

BEYOND ADVOCACY: THE NORTHERN CONFERENCE AS AN EDUCATIONAL MODEL

CURT TAYLOR GRIFFITHS,,
School of Criminology,
Simon Fraser University,
Burnaby, British Columbia,
Canada, V5A 1R6.

and

MARGIT NANCE,
Office of Continuing Studies,
Simon Fraser University,
Burnaby, British Columbia,
Canada, V5A 1S6.

ABSTRACT/RESUME

The authors examine the Northern Conference as a model for the development of useful ties between universities and local communities. The Northern Conference takes place periodically at different locations in northern Canada, utilizing primarily community-based leaders for workshops and seminars, but maintains an administrative base at Simon Fraser University. This form of relationship between Native people and universities can be of value in assisting Native self-determination.

Les auteurs examinent la Conférence du Nord comme modèle pour le développement de liens utiles entre les universités et les communautés locales. La Conférence du Nord a lieu à intervalles réguliers dans des emplacements différents dans le nord du Canada et emploie essentiellement des dirigeants pris dans la communauté pour des ateliers et des séminaires, mais conserve une base administrative à l'Université Simon Fraser. Ce genre de rapports entre les autochtones et les universités peuvent se révéler enrichissants afin d'aider l'autodétermination autochtone.

Recent years have witnessed an increased focus and concern with a wide range of issues relating to self-determination for Native people in Canada. Despite this increased attention, universities have, with a few notable exceptions, played only a very minor role in providing forums and programs through which an ongoing, thorough examination of the key issues that have emerged can be undertaken.¹

This lack of involvement on the part of Canadian universities is due in large measure to the suspicions that Native individuals, organizations, and communities have about the university. The university is often viewed as another one of many "southern"-based institutions which are only marginally relevant to either the circumstances of most Native people or to the issues with which they are most concerned. Rather than being viewed as promoters of self-determination and as a mechanism through which a consideration of issues might occur, "southern" universities may be associated with dependency upon southern government, southern funding, and southern higher education. (For a notable exception to this general rule, see Morse, 1985).

Reluctance to become involved with universities may also be due to previous negative experiences with academic researchers who solicited the participation of individuals or communities in research projects, but who subsequently provided little, if any, demonstrable feedback to those involved. Similar perceptions of the university may be held by officials in federal and provincial departments and ministries which have as their mandate issues related to Native self-determination. Government officials may view the faculty and administration of universities as having little interest in, or little to contribute to, the political process associated with self-determination.

In the following discussion, it is argued that the university, rather than being irrelevant to the dynamics of Native self-determination, is uniquely suited to play a major role in such an enterprise by providing programming and information within an educational rather than a political framework. As an illustration of this potential, the origins and development of The Northern Conference are detailed. While specifically concerned with justice issues, The Northern Conference provides a model which could be employed to create forums and facilitate dialogue in a variety of areas related to Native self-determination.

THE DELIVERY OF JUSTICE SERVICES IN THE NORTH: THE NEED FOR EDUCATION AND INFORMATION

One area that has received a considerable amount of attention is Native involvement in the criminal justice system. This concern is due in large measure to the well-documented overrepresentation of Native people at all stages of the criminal justice process in Canada. Concern by Native communities and organizations provided the impetus for the Federal-Provincial Conference on Native Peoples and the Criminal Justice System held in Edmonton in 1975. Among the recommendations of the conference, attended by both Native and government representatives, were that Native persons should become involved in the planning

and delivery of justice services for Native peoples and that Native communities should assume greater responsibility for the delivery of criminal justice services to their people (Solicitor General of Canada, 1975).

While the 1975 Conference served to identify many of the issues and concerns of Native people, observers have argued that the recommendations were too general and did not address the many legal and cultural complexities surrounding Native involvement in the criminal justice system (Griffiths and Yerbury, 1985). Further, no provision was made for insuring that action would be forthcoming on the publicly stated commitments of Native and non-Native leaders. A survey of government action on the recommendations of the 1975 Conference, undertaken in 1979, revealed that little or no progress had been made on many of the recommendations (Jolly, 1979).

The 1975 Conference is an illustration of the larger point that one-time national conferences on specific issues, conducted within a public, political framework, may not be the most productive mechanism by which either to consider the complex issues surrounding Native people and the criminal justice system or to establish a framework within which specific initiatives can be undertaken. In the decade since the 1975 Conference, efforts have been diffuse and produced mixed results.

The difficulties of creating forums for discussing issues surrounding the delivery of justice services in the northern and rural areas of Canada are even greater. Communication and information-sharing are hindered by the great distances and geographical isolation of northern communities, their cultural diversity, and the dominant role often assumed by governmental agencies in setting policy and establishing programs.

While the isolation of northern communities and a relatively small criminal justice system provide a unique opportunity for the development and implementation of new and alternative strategies for addressing crime and delinquency and for the delivery of justice services, there are few forums for education and information-sharing on issues of mutual concern.

Among the more unique attributes of northern and rural areas that must be addressed by any educational or informational scheme are the following:

Similar Concerns Across the North

The operation of the criminal justice system within the cultural, economic, and geographical environment of the north creates unique problems and opportunities not found in the southern, more urban areas of the country. These include cultural barriers to communication, the relevance and implications of circuit court decisions for the victim, offender, and the community, the extent to which northern and Native communities can become involved in the development and operation of community-based justice programs, and how "southern" legislation, such as the Young Offenders Act, can be or is adapted to the needs of northern youth.

The Lack of Northern Linkages

While a rich and active exchange of information takes place across southern Canada, and to a lesser degree, north and south within each province, relatively few formal communication linkages exist across the north. As a consequence, the experiences and knowledge of communities in the Yukon Territory, the Northwest Territories, the northern regions of the provinces, and the State of Alaska, rarely cross jurisdictional boundaries.

The Increasing Involvement of Communities in the Justice Process

There is a growing awareness in the north (as well as in other areas of the country) that community involvement in the delivery of justice services is a prerequisite for addressing social problems in the community as well as the shortcomings of the existing criminal justice system. Further, it is increasingly apparent that reliance upon "southern" policies and programs has hindered the development of more productive partnerships between professionals involved in the delivery of justice services in the north and members of the community.

Self-Reliance

The remoteness and small size of many northern communities often generates a sense of self-reliance that can be utilized as the foundation for the development of mechanisms for involving the community and individuals in criminal justice delivery.

THE NORTHERN CONFERENCE: A UNIQUE RESOURCE

The Northern Conference is a unique partnership between northerners and a southern university. The initiative developed at a chance meeting between a Territorial Court judge and two individuals from Simon Fraser University, one a faculty member in the School of Criminology and the other a program director in Continuing Studies. Subsequent informal discussions centered on the need to create an educational forum for justice-related issues and for a mechanism to distribute information on northern programmatic initiatives and research to interested individuals and communities in northern settings. This led to the formation of a working group which became the first Board of Directors.

From extensive conversations with individuals at the community level and those involved in the delivery of justice services in rural and northern areas of the country, it became clear that a stable administrative "home" for any initiative that would be developed was required for continuity of effort. Previous efforts to locate such a base either in a Native organization or within a specific criminal justice agency had been unsuccessful.

There was also a need to establish an educational program in which individuals involved in justice delivery and individuals and communities who were the recipients of this process could meet to share ideas and experiences.

With the support of the senior administration, Simon Fraser University became the administrative home for The Northern Conference, with programmatic direction provided by a northern Board of Directors.

The primary goals of The Northern Conference are to reflect northern initiatives and priorities, to identify resource persons and programs on a community-by-community basis, to make these known and accessible, and to translate and make known the results of research on northern justice and related issues. All of these activities are designed to contribute to a greater self-reliance among individuals and communities involved in addressing northern justice problems. These goals are pursued through a variety of initiatives sponsored by The Northern Conference:

Educational Programs

A major educational program is held in a northern location every eighteen months. It is constructed around short courses, workshops, field trips, and live theatre presentations. The program is designed to provide participants with the opportunity to acquire new skills, exchange experiences, and make valuable contacts with people in other regions with similar interests. To reach an even wider audience, The Northern Conference is developing several travelling workshops on specific topics that will provide in-depth training on a community-by-community basis.

The themes of the major programs - "Circuit and Rural Court Justice in the North" (Yellowknife, 1984); "Northern Youth in Crisis: A Challenge for Justice" (Val d' Or, 1985); and "Community Involvement in Northern Justice" (Whitehorse, 1987) - as well as the specific topics covered in workshops and short courses during the meetings, are determined by consultations with individuals across the north. Workshops highlight specific programmatic initiatives and experiences, while short courses, often offered in both an introductory and advanced format, are designed as intensive, "how to" skill-development sessions.

At The Northern Conference program held in Whitehorse in 1987, workshops focused on such areas as the sentencing process in small communities, the role of women in criminal justice issues at the community level, and broadening community responsibility for justice. Short courses were conducted on community dispute resolution, Native community awareness training for non-Native justice personnel, and community-initiated crime prevention programs. Two special Roundtable discussions focused on the circuit court and the community and the media and justice issues in the north.

Program evaluations have been conducted to determine the impact on participants and upon the work they are involved in. These evaluations are augmented with informal consultations with participants who are part of a growing network of Northern Conference contacts. These evaluations have revealed that the program has had a direct impact on the development of justice-related programs in northern communities.

For example, the community justice council that has been developed in

Barrow, Alaska was initiated with the assistance of a judge who first learned of the concept at a meeting of The Northern Conference. Similarly, several communities have requested the advice and assistance of short course and workshop leaders in areas such as wilderness experience programs for youths, community-based dispute resolution strategies, and training for Native police officers. The program of The Northern Conference has also served to heighten the profile of northern justice issues among provincial/territorial and federal ministries and agencies as well as to illustrate the potential for alternative, community-based justice strategies.

The Northern Conference Resource Centre

The Northern Conference has established a centralized depository for the collection, cataloging and dissemination of information on projects, programs, research and policy related to the delivery of justice services in northern and rural areas of Canada. It also includes comparative materials from the State of Alaska and Greenland. Through the Resource Centre, individuals, communities, organizations, ministries and departments have ready access to a large body of "unpublished" materials which had previously had only limited distribution. To facilitate direct access to the resource centre's bibliographic data base, several computer links have been established with northern agencies on an experimental basis.

Publications

The Northern Conference has produced a number of publications, several of which are updated on a periodic basis. These include a research bibliography of materials housed in the Resource Centre, a compilation of audio-visual materials on Native justice issues, and publication, in resource package form, of the materials presented at the meetings of The Northern Conference.

The Visitation Program

The Northern Conference offers a program of support for northerners with extensive experience in Native and northern justice issues to spend a period of time in residence in the School of Criminology at Simon Fraser University. During the visit, which may range from a few days to several weeks, this individual has access to the resource centre, participates in graduate and undergraduate classes and seminars, and is available to meet with and advise students on an individual basis. This residency also provides the individual with an opportunity to interact with faculty and to pursue independent research on northern justice issues. Among the individuals who have participated in the visitation program are a Territorial Court judge from the N.W.T. and a Metis enrolled at the University of Alberta.

Student Bursary Program

To provide students with the opportunity of observing the operation of criminal justice in northern settings first-hand, the Northern Conference provides support to undergraduate students enrolled in the Field Practice program in the School of Criminology. Through the cooperation of individuals involved in Northern Conference activities, one-semester field placements have been made available for students in a variety of locations from Whitehorse to Iqaluit.

THE ROLE OF SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

One of the key elements in the success and continuity of The Northern Conference has been the involvement of Simon Fraser University. The experience of the university to date provides valuable insights into the potential role of universities in issues relating to Native self-determination.

In addition to overcoming the general feelings of suspicion that may have existed toward a southern-based university, there were several major obstacles in establishing Simon Fraser University as the administrative base of The Northern Conference, including:

Problems of Territoriality

While the idea for the development of an initiative that came to be known as The Northern Conference originated with individuals in the North, there was some reluctance on the part of Native organizations, communities, and individuals, as well as federal and provincial governments, to ascribe legitimacy to an educationally-based initiative attached to a southern university. While a portion of this reluctance could be attributed to the uniqueness of the project, some measure of resistance was due to the fact that issues relating to the delivery of justice services had generally been considered within a political rather than within an educational framework. Further, although the north is often utilized as a research base, universities do not have a strong record of educational programming in these areas.

Funding

To establish the Northern Conference as a politically neutral, educational endeavour, it was critical that initial funding be obtained from non-government sources. Start-up monies were secured from provincial law foundations, Simon Fraser University, and from the Donner Canadian Foundation.

Once the initiative was underway, support was sought for specific program activities that fell within the mandate and interest of government agencies. For example, the federal Department of Justice contributed travel grants to insure the attendance and participation of community-based persons from northern communities in programs, and funding from the Department of Justice and the Ministry of the Solicitor General has supported the publication of resource

materials presented at Northern Conference meetings.

Adoption of the Mission of the University

Following a fruitless search for a non-political, educationally-based "home" for The Northern Conference, and with the realization that a decentralized administrative structure would be wasteful and unreliable, the decision was made by the Board of Directors to make Simon Fraser University the administrative base. The primary responsibility for identifying northern priorities would lie with the Board of Directors who would, in turn, determine the program activities and content of The Northern Conference.

The educational and administrative expertise required to implement these activities were already in place at the university. The School of Criminology and the office of Continuing Studies had extensive experience in providing continuing education in the area of criminal justice and public policy on a collaborative basis.

To establish the university as the base for Northern Conference programming, it was necessary to secure the support of senior management for a non-traditional program. The primary clientele would not be enrolled in a course of study at the university and, in fact, might not ever visit the campus. While university resources would be utilized, the recipients of these services were far removed from Vancouver and even from the Province of British Columbia. In short, Simon Fraser University would act as an educational catalyst and broker for programs and materials delivered in distant locales.

Once administrative approval was secured, it was critical to establish the University as an integral part of The Northern Conference, while at the same time maintaining a low profile to insure that the traditional concerns of northerners and Native people about "another southern institution telling northerners what to do" did not arise. This was accomplished in large measure by recruiting a wide range of individuals from across Canada and Alaska for the Board of Directors. The role of the University was presented as a facilitator and contributor of educational program development expertise rather than as the single determiner of the issues and areas to be addressed. This low profile insured the acceptance and success of programming initiatives.

MAINTAINING CONTINUITY AND COPING WITH SUCCESS

The Northern Conference has been in existence five years and has experienced considerable success in its program activities. This success has created additional contingencies that have required ongoing monitoring by the Board of Directors and others involved in the project. These have included:

Retention of Commitment to Constituency

With the success of its programs and publications, an increased amount of attention has focused on The Northern Conference. In all of its program activi-

ties, the Board of Directors has defined as the primary audience community-based individuals and organizations, those most likely to benefit from the educational and informational network, but less likely to have the resources to attend conferences or to participate actively. In all of the conferences that have been held to date (Yellowknife, N.W.T., 1984, Val d' Or, Quebec, 1985; Whitehorse, 1987), for example, the majority of workshop and short course leaders and attendees have been community-based persons and line-level criminal justice personnel rather than individuals at the middle or senior administrative levels of government.

Maintenance of the University Support Base

While support for many of the activities of The Northern Conference has come from private foundations and government, the University has provided substantial monies and in-kind services. To insure this continued commitment of resources, it has been necessary to communicate to senior management, on an ongoing basis, the benefits of the university's involvement.

Among these are access by faculty and students to a network of individuals and organizations involved in the delivery of justice services in the north, exposure to the perspectives of northerners visiting the university on a periodic basis, and the availability of an extensive collection of materials on northern and Native justice issues in the Resource Centre. The University is also the recipient of considerable good will through its extension into non-traditional educational settings.

Maintenance of the Independence of The Northern Conference

While locating The Northern Conference at Simon Fraser University has assisted in insuring that its activities occur within an educational rather than a political framework (even though the issues that are addressed in its short courses and workshops and other activities are, by definition, political in nature), the need to secure ongoing core funding presents a formidable challenge. It is the view of the Board of Directors that a primary reason for the success to date has been the avoidance of a political framework and the use of an educational model. The generation of funds to sustain the administrative office and core structure of The Northern Conference is critical to retention of this non-political stance. An endowment campaign, incorporating a variety of contribution sources, has been chosen as the vehicle for ongoing funding and is currently in progress.

THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY IN NATIVE SELF-DETERMINATION

The experience of Simon Fraser University as an administrative home and facilitator of The Northern Conference suggests that, while universities have the potential to make a substantive contribution to a consideration of issues related to self-determination, the following must be considered:

1. Universities must understand and address the perceptions that Native communities and organizations as well as government have of them. As a consequence of these perceptions, there may be indifference, and even resistance, to university-based initiatives.

2. The support of university administrators must be secured and maintained, even during times of fiscal restraint, by establishing collaboration between two or more departments or sections of the university.

3. To establish and maintain the political neutrality of the initiative, funding from foundations or from other non-governmental sources is preferred, although grants from government departments and ministries can be sought to support specific program activities.

4. The organizational structure of the initiative must be predominantly drawn from the target population, rather than from the university, although it must be clear that the objective is educational and that programs will be constructed on an educational rather than a political basis.

5. A primary role of the university is to contribute program development expertise, to exercise educational "quality control" and to insure that the educational objectives are met, rather than functioning as an advocate for specific types of change.

It is hoped that the experiences of Simon Fraser University as a participant in The Northern Conference, as well as the specific initiatives undertaken by the Conference, will provide the impetus for other universities across the country to become involved in creating forums for the consideration of a wide range of issues surrounding Native people in Canadian society.

NOTES

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