

BUILDING A HISTORY PROGRAM IN THE 1990s.

In 1994, the University of Northern British Columbia opened and was described as the first new university since the boom years of the 1960s. Putting together a History program in the 1990s certainly carried with it some opportunities and challenges that were distinct from the issues that shaped new departments in the 1960s. First, the university arose from community agitation and so it has been made to respond to that community from its very inception. Second, the 1990s were hardly the flush economic times of the 1960s and so administrators, staff and faculty have always had to be frugal. These two particular distinctions, however, have made UNBC a unique experience for all of us who helped form programs (as our departments are called). In response to the community consultations, UNBC had a mandate that included five theme areas: Northern studies, International studies, First Nations studies, Environmental studies, and Gender studies. While the university as a whole developed curricula, created administrative units and hired faculty that fit with these five "mandated" areas, the History program recognised that finding a niche within the competitive environment of British Columbia's post-secondary system was going to be crucial to our survival. This seemed particularly important when the University sustained a round of budget cuts even before it opened. Faculty complements in many programs, including History, were reduced and so it was clear that we were going to have to do the most with limited staffing resources. So, Robin Fisher, the founding chair of the program, devised a curriculum that would build on the strengths of the university, would foster inter-disciplinarity and would produce histories that were relevant to our northern British Columbia community. This curriculum, then, focused on northern, gender, First Nations, environmental and international history and generally covered only the 19th and the 20th Centuries. Courses were weighted towards North American history but given the strengths within the University with respect to northern Europe, a full slate of courses on Scandinavia and the former Soviet Union were integrated into the curriculum. Finally, in order to promote interdisciplinarity, we limited the number of required courses for History majors to three (HIST 100: Headlines in History; HIST 200: Historical Methodology; HIST 300: Historiography) and the number of credit hours assigned to History (54) within a 120 credit hour BA.

Though it seems hard to imagine now, the curriculum was subject to some controversy. Other institutions commented on the lack of coverage (of all areas of history, of all epochs) while others wondered at the validity of the themes we were set to examine. Could we really have courses that sought to explore the concept of "nordicity" some questioned? Fortunately as all the theme areas were subject to intense scholarly inquiry in the mid-1990s, job applicants responded enthusiastically to the curriculum, the openness of a new university and to the challenges of working in a northern community that had only a limited experience with post-secondary education. And we were able to hire a fine cohort of young faculty even as we attracted leading

scholars in the fields of Northern and Diplomatic history. Finally, Robin Fisher insisted that we offer a Masters in History right from the first semester primarily so that the history of northern British Columbia, a region about which so little has been written, could be developed. So far we have graduated five Master's students of whom two have gone on to the doctoral level.

Building a History program from scratch has been a challenge. Despite the outstanding commitment of the province to the University, we were funded to hire only 125 faculty for the whole University. We have only full-time faculty members in History, one of whom lives in Ft. St. John over 500 miles away and teaches primarily by distance technology. On the other hand, the opportunity to fit a curriculum to the needs of the broader community, to build a program that is coherent and has supportive connections with other units within the University has been a marvellous opportunity. Since the vast majority of the faculty are in the same age range and have similar research and life interests, the collegiality of UNBC is truly amazing. Research partnerships have formed between History faculty and colleagues in Political Science, Community health, Psychology, Social Work, Women's Studies and Nursing. And we have already hosted a number of visiting professors, from New Zealand and Australia, guest speakers from across Canada, and a number of successful conferences which brought scholars from around the province to UNBC to discuss new directions in historiography, methodology and pedagogy.

Looking back over the first five years of operations, it is clear that we still face challenges. We are in the process of implementing an Honours program. We have recently revamped our Graduate Program in order to take into consideration the needs of local community members who have full time jobs in the school system or in local heritage work. But as an external review conducted in 1998 pointed out, we have also had many successes. While enrolments are declining across the country, we are still attracting more students yearly. Though we are isolated from the provincial and national archives, we have an excellent library and are in the process of establishing a University archives. And though we have had to modify the scope of our curriculum slightly in order to fit the demands of education programs to which our students apply, the focused curriculum facilitates co-teaching arrangements and the intense development of our students' knowledge base on the subjects that fall into our pedagogical niche. Most importantly, working at UNBC is still fun. We still have all the opportunities to make meaningful contributions to our fields even as we have abundant occasions for advancement within the University and the community as a whole. In short, we are still growing, still changing, and we are still worth watching.

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