

Yukon College Editorial— Poised for the Next Step: University

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Yukon College, first as a vocational school and then as a community college, has been a partner in the development of the Yukon for fifty-two years. In that time, our college has grown and changed as the territory has. We are now poised to become the first university in Canada operating north of the sixtieth parallel. The demand for university-level and career programs delivered in the North is clearly evident, particularly for those programs that respond to the economic and social needs of northern communities. It is time to open our doors wider—to share our unique knowledge and perspective of the North with the rest of Canada and the world, and to become a destination for students and researchers who want to experience living and learning in the North.

It is also time to reflect on the profound changes the Yukon and its college have witnessed, and the *Northern Review* is an ideal place to do it. The journal has a tradition of documenting and commenting on developments in the North, in the Yukon, and in Yukon College more specifically. Its editors past and present and, from time to time, its friends, have commented on and celebrated changes in the research environment and in the scope and nature of northern education and research. The *Northern Review*, thinking it time to do it again, asked us to talk about the college, where it has been and where it is going.

Yukon College was the result of community demand. A grassroots attempt, between 1970 and 1983, to found a Yukon university had spluttered out when its modest activities failed to capture the imagination of Yukoners. When asked, however, about their desires for further post-secondary education, as Yukoners were around 1978, the majority agreed that a community college would be the most appropriate institution for the territory. A community college, they thought, would be accessible in a way a university could not be. A community college would offer a range

of programs that would put people on their feet and into jobs and into business. The community college also would not overlook those who needed the basics. Best of all, people would not have to travel to southern Canada for further training. It would be the Yukon's own institution.

So in 1983, after twenty years of service to students across the territory, the Yukon Vocational and Technical Training Centre was expanded with the addition of a University of British Columbia university-transfer program that originated as the Yukon Teacher Education Program. The merger was marked officially by the formal recasting of the training centre as a community college. It was an exciting advance.

Yukon College in 1983, at the point of transition, was understood to be an institution-in-formation. Its basic features were copied from community colleges across the Canadian West which, unlike those in Ontario for example, offered junior undergraduate university-transfer courses and programs. Yukon College, based as it was on the vocational centre, began life as a government program housed in the Advanced Education division of the Yukon government's department of education. That was not intended to be permanent. From its inception, there was a goal, if not an actual plan, for institutional autonomy. The government ran the college only until 1990. Then, on January 1, the Yukon College Board of Governors took charge of an institution that now had complete control over programming, academic quality, and staff and faculty hiring. In most respects, it was answerable only to the community it served. It would stand or fall on its own. A succession of college presidents, most from out of the territory, had their work cut out for them.

Service to Yukoners and to the Yukon has been the work of the college from the start and most certainly from the first day of its independent existence. One of the challenges for the college has been to grow and develop alongside the territory. The college has been a partner in the construction of a territory its residents want. The training centre literally built parts of the territory, including roads, houses, and public buildings. The college has built buildings, plumbed and electrified houses, fixed cars and trucks, and, more and more, provided the people who open the businesses, run the communities, account for the spending, govern the territories, manage the resources, develop the new products, and ask the hard and important questions. In the mid-1990s, the government of the day built the territory a "house of learning" on a hill overlooking Whitehorse, as a sign, and perhaps even a symbol, of the institution's promise and its future contributions. When the doors opened at the Ayamdigut campus in the fall of 1988, Yukon College was in a position to take on the future alongside the citizens of the

Yukon and, soon enough, the citizens of a growing number of self-governing First Nations.

In 2015, it often seems that outsiders, those who are not Yukon College staff or students, continue to believe that the college has stayed pretty much the same for the past decade or two, and that our capacity for growth is limited to responding to the needs of a small segment of the Yukon's population and economy. Yet our growth can also be illustrated with numbers that offer a snapshot of where the college is today in terms of infrastructure, student body, and capacity. In 2015, twenty-seven years after the Yukon Legislative Assembly passed an amended *Yukon College Act*—which established the college as a separate institution operating within the same legislative structure as other board-governed colleges in Canada—the college has grown to become a thriving, broad based, and comprehensive post-secondary institution.

A look at the student enrolment in Yukon College programs demonstrates an apparently unending appetite by Yukoners to acquire their higher education at home. Twenty-seven years ago, there were very few university-level programs offered at the college. Today, 44% of our 1,211 students (2014-15 data) are enrolled in programs or courses that either transfer to southern universities, or allow degree completion here. The four academic years between 2011-12 and 2014-15 have shown the following ranges in our enrolment mix:

- 3%–5% in pre-apprenticeship trades;
- 18%–28% in career and technical programs;
- 23%–28% in academic and skills development; and
- 42%–54% in university-level programming.

What recent enrolment numbers seem to indicate is that, although the college continues to attract students to a wide array of career programs, almost half of our students seem most interested in programs leading to a degree.

In a recent survey of students attending high school in the Yukon, 46% of Yukon youth aspired to a university degree, including 27% wanting a bachelor's degree, and 19% a graduate degree (*2012 High School Exit Survey Report*, Yukon Bureau of Statistics, October 2012). When we asked Yukon College students a similar question in a 2013-14 survey, the university interest was even higher: 64% aspired to a degree, including 29% aiming for a bachelor's, and 35% for a graduate degree. We have not yet done the further study to determine if our current student body is comprised of individuals who, had they been required to leave the Yukon to complete their studies, might not have done so at all. From post-secondary education

transfer organizations like the Alberta and the British Columbia councils on admissions and transfer (ACAT and BCCAT), however, we know that transfer courses and programs in local institutions are often where the aspiration for higher education begins.

In addition to offering fourteen certificate and twenty-three diploma programs, three apprenticeship trades programs, and two or three pre-apprenticeship programs each year, Yukon College has responded to local labour market needs in ways that are unique to the Yukon. This area of college activity is one that continues to grow rapidly as we refine our approach to meeting the needs of local employers. In addition to a continuing education division, which in 2003 counted just under 3,000 student registrations and in 2013 reached over 9,000, the college has built purpose-specific units that cater to niches within the labour market. For example, since its establishment in 2010, the Northern Institute of Social Justice (NISJ) has delivered dozens of courses to over 1,000 individuals from Yukon and First Nations government departments and agencies—including departments of education, health and social services, and justice—as well as from non-governmental organizations in related fields. The success of the NISJ has generated partnerships across the North, and resulted in both research and course development and delivery in all three territories. A key element of the NISJ mandate is social justice and this has resulted in a strong focus on issues that are especially significant for Yukon’s First Nations citizens and those professions working closely with Aboriginal groups in such areas as the administration of justice and social services.

The Centre for Northern Innovation in Mining (CNIM) is also building strength in workforce training and related research. Through strong partnerships with industry, the centre is ensuring that the programs it offers and research projects it undertakes meet the current and future needs of the industry. A novel international agreement with the University of Alaska Anchorage means that Alaska and the Yukon have been able to meet their training demand more effectively by building and sharing a mine site training environment in Delta Junction, Alaska.

The growth of Yukon College can also be traced through its operating budget. Much of the growth can be attributed to activity that is outside “normal” college activity such as credit programs. In 2003-04, the total college expenditure was \$22.39 million—58% of this was received as our annual grant from the Yukon government. In 2013-14, the total expenditure had grown to \$42.01 million, of which 54% was the annual grant. A substantial component of this growth was an increase in the number of permanent and

term staff. In the past five years, we have increased the number of college staff from 572 to 630, adding thirty-one new permanent positions.

Another component of our growth is the Yukon Research Centre (YRC). In its first official year in operation, the YRC had six staff and one student in June 2010. By June 2014, it had twenty-two permanent and term staff and over twenty students, plus a number of visiting faculty researchers. Between fiscal year 2010-11 (first full year of YRC operation) and 2013-14 (last full year reported), the Government of Yukon contribution to the YRC grew from \$1.72 million to \$1.83 million (a 6% increase); however, funding from other sources, including industry, Tri-Council grants, and other government funding agencies such as the federal Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency (CanNor), increased from \$1.65 million to \$3.49 million (an increase of 91%).

In the past few years, the college has also sought opportunities to work collaboratively with the fourteen First Nations in the territory. Through joint projects such as a food security and working farm project with the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation, an energy security project with Kluane First Nation, a recently awarded Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grant to the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, and a mine training project with the Ross River Dena Council, these relationships have become a vital resource when planning new programs or identifying new research opportunities.

In the past year, we have made a very concerted effort to increase the participation of college students in research, and we have allocated funds to this through a faculty-driven research fund. One of the goals identified by the college board of governors in its strategic plan for 2013–2016 was that the majority of our students be exposed to research opportunities, both within their programs of study as well as through employment opportunities at the YRC.

The college has been challenged again and again to be a leader in the development of the community, to provide vision for the future of the territory while being responsive to the immediate needs of business and industry, of government and academia, and, equally importantly, while being responsive to the very important needs of every one of our students. Since 1988, there has been an emphasis on northern studies in many program areas and on ensuring that all graduates of college programs are well grounded in Yukon First Nations history and the land claims. Yet the college has deliberately defended against being focused solely on the Yukon and the North. Our motto “start here; go anywhere” not only highlights

our commitment to Yukoners, it also highlights what we offer to all those across Canada, the Circumpolar North, and indeed the globe: excellent education and training programs that respect and reflect the social, cultural, and political conditions of the region. Wherever our students start from, and wherever it is they wish to go, we will facilitate and nurture their journey.

The college has forged links with trade, professional, and academic organizations that demonstrate (and often guarantee) the quality of our programs and the rigour of our courses and credentials. We are connected internationally through such networks as the University of the Arctic, and our students have made a name for themselves around the world in academia and in fields as widespread as welding, culinary arts, political science, climate change, and business administration.

Yukon College has become an integral part of the social and cultural fabric of the territory and of the Canadian North, and is poised to take, along with the rest of the territory, the next step in its evolution. Many people and many institutions—in the territory and beyond—have had a hand in that evolution. What we do next is possible because of what we have done together so far. We can see how far we have come. It will be very interesting to see how far we can yet go.

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