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Yukon College: A Northern Centre for Northern Studies

By Aron Senkpiel

For over two decades Yukoners have talked, often in expansive terms, of assuming a greater role in post-secondary education and research that focuses on the North. As early as 1960, James Smith and F.H. Collins — who were both once commissioners of the territory — identified a site for a northern university. In the 1970s, a diverse group of northerners, spurred on by Richard Rohmer, received a federal charter for the University of Canada North, which, however, never quite came together. At the same time, the Council for Yukon Indians put forward a resolution "to establish a Yukon Indian education centre" as a focal point from "which native people [could] be served."

While many northerners were trying to establish a uniquely northern institution that would focus on the dissemination of northern knowledge and training important to northerners, a number of southern-based institutions and agencies were independently making their own plans. For example, in its 1977 report *Northward Looking*, the Science Council of Canada urged the creation of a northern university. The following year William Gauvin, then director of research for the Noranda Research Centre and head of the Science Council's special committee on northern development, advocated the creation of a "northern resource centre."

Despite the widespread recognition of the need for a northern-based institution that would not only train northerners for northern jobs but would also promote the involvement of northerners in northern research, little of consequence happened until March 1983, when Yukon College was created. By amalgamating the Yukon Technical and Vocational Training Centre and the Yukon Teacher Education Programme, government officials accomplished what had eluded so many others: the creation of a Yukon-based post-secondary institution, the sole purpose of which was to serve the educational needs of the adult population of the territory.

Since 1983, other developments have been building logically toward such programming. Through its special relationship with the University of British Columbia, Yukon College has built a small, cost-effective and credible university transfer program.

The Arts and Science Division

The roots of the Arts and Science Division go back to 1977, when the government of the Yukon invited the University of British Columbia (UBC) to deliver a teacher education program to train Yukoners to teach in the territory's many rural schools.

In 1982, the Yukon Teacher Education Programme (YTEP) was restructured to meet the growing need for a local liberal arts program that would allow Yukoners to complete their first two years of university work in a supportive and familiar environment. Between 1982 and 1986 graduates of what came to be called UBC Programs went on to successfully complete degrees in computer science, education, arts and social work. And like many of the graduates of YTEP, a large number of the program's graduates have returned to the territory, where they are pursuing careers in government, education and business.

Following the creation of Yukon College in March 1983, UBC Programs continued to mature. The transition from UBC Programs to what is now called the Arts and Science Division is now nearing completion. Following the transfer of the program's coordinator from UBC to Yukon College, the college developed its own admissions criteria and procedures, as well as its own two-year programs in arts and general studies and a one-year science program, modelled on those in place in colleges in British Columbia and Alberta. In the second phase, the college assumed responsibility for faculty appointments. In the third phase the college successfully secured transfer credit for its first- and second-year courses from UBC, the University of Victoria and Simon Fraser University. Thus, with the assistance of one of Canada's major universities, Yukon College has built a small Arts and Science Division committed to quality university-level programming and research. But while it is unquestionably for northerners, little of its programming had yet been about the North.

The New Campus

With a solid academic foundation in place, only one major obstacle separated the community from its longtime goal of a truly northern northern studies program: a facility geared to academic teaching and research. But it too is now a *fait accompli*:

From the Editor's Desk

A geographic region has no intellectual heart until it establishes its own university. In recent times this was obvious when Alberta established its university almost immediately upon gaining provincehood, followed shortly by Alberta setting up its very own professional research establishment, the Alberta Research Council. Logically, economically and politically this made no sense whatever when it happened in the early years of this century, but spiritually and emotionally it was a vital move to make.

Although the Meech Lake agreement has fouled up Yukon's move to provincehood, it cannot and must not hinder Yukon's advance to intellectual maturity. The story of the emergence of Yukon College makes logical reading, but we sense that there is a good deal more to it than the simple provision of physical plant, courses and programs. There is a spirit of institutional determination and academic excitement running through the whole operation that will be picked up by the students and by everyone impacted by those students as the adventure surges ahead.

— Gordon Hodgson

the new \$44 million Takhini complex is one of western Canada's most exceptional college facilities, ideally suited to a multidisciplinary northern studies program.

The new complex has not only all the services considered basic to university-level programming — including three well-equipped science labs suitable for both teaching and research (with an interlab and growing room) — it includes many additional services needed for program delivery in the North. Television production will, for example, be possible in the new production facility; also, a complete range of printing will be possible in the new learning materials facility.

The three main buildings are now complete. The student residence will be ready late in 1988. Students will have access to one of the largest collections of historical materials in Canada's North. Add to this the college's computer capabilities all housed in the new library, and it becomes clear that no other facility in the Canadian North has Yukon College's teaching and research capabilities.

The Northern Review

Another recent development further attests to the college's growing commitment to northern studies; it has enthusiastically supported the creation of the first scholarly journal to be published in Canada north of the 60th parallel, *The Northern Review*. It will contribute to the further growth of "indigenous northern scholarship," research not only pursued in the North but by northerners. The *Review's* coverage will focus on the arts and social sciences, i.e., human thought about and activity in the North.

Clearly, the publication of the *Review* will support the other important initiatives mentioned here: for the first time northerners have their own forum in which they can discuss the results of their own and others' northern research.

In short, all the major obstacles that have kept so many different groups from achieving a common goal have been overcome: Yukon has the physical plant, the programming base, the expertise and its own scholarly publication. The question, then, asked so often by government officials and college educators — How can we promote the study of the

North in the North? — can now be answered in a coherent and cost-effective way.

The Diploma of Northern Studies

The government has committed itself to the staged implementation of a two-year diploma of northern studies, which will prepare students for entry-level employment in a wide variety of fields as well as for transfer to degree programs at other institutions. A fully transferable university-level diploma of northern studies program will not only be of great benefit to northerners but a strong attraction for people who are interested in the North. Building on the skills acquired in the college's existing first-year arts and the new first-year science programs, students will, in the second year, complete a common northern studies core before concentrating in one of four areas: native studies, northern science, northern justice or northern outdoor and environmental studies.

Some of the features of the diploma of northern studies, as it is now envisaged, deserve particular attention. First, although the program will lead to a diploma, students will seek admission only after completing first-year arts or science at Yukon College or another accredited institution. There are distinct advantages to this. Students coming into the program will already have the basic academic foundation to which they can add their new knowledge of the North. Before students can competently study sociological, anthropological and environmental issues of the North, they must have a solid "grounding" in the basic concepts of the various disciplines. Secondly, students from other jurisdictions — e.g., Alaska and the N.W.T. — would be more attracted to a program requiring only one year "away." In short, there are some strong reasons for a program that builds on our existing first-year programs.

The Northern Studies Core

The heart of the program will be a common core of four courses that all students, regardless of concentration, will be expected to complete. They will develop the academic skills required for further academic study as well as for entry-level "professional" employment in the North. The core will also establish the multidisciplinary nature of the program and will allow for a more pan-northern, rather than Yukon, orientation.

Two courses will focus on developing the communication, analytical and research skills needed for writing reports, proposals and field notes. One is on practical composition (English 211), and the other, research in the North.

Two other courses will give students the broad knowledge and understanding of the North they need: one looks at the northern landscape and its natural history, and the other explores human activity in the North.

These latter two courses will be important to diploma stu-

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dents in northern studies, as well as to students enrolled in other college programs and to professionals new to the territory and wishing to acquire a basic understanding of the North.

With the exception of English 211, only the courses common to the core will be developed under the aegis of "northern studies." All other offerings will carry titles linking them to the parent academic discipline, e.g., history, psychology, anthropology, etc. We believe that once students have completed the core, they will have the basic skills and knowledge needed to support more specialized study in one of the four concentrations.

The Native Studies Concentration

Building on basic concepts and knowledge from psychology, sociology, anthropology and political science, students in this concentration will study both the traditional and contemporary cultures of the North's native peoples. Graduates of the northern studies program with this concentration will have the basic communication and analytical skills, research tools and knowledge of the North and its native peoples needed in a wide range of fields, including community economic development, band affairs, journalism and social services.

In addition to the northern studies core, students will take core social science courses in areas such as the constitutional development of the North and native land claims, the geography of the North, contemporary northern social issues, native languages, northern economics and community psychology.

The Northern Science Concentration

Building on basic concepts and knowledge from first-year science, this course of studies will focus on basic knowledge and skills required to assist in scientific and technological work in the North. Graduates of the northern studies program with this focus will be able to work in areas that require sound communication and analytical skills and basic field and labora-

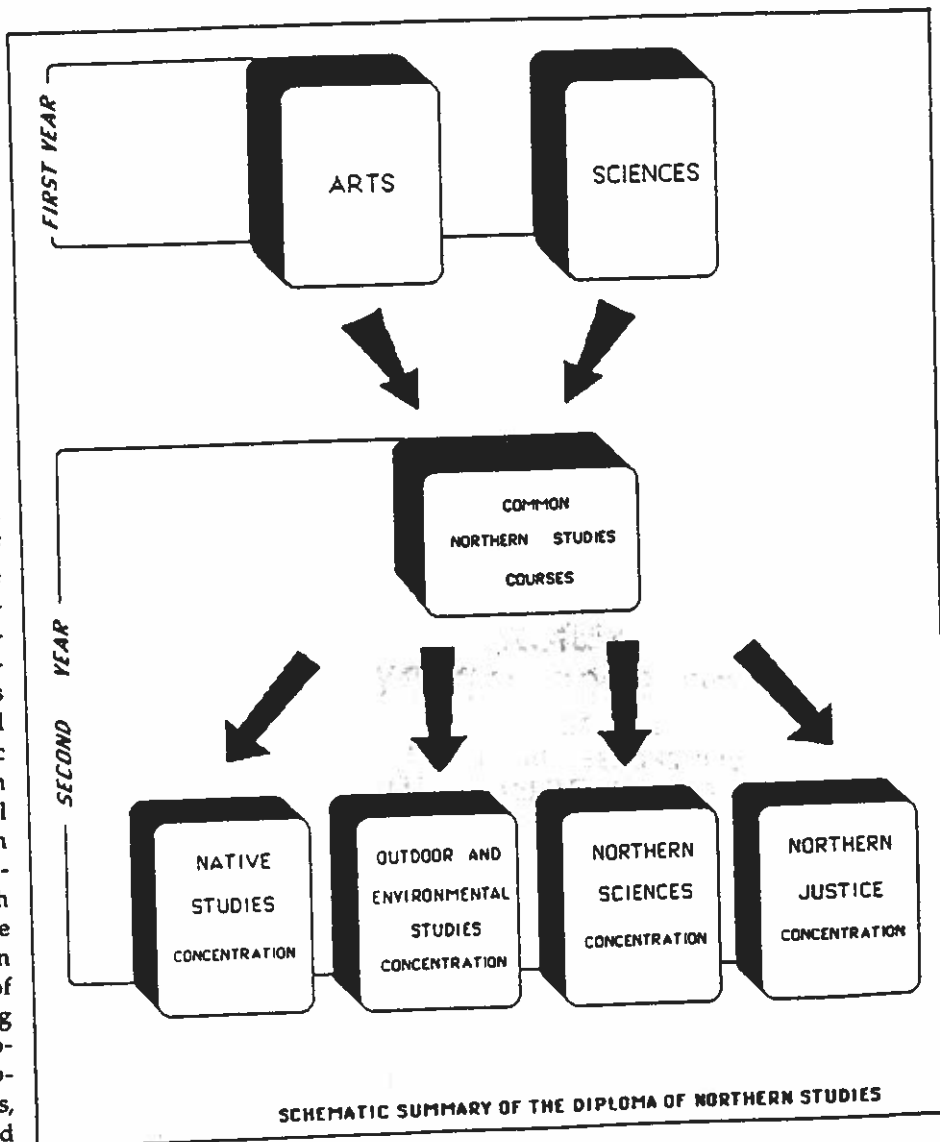
tory techniques, as well as a solid understanding of the northern landscape and its flora and fauna. Currently such jobs exist in mining and mineral exploration, park management, northern research, oil and gas exploration and conservation. Once admitted to the program, they will focus either on the biological or geological sciences.

The Northern Outdoor and Environmental Studies Concentration

Building on skills acquired in first-year science or arts, students in outdoor and environmental studies will acquire knowledge and skills required by a wide variety of jobs in community recreation and education, outdoor pursuits, park recreation, etc.

The Northern Justice Concentration

Although not part of the original proposal, a fourth area has been added that will prepare students for employment in corrections and paralegal counselling through a fusion of college-level criminology programming similar to that at a number of colleges in western Canada with northern-specific curriculum from the native studies concentration.



Conclusion

All the major obstacles separating northerners from participating usefully in the study of the Canadian North have been overcome. Thus, after more than a decade of careful work, a new centre for northern studies has emerged, a centre with a difference that separates it from all others in Canada: It is in the North.

The author is the coordinator of the University Transfer Division. For further information about The Northern Review, the Diploma of Northern Studies or, more generally, Yukon College, please write him at Yukon College, Box 2799, Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, Canada Y1A 3H9, or phone (403) 668-8770.