions that can follow.

Perhaps a shift from general to specific examples will underscore why the predicament of being caught among competing interests is especially problematic in resource-based communities. The example from Northwest

Community College noted above suggests that the college was drawn—wittingly or not—into a contestation of values regarding development of the Enbridge pipeline. The highest aspirations and ideals of some members of northwest communities may be to pursue development and corporate investment, and partner with large corporations to facilitate both capacity and economic growth. Alternatively, there are contrasting aspirations to inhibit association with oil and gas companies and oppose both pipelines and fossil fuels. Reasons to inhibit this development may be associated with environmental concerns, priorities for land claims and self-government, or perhaps generated by animosity towards corporations from outside the community. For or against development, all sides seek to engage institutions of higher learning with their cause.

The University of Northern British Columbia is very much a regional university. Its origins are linked to active community engagement to build a university “in the North, for the North, and by the North” (Morrison, 2014). In fact, the political will to create UNBC emerged from a grassroots effort during which 16,000 northerners signed on as members of an advocacy campaign. This was much more than a lobby effort to increase government spending in northern BC. The University was intended from the outset to build capacity in the North, articulate and defend its interests, create new opportunities for growth and development, and fundamentally change the hinterland. Twenty-five years after its creation, it has become a key player in northern BC. UNBC now graduates far more students annually who work in the provincial North than all other BC universities combined. It also trademarked the phrase Canada’s Green University™, even if the brand emerged without a full discussion as to the implications of such a title. How should UNBC position itself in ongoing community debates about pipelines, environmental reviews, hydroelectric megaprojects, and mining? Competing perspectives towards development, from *BANANA* (build absolutely nothing anywhere near anybody/anything) and *NIMBY* (not in my back yard), to frontier economics (which harken back to earlier generations) are all part of the rhetorical landscape. Although the majority of northern residents are somewhere in between such extremes, this is very often a silent majority. And because these debates either come to or occasionally originate in the university, there are some public expectations that UNBC declare positions on such matters as divestment, opposition to fossil fuels and pipelines, or, alternatively, in favor of a particular development project.

Because UNBC has trademarked itself as Canada’s Green University, reasonable arguments can be (and have been) made that it has an obligation to divest its endowed funds and investments from supporting the oil and

gas industry, or should join the campaign against the Site C dam, or warn a local community about the high social costs of developing a new mine. And, following the example at Northwest Community College, additional arguments can be advanced that the university has an obligation to refrain from accepting funds from oil and gas companies. At the same time, the logic of such arguments might extend further to question what monies the university should receive: since UNBC is a public university receiving a majority of its revenue from the provincial government, should the university then refrain from any dollars the provincial government receives in the form of taxation from the oil and gas sector? Should the university accept foreign students from oil-exporting countries when the tuition is paid for by their government? To put it in a different way, does receipt of a student bursary award from Enbridge necessarily suggest the university or college has made common cause with the donor? Any one student might have the choice to apply for, or even refuse, the award. This would be within their right to do so, and others are welcome to agree or disagree with an individual's decision. A university or college also has a right to do so, but surely the aspirations and ideals of the community or communities involved invite careful consideration. In this light, succumbing to pressure from either side of the argument risks simplifying development to a binary system. In between the yes/no dichotomy is a spectrum of possibilities where economic development might be preferred by the largest number of northern communities. This spectrum of possibilities includes a variety of options and opportunities for the university to engage in economic development by partnering with corporations, governments, and communities for the education and training of professionals; pursuing important research; articulating and debating issues and concerns connected with specific projects; and monitoring and evaluating development through such practices as environmental testing and soil remediation.

For its part, UNBC has been well-engaged in such endeavours. The construction of a bio-energy plant on its Prince George campus, for example, has reduced fossil fuel consumption for heating the campus by 80 percent.¹⁵ The plant cleanly burns up to six tonnes of hog fuel (shavings, bark, sawdust) from local mills each year and is a demonstration of technology well-suited for communities throughout the North. Another example is the January 2014 cumulative effects conference, supported by the BC Oil and Gas Commission and sponsored by three UNBC research institutions (Natural Resources and Environmental Studies Institute, Health Research Institute, and the Community Development Institute), on the impacts of natural resource development in northern BC.¹⁶ One more example is provincial

government support for a new graduate degree in integrated wood design at UNBC, which will foster research on wood and other forest products. Such partnerships suggest that collaboration between corporations, governments, communities, and the university can be beneficial for northern communities and economic development. These endeavours may not fit neatly into the triple helix model, and may not lead to marketization of new technology. But they do serve community aspirations and facilitate economic development. Rodrigues and Melo (2013) note that beyond the triple helix model and technology transfer, regional economic development also requires institutional capacity building that facilitates mobilization and action.

UNBC is currently engaged in such capacity building, which is consistent with its mandate. This is the kind of activity that institutions of higher learning—especially those seeking to cultivate and care for the community’s highest aspirations and ideals—must deliver. Some ten years ago, then President of UNBC Charles Jago noted in a public speech that,

It would be a disservice to British Columbians, and particularly to those living in resource-based communities, if the energy sector in BC develops as a predominantly frontier industry, serviced by a temporary and itinerant skilled labour force, dependent on intellectual capital imported from other jurisdictions, and bringing little long-term benefit to the regions from which it derives its profits.¹⁷

Northern communities look for sustainable economic development and healthy living, for economic and social prosperity. The role of a regional university in northern economic development is to cultivate success in both.

Author

John F. Young is associate professor of political science at the University of Northern British Columbia.

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Notes

1. The press release is no longer found on the college website. See “New bursary awards for NWCC students,” March 4, 2014, <http://nationtalk.ca/story/new-bursary-awards-for-nwcc-students>.

2. Cost estimates have varied over time. Current dollar estimates have increased to \$7.9 billion from estimates of \$6 billion two years ago. See, for example “Enbridge says Northern Gateway line unlikely to start in 2018,” <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/04/enbridge-northerngateway-idUSL1N0R51OT20140904> and Ian Bailey, “Premier stays mum on how much B.C.’s pipeline approval will cost,” *Globe and Mail*, August 3, 2012, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/premier-stays-mum-on-how-much-bcs-pipeline-approval-will-cost/article4462723>.
3. See, for example, “Save the Fraser Declaration,” <http://savethefraser.ca/> signed by representatives of 130 First Nations, including 48 identified as Nations located in the Fraser River watershed.
4. Bloomberg-Nanos BC Northern Gateway Pipeline Survey, June, 2014, <http://www.nanosresearch.com/library/polls/POLNAT-S14-T607.pdf>. This survey result followed earlier, competing surveys sponsored by Enbridge and by ForestEthics that found majority support or majority opposition to the project. See “BC Residents support Northern Gateway pipeline: Poll,” *National Post*, January 5, 2012; see also “More than half of BC residents oppose Northern Gateway pipeline, poll suggests,” *Vancouver Sun*, April 12, 2012.
5. See, for example, Statistics Canada, “Table A.34: Gross domestic product per capita, Canada, provinces and territories, 2005/2006 to 2009/2010 (in current dollars),” <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-595-m/2011095/tbl/tbla.34-eng.htm>.
6. *TIME* 88:14, September 30, 1966.
7. Matthew Robinson, “Feds reject Taseko’s New Prosperity Mine over environmental concerns,” *Vancouver Sun*, February 26, 2014, <http://www.vancouversun.com/news/Feds+reject+Taseko+Prosperity+Mine+over+environmental+concerns/9555588/story.html>.
8. See, for example, BC Ministry of Environment incident reports and updates, <http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/eemp/incidents/2014/mount-polley/>.
9. See “The LNG Opportunity in BC: Separating Rhetoric from Reality – Part 1,” *Environment and Energy Bulletin*, Business Council of British Columbia 6:3, June, 2014.
10. BC Stats, “British Columbia Municipal Census Populations, 1921 to 2011,” <http://www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/StatisticsBySubject/Census.aspx>.
11. BC Stats, <http://www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/StatisticsBySubject/Demography/PopulationEstimates.aspx>.
12. Breznitz’s study focuses on Yale and Cambridge and the biotech industry. The conclusion of her study, however, highlights the importance of leadership and structures within the university as an institution as well as regional and national economic opportunities. Breznitz, *Fountain of Knowledge*.
13. See H. Etzkowitz and L. Leydesdorff, eds., *Universities and the Global Knowledge Economy: A Triple Helix of University-Industry-Government Relations* (London:

Pinter, 1997); H. Etzkowitz, "Innovation in Innovation: The Triple Helix of University-Industry-Government Relations," *Social Science Information* 42:3 (2003) 293–337; Carlos Rodrigues and Ana I. Melo, "The Triple Helix Model as Inspiration for Local Development Policies: An Experience-Based Perspective," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37:5 (September, 2013) 1675–87.

14. See, for example, the open letter to the Board of Governors of McGill University from Fossil Free Canada, July 30, 2013, at <http://www.gofossilfree.ca>. See also the exchange at Yale University by Bob Massie, "Why American universities must divest from fossil fuel companies," and Robert N. Stavins, "Divestment is no substitute for real action on climate change" at http://e360.yale.edu/feature/counterpoint_robert_stavins_divestment_no_substitute_for_real_action_on_climate/2749. The divestment movement is not confined to North America: in energy rich Norway, the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in Science and Technology (NENT) has questioned the ethics of university collaboration with oil companies, and has suggested that universities distance themselves from such collaboration and from petroleum research in general. NENT claims that such research is ethically irresponsible if it contradicts UN climate targets. "Ethics committee to universities: oil research can be unethical," <http://350.org/ethics-committee-to-universities-oil-research-can-be-unethical/>.
15. See "Energy Initiative Phase 2: The Bioenergy Plant," <http://www.unbc.ca/green/energy/bioenergy-plant>.
16. The conference website and program, as well as a brief write-up, is found at <http://www.unbc.ca/health-research-institute/cumulative-effects>.
17. Charles Jago, "An Educational Perspective on Strategic Considerations for a New British Columbia Energy Policy: The Final Report of the Task Force on Energy Policy," presentation to the *Energy Summit* (Ft. St. John, British Columbia, January 31, 2003).

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