

Akitsiraq Law School: Making Northern Dreams Come True

Grantor: The Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation

Grantee: Akitsiraq Law School

Summary: Support for the cultural components of the law program including language instruction and simultaneous translation of course lectures and an elder-in-residence.



Near Cape Dorset in the northern territory of Nunavut, a ring of stones forms a meeting place for traditional Inuit justice, a place where judgement was passed on those who had committed crimes. In the language of the Inuit people, the word Akitsiraq refers to this place of justice. Fittingly, Akitsiraq was the name adopted for the new law school that opened in 2001. And, thanks to a grant from the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation of Toronto, the law school is able to offer innovative components that root the program in Inuit language and traditional culture.

Nunavut is the newest self-governing territory of Canada, established in 1999 to implement the terms of a land claims settlement between the Inuit and the Government of Canada. Nunavut is home to about 29,000 people, 85% of whom are Inuit. The Government of Nunavut “works in some ways like an Aboriginal self-government,” says James Stauch, Program Manager of the Gordon Foundation. There are no political parties and decisions are based on consensus. “It’s very democratic. The flip side is that it is also quite complex with many unique challenges to work out.”

In all of Nunavut, there is but one Inuit lawyer, Paul Okalik, who is also Premier of the Territory. Other lawyers are white southerners and none of the three judges in office in Nunavut today speak Inuktitut. Over 70% of Inuit have Inuktitut as their mother tongue; many speak neither English nor French. The lack of Inuit speaking lawyers and judges is thus a real concern. The 1993 land claims agreement between the federal government and the Inuit stipulates that Inuit traditional knowledge must inform and infuse all aspects of government and administration in the new territory. The Government of Nunavut wants to create its own justice framework based on Inuit tradition. But, as time passes, there are fewer and fewer elders who remember the traditional knowledge and practices of the people. Importing experts from the south is not an option. The government must recruit Inuit who are trained in law and who understand Inuit culture and tradition.

For over a decade, the idea of a law school in the north had been circulating among northerners involved in the legal system. There are enormous barriers and formidable costs in the way of northerners attending law schools in the south, not the least of which are strong ties to home and family. For the majority, going south to study is not a realistic option.

Thus, the dream was to “bring the mountain to Mohammed – to bring the law school to the north,” says Shelley Wright, Program Coordinator of Akitsiraq Law School. The Dean of Law at the University of Victoria became intrigued with the idea and partnered with the Government of Nunavut to make this dream a reality by helping to establish a new law school in the territory, named Akitsiraq after the Inuit traditional place of justice. A key partner in all this has been the Gordon Foundation.

The Akitsiraq grant is a strong fit with the future direction of the Gordon Foundation’s grantmaking. The Canadian North is a major priority for the Foundation. It wants to support and strengthen the capacity of residents of the Canadian North to participate in and help determine the key public policies that will shape their lives. By increasing the number of Inuit lawyers in Nunavut, northern voices will be certain to be heard in policy and law making in the Territory. The lawyers trained by Akitsiraq will go on to work in various aspects of governance and law making, whether in private practice, in the government or in Inuit associations and other public purpose organizations. “If northerners are part of

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the policy process, that will ultimately improve community health and address other changes over time," says Stauch.

The Government of Nunavut contributes a major part of the funding required for this one-time, four-year initiative. Eligible students receive financial sponsorship while they are studying so they can devote themselves fully to the program. Government sponsorship enables students who live outside Iqaluit to travel to their communities for home visits once a year. It will also fund two trips to the south for intensive study at the University of Ottawa and the University of Victoria. Many Akitsiraq faculty members come from the University of Victoria, which helped develop the program.

In spring 2001, Akitsiraq Law School received 106 applications for the 15 allocated spaces. Screening applicants was based on a variety of factors important for the student's success: logic and reasoning skills, language skills in English and Inuktitut, education, life and work skills, references, and a capacity to do and understand the work. This competitive process tailored to the North yielded 15 qualified students. Now, the students are at the beginning of their third year, roughly halfway through the program. Four of the original students left the program last year and were replaced by two others who are almost caught up. Eleven of the 13 students in the program are women, many with families and some single mothers. All 13 are expected to graduate. "By Nunavut standards, that is absolutely miraculous.

The fact that we still have 13 out of 15 places filled is a testimony to the students and to the program," says Wright.

The Gordon Foundation is funding what has become the heart and soul of the Akitsiraq program. These are its cultural components. Akitsiraq Law School is "more than just a training program based in Iqaluit," says Stauch. The enhancements include traditional law and language, and special library services, including Inuit-specific complementary learning materials. "The more the law degree is specifically made for the North, the better the students are going to be able to serve Nunavut and clients up here in the North when they graduate," asserts Wright.

The program is taught in both English and Inuktitut, and the Foundation's funding pays for language instruction and simultaneous translation of course lectures, presentations and discussions. Translating legislation is important but also can be challenging. In Inuktitut, there are no words for concepts like "guilty" or "complaint."

The Gordon Foundation grant provides for an elder-in-residence who attends all classes with the students, participates in discussions and teaches a course in traditional Inuit law. Not every Inuit senior is an elder; elders are chosen and recognized for their special wisdom. Both Wright and Stauch report that the elder's presence is very important. Stauch says, "Having an elder in the class provides a bridge to the past – to the way things were before European law was introduced. This is critical if they want to introduce Inuit traditional values and knowledge into government."

Wright does not believe the program would be successful without the Gordon Foundation's enhancements. "They are getting a genuinely northern law degree with the Inuit tradition and culture respected and the language taught. It's incredibly important to them; we would lose students if we didn't do that."

The Foundation's funding also provided for an intensive workshop on land claims, which was attended by students, professors, elders, the Premier, land claims specialists, members of the community and Foundation representatives. Stauch, who attended, was very impressed by the caliber of the students. He now has a "high degree of confidence that the program not only

meets the standards of southern programs but far exceeds it."

The impact of the Akitsiraq program on the 13 students is enormous. For some, being a lawyer is a dream come true. For others, it is something they never dared to dream, or perhaps dreamed, but never thought would be possible. The potential impact on Nunavut is even greater. "We are training the future leaders of the Territory," says Wright. She is "willing to bet" that she has "a future Premier, a future chief judge, future ministers and deputy ministers" in her class.

The Gordon Foundation's grant was a modest investment that will have "huge ramifications down the road," says Stauch. This is the first time that a full professional program has been brought to the north. It could easily be a model for other northern training programs. The cultural and traditional enhancements of the program also make it one of a kind. "Grantmaking is as much an art as it is a science. Seizing these kinds of opportunities is all part of it."

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