

**Contact North:  
A Case Study in Public Policy**  
Lessons from the First 25 Years

**Dr. Ross H. Paul**

Research Associate

Contact North | Contact Nord

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## OVERVIEW

In the April 22, 1986 Speech from the Throne, the Ontario Government of Premier David Peterson announced a “major project in Northern Ontario... to expand the use of new technologies in delivering distance education to remote communities. This project will also build on the clear potential for developing these technologies locally.”

This was followed by an investment in the subsequent provincial budget of \$20 million over four years to set up a distance education network for Northern Ontario. While there had apparently been discussions in three ministries leading up to this (Education, Northern Development and Mines, and Colleges and Universities), the details were vague and there had been almost no public consultation. Ultimately, the lead was taken by the then Ministry of Colleges and Universities (MCU).

Twenty-five years later, there is no question that the resulting network, Contact North | Contact Nord, has been a resounding success from many points of view. It has outlasted almost all other such ventures across Canada and beyond. It has served the needs of thousands of Ontarians living in remote areas and helped them gain credentials and qualifications that have enriched their lives and gave them new employment opportunities. The technology has changed dramatically in those two-and-a-half decades, the needs of northerners have evolved and young Ontarians have significantly different learning styles and experiences from their earlier counterparts. Nevertheless, many challenges persist, the needs continue and the lessons learned from this unique experiment are more relevant than ever.

Why has Contact North persisted throughout such changing times? What are its main successes and how were they achieved? What could have been done better? What have we learned about public policy development and implementation in its wake? What are the key lessons that are most relevant today?

Based on interviews with key players and stakeholders in Contact North’s development, this report attempts to answer such questions. As such, it not only pays tribute to a unique group of men and women who helped make the government’s vision a reality, it offers us some important perspectives and lessons for the future.

## CONTACT NORTH: THE STORY IN A NUTSHELL

In the mid-1980s, there were a couple of simultaneous demands for special attention to the North. At the same time that the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines was promoting a northern education initiative, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities (MCU) made a similar pitch as part of the budget cycle to the Treasury Board. The central agency encouraged the two departments to work closely with the Ministry of Education to present a collaborative submission.

The lead was taken by Assistant Deputy Minister Ralph Benson in MCU. He made Bill Summers a Special Assistant and worked with him to develop the project proposal. There was not a lot of early public consultation. In Ralph's words, the need was clear, they knew it was a good idea and so they just got on with it. The northern initiative's passage through the decision-making processes of government was greatly facilitated by the excellent relationships Ralph had with his Minister, Greg Sorbara, and with the Premier's Office.

According to Bill Summers, there were several key driving principles established from the outset:

1. It should be a neutral technological highway that northern institutions and the Independent Learning Centre (secondary schools) could deliver through;
2. The government would not manage the organization – it was to be directed and managed by the northern institutions on a contractual basis with the province.
3. Collaboration amongst all institutions and providers was to be the key to its success.

The initial model divided the North into two parts – the Northeast centred in Sudbury and the Northwest in Thunder Bay. The East has the greater and more concentrated population, more large centres and colleges than the comparatively isolated western frontier. There are important cultural differences as well, with most Franco-Ontarien (ne) s living in the East and the majority of First Nations settlements being in the West.

Four institutions were identified as the “contractors”, (Laurentian University and Cambrian College in the Northeast and Lakehead University and Confederation College in the Northwest). There was a lot to do in a short period of time and actions proceeded remarkably quickly. The first step was to appoint the two directors – Judy Roberts in Sudbury and Terry Anderson in Thunder Bay. Not only were the specific cultures and requirements of the Northeast and Northwest somewhat different, so were the styles of the two appointees. A native Sudburian, Judy came back home after considerable experience with tele-medicine in Newfoundland and Southern Ontario. As described by Marian Croft, she had the “strength of character” to come in and set things up quickly. Terry Anderson was a bit more laid back:

I was a rather unsophisticated guy from rural Alberta, so when I came in to approach the problem of setting up 20-30 sites, I said, well, you just get on the phone and drive out there and do it, whereas Judy was always in the politics (was this the right person and the right thing?) Often, I just blundered into things that she was smart enough to avoid and other times, she got herself in knots about politics sometimes and couldn't move forward, so we complemented each other quite nicely.<sup>1</sup>

A critical decision at the outset, apparently reached by consensus among the key players (directors and ministry officials), was to split the \$20 million into two envelopes – \$12 million over four years for setting up the organization (central staff, equipment, community centres and staff) and \$8 million for program and course development by the cooperating institutions. Gérard Lafrenière, Marian Croft and others were determined not to repeat the unfortunate experience in Alaska where the government had piled great sums of money into the creation of a distance education network in the mid-1970s that created elaborate studios linked to satellite technology but none of the funds were available for course development. It was a super pipeline with very little to send through it.

With the support of Bill Summers and Ralph Benson's influence with the Minister, such decisions were made quickly. Judy Roberts describes the 12/8 split as a "back of the envelope" decision that worked out pretty well.

What was amazing about the project was that it was hugely top down – as far as I knew, there were no needs assessments, no feasibility studies, no advanced consultation. The process seemed to be that the premier's office said that there was \$20 million in the throne speech – you go and do something about it. For a process that was all wrong, it was amazing that there were a few people in the right places who pulled together, trusted one another and "made it work". It was somehow the right idea, at the right time, with the right people that, when we got going on it, it somehow happened.

What was soon to become Contact North built on the activities of the existing institutions, each of which had its unique way of reaching out to Northerners. Confederation College had a long history of delivering programs in six regional centres in particular by partnering with local high schools. It also had a policy of not paying rent for community facilities, one that was adopted by Contact North from the outset. Through the Independent Learning Centre, the school boards collaborated in offering extensive high school courses by correspondence. Lakehead University had a tradition of flying professors into remote communities for weekend courses and Laurentian University, an early user of local cable television, was primarily offering correspondence courses supplemented by audio and video tapes.<sup>2</sup> The school boards and other colleges (Cambrian, Canadore, Northern and Sault) had strictly defined catchment areas while the universities were less restricted geographically. The three university colleges (Nipissing, Algoma, Hearst), the first two of which subsequently became universities, worked relatively closely with Laurentian, their constituent parent.

The initial structure to ensure the equitability of centre services and programs was a pretty straightforward management committee comprised of representatives of the lead institutions and the Ministry – Judy Roberts (Sudbury), Terry Anderson (Thunder Bay), Marian Croft (Laurentian University), Pam Derks (Cambrian College), Susan Cole (Lakehead University), John Arblaster (Confederation College), Bill Summers (MCU) and Bruce Aarons (Ministry of Education).

From the beginning, the guideline was that any significant decision had to be made by consensus by the management committee. While time-consuming and sometimes frustrating, this developed a spirit of partnership and collaboration that has been the hallmark of Contact North's success. Contact North leaders recognized that the institutions came first and that none had priority over another. Conflicts were always taken back to the management committee for resolution. Any day-to-day operational policy had to be agreed upon by the regional directors to do exactly the same thing, East and West. The two regions were to be separate, but equal and, to an outsider, appear as a seamless operation across the whole North.

They acted as a team from the beginning, starting with visits to all the institutional presidents to assure them that everyone was to be part of the network and that the contractors were only acting on behalf of the group. The visits also included a presentation on distance education because few institutional heads, with the notable exception of John Daniel at Laurentian, had much knowledge of, or appreciation for, the field. Marian Croft believes that this round of visits did much to dispel some of the initial suspicions and concerns around this relatively out-of-the-blue initiative. She cites the case of one college president who confessed after the visit that he had intended to fight it because it looked, as usual, as if everything was centred in Sudbury and Thunder Bay, but was persuaded to support it. All the presidents came on board.

My interview with John Daniel, like me, a former president of Laurentian University, reinforced how well the group worked together from the start. I was struck by how little involvement with Contact North John remembered having as president in those early days, one reinforced by my own similar experience over the next decade. In John's words:

I was there for the first four years of Contact North and the fact that it was a “no news is good news” story for me suggests that it was a success from the beginning.

As the founding chair of the board of ORION, the high-speed fibre optic network for Ontario, I note some very strong parallels with the development of Contact North. Our initial challenge at ORION, from its inception in 2001, was to develop the 4200 kilometre network. This was completed by 2004 and, then, we faced a greater challenge – persuading all of the institutions and potential users across Ontario to make full use of this wonderful new facility. It is one thing to build a pipeline and quite another to make sure it is fully employed.

This was a very important challenge for Contact North. Perhaps the biggest source of early frustrations with Contact North involved the relative lack of program and course availability. Debra Betty remembers this well:

We only had four programs available at the beginning. We had great people dealing with the Francophones, the school boards, the aboriginal communities and others, setting up advisory committees with the institutions and offering the services of our instructional designer, but the programming wasn't happening.

Contact North was only the conduit for whatever was available and its ultimate success would depend upon the institutions and their ability to work with it to identify and respond to the academic programming needs of northern communities. Its impact was greatly facilitated by the money set aside for the Northern Ontario Distance Education Fund which allowed it to support course development that responded to the identified needs of Northerners, but only if at least two institutions agreed to collaborate in response. Gérard Lafrenière credits Contact North with opening up a new spirit of collaboration and encouraging course sharing across institutions, with concomitant cost savings and efficiency for all.

Contact North's strong presence in so many small and remote communities was immensely valuable to the institutions, not only in identifying community needs, but also in promoting the availability of their courses and services. From his long-time involvement with Laurentian University, Denis Mayer has a very positive view of this support:

I always looked at Contact North as a major partner to get the word out there because, in the region, it was not the culture to go to university or college. I saw Contact North as doing the legwork, bringing storefronts for institutions in those communities – what they were lacking, what they were looking for – so we didn't have to do the swings two or three times a year to all those town-hall meetings.

Mayer stresses the complexity of working with several different kinds of institution:

Contact North is working with very different clients. The university panel is one type of client, the college panel another, and the high school panel still another - and then they are each different communities. It's hard to have a single kind of business mantra when you have such diverse needs.

Community access centres were the lynchpin of Contact North from the very beginning. Bill Summers remembers how quickly a small group decided on the immediate establishment of 35 centres in the North, 15 in the West and 20 in the East. In some cases, they simply moved into existing centres, such as the six run by Confederation College (which exist to this day) in Fort Frances, Dryden, Sioux Lookout, Marathon, Geraldton and Kenora.

Judy Roberts and Terry Anderson moved very quickly to establish and staff the access centres in their respective regions. Especially in the more remote and smaller towns, the Contact North access centres were instantly visible and it was really important that they were responsive from the outset.

Whenever and wherever you walked into a centre, the services should be the same for all students and also all institutions should be treated equally in how they were booked and used the services. Our philosophy was that we never said no to anyone, we needed to make it work whatever we had to do, adjust times, etc. (Debby Sefton)

Although there was ultimately strong agreement across the system that the reorganization of Contact North under a single director made a lot of sense, there were good reasons for the original division of the organization into two equal partners, given the aforementioned differences between East and West. While the two regions operated fairly independently of each other, there has been a very strong commitment from the beginning that the policies would be the same, that no institution would get preferential treatment. Judy Roberts puts it succinctly:

At the very beginning, Laurentian and Cambrian signed a contract with MCU and Confederation and Lakehead signed exactly the same contract with MCU. Terry and I each managed exactly the same budget, exactly the same staff (an instructional designer, a technical person, office administrator, coordinator of part-time sites), but Terry had an aboriginal liaison officer and I had a Francophone liaison officer. They were both for both regions, but mainly respectively West and East. In those first three years, even the technology was the same in each region – what tender we were putting out, what brand we were buying... Neither one of us moved without the other one.

From the outset, the decision-making model was one that required consensus across all the institutions, East and West, and the representatives of the provincial government. While this almost certainly has a lot to do with the spirit of partnership and collaboration that were so essential to Contact North's success, such an approach can also be very time-consuming and frustrating.

Especially when the management committee was expanded to 10, the concomitant demands on process and consultation left Judy Roberts, for one, feeling that her talents were better suited elsewhere and she went on to a very successful consulting career. She saw herself more as a builder and facilitator than an ongoing manager and the results speak for themselves – one could only wish that more senior administrators had her self-knowledge and ability to act on it.

I knew I could not stay at Contact North once they started saying that the contract renewals were going to be exactly the same as they were before, and the management committee had expanded to 10. It was going to be four more years of requiring 10 people to reach total consensus before any decision could be taken. That's not a style I feel comfortable with over the long term and I probably didn't think, even at the time, that it was the right model to continue with. Even in 1990, I thought we could go with a more hierarchical model with one director, but the stakeholders weren't yet ready for it.

At the same time, there were important early benefits to the consultative model, one of the key components of which was the recognition by Contact North leaders that the institutions came first. Debby Sefton:

It took a long time to get the East and the West to work together. We always toed the line with respect to the institutions – we always said “we're neutral”. Everyone wanted the same times (7-10 in the evening) and when there were conflicts, we always took it back to the institutions. No institution was a priority – we said that this is your network and we want you to work it out so that everyone was semi-happy. We did have some claiming priority rights but we did not give in.

The management model persisted under new leadership (Gérard Lafrenière in the East and Sam Shaw in the West) but there were increasing frustrations with the dual decision-making model and significant changes were finally made in 1996. The regional directorships were discontinued and Contact North was reconstituted under a single Board of Governors and a chief executive officer, Maxim Jean-Louis (who remains in that role today). It led to economies of scale and almost certainly contributed to a more professional and vibrant organization, but the earlier model had nevertheless done much to establish the credibility of Contact North in its respective regions and to improve relationships across the institutions.

Even with the new structures, the physical and cultural differences between the two regions persist. There are a number of key players in both offices who help bridge these, none more than Debra Betty in the Northeast and Debby Sefton in the Northwest who are in constant communication and do much to ensure the quality and equability of service to every student and every community, regardless of its location.

According to Lakehead's Gwen Wojda, who has played an important role on the Board of Directors for some time, there still is a spirit of collaboration across the East/West boundaries and a recognition that the ultimate issue is not to compete but to put the resources where they best serve northerners.

## THE SUCCESSES

### 1. CHANGING THE FACE OF EDUCATION IN NORTHERN ONTARIO

The enrolments in the educational institutions' courses supported by Contact North took off right from the beginning, but the true success of Contact North goes well beyond the numbers. There is a resounding message emanating from current and former faculty of the educational institutions, staff, ministry officials and students using Contact North's services of overwhelming pride in Contact North and its achievements. Almost everyone interviewed said it was one of the most rewarding ventures they have been involved with in all of their years in higher education because of the immeasurable difference it has made to individuals, to communities and to the North as a whole. Marian Croft and centre coordinators such as Jean Desgagné and Arlene Evans revelled in the immense pride shown by those who were the first in their families to get a particular credential, whether it was graduating high school, or obtaining a college diploma or a university degree.

Consider the following responses:

Of all the things I accomplished in government over 15 years, it's the accomplishment that gave me the greatest pride. The establishment of Contact North and the distance education funding made a tremendous difference. While the implementation of the project required a great commitment of time and energy from all the partners, it was great fun. (Bill Summers)

I've been here for 20 years because I believe in what we're doing. No matter what the changes, the philosophy of the organization is the same, and that's what keeps me here. Sandy Lake brings a group in every year, they play with the technology and I take them to lunch and then they visit Confederation College. We're talking first generation of high school! There aren't many topics that you can get me talking about with such enthusiasm as Contact North! (Debby Sefton)

Contact North has been one of the better organizations I have been involved with over the last 25 years because I felt that it made a real difference. (Jack Playford)

I have wonderful memories of seeing students coming to get their diplomas who had never set foot on our campus. For me, what we did for Northern Ontario, it was approaching a miracle. (Gérard Lafrenière)

Expanding from the original 35 access centers to the present 112, of which 94 are in the North, Contact North has transformed community after community. By taking education to the people, Contact North has not only responded to demand, it has created and expanded it. It has made a huge difference to individuals in the most remote communities, bringing higher education to them, allaying their fears and apprehensions and demystifying the colleges and universities. It has stimulated their interest, encouraged their aspirations and helped them succeed.

112 learning centres – that's penetration! It's not just to say that we have another dot on the map. It's a whole community process – someone has requested something and someone has offered a place and is prepared to support it. When you look at the penetration, you know that people are now paying

more attention to education – we want this in our community, we’re prepared to give it a place and to support it whether it’s in the high school or community centre. Daily, the exposure is there and that changes the mindset. (Denis Mayer)

Assisting a few people to achieve new credentials can make all the difference to an isolated community. It can mean the difference between having and not having a local social worker, paramedic or nurse. It can add quality and meaning to someone’s life and develop role models for young people. It can contribute confidence and optimism in the most difficult of times. It can help a community realize that its citizens can succeed in higher education and that they can do it together. As well, after 25 years of helping people to overcome the traditional barriers of time, location and cost, Contact North has legitimized the once unfamiliar concept of distance education.

Reg Jones is proud that Contact North survived all of the financial challenges through tough times and in the face of never-ending questions about its future from southern college colleagues. Because the entire amount of the funding showed up on the books of Confederation College in the early days, and since it still flows through provincial college special purpose funds, it was often challenged by other colleges who asked “why does Contact North get our money?” He found he had to continually defend the rights of northerners’ access to education through such means as Contact North. For northern colleges and universities, the answer was that the collective could achieve so much more than individual institutions working independently. As well, Jones notes with pride that the great majority of funds went to extend access through teleconference sites supported by an efficient infrastructure in the Sudbury and Thunder Bay offices.

While the explosion in enrolments supported for the educational institutions exemplified the Contact North’s success, Debby Sefton stresses that it has not just been the numbers, but who is helped, that really matters.

Contact North was there for the smallest and most isolated communities. It concerns me when people say that there’s not a lot of activity somewhere and that we should focus on the busiest centres because that one person who is taking that program or course is really important. We really do make a difference in peoples’ lives.

Gwen Wojda echoes this sentiment.

Many are first-generation learners and so it is critical to have something in that community that exposes kids to role models, seeing their parents taking courses, for example. The community model has broken down the ivory tower image. You don’t have to come to the campus, you can do it in your own base. You can learn that faculty members are great people to work with and increasingly see the value of community research projects.

She cites the particular case of the post-RN degree program:

So many of those nurses could not have done their degree program in any other way. And think of the impact if the health care providers had been taken out of their communities!

Like Denis, Gwen has witnessed changing attitudes towards distance education:

It has been a paradigm shift right across the province from the on-campus, face-to-face environment, to one that helps dispel such myths as that distance learners don't want to come to campus or that distance education courses are less academically vigorous. There has been a very definite transition. The proliferation of distance education offerings, not only in Canada, but around the world, has also made it all more normal and accepted. There is realization, too, that the learners can "walk" – if we don't provide what they need, they can get it elsewhere.

One of the great rewards for learner and provider alike is the convocation ceremony, some of which are even held on site in small and remote communities.

You see the excitement in the community when someone gets a degree or attends convocation. We have a learner come in and identify him or herself and it's very exciting. There is also the benefit of the community feeling connected to the university community. We still bring our own staff out to communities as we did in the early days to get them to see that distance learners have the same needs as on-campus students – library, financial aid, academic advising... It's no longer just the 18 year old on-campus learner but the 33 year old distance learner. (Gwen Wojda)

I had one woman from Hearst – we told her she could bring 4 people to graduation. She asked for 12 seats! I said, make a pitch. She said, "I'm the first person in my family who has ever graduated from high school." She got her 12 and they all came! You could just feel the pride in everyone. (Jack Playford)

It was the same at the secondary education level in earlier times:

One of the reasons we were successful was that, in addition to distance delivery via Contact North, we would send people up once or twice a year to tour the centres. People hear a voice and they want to see a face. Our teachers would go up and deliver a program from Summer Beaver or Sandy Lake or wherever – in those days, we just had the audio technology, the convenor, so the technology was not a big issue, but the interpersonal relationships were huge. I'm still in touch with that program and they still do that – they have a graduation so that if you can't come to us, we go to you. (Jack Playford)

Judy Roberts gives much credit to the participating educational institutions, lauding how quickly and to what extent they took up the challenges to start changing their courses.

All four of the institutional presidents really bought into it. One thing that was really good about it was there were never any institutional bun fights among those four lead institutions, either at the working or presidential levels.

She also believes that the instructional designers made a significant difference to the quality of the courses.

The institutions could easily identify subject matter experts but they really didn't have instructional design resources – while it is hard to support with evidence, my belief is that the course quality was higher than it would otherwise have been because Contact North instructional designers could partner with institutional subject matter experts.

The face of Contact North to the great majority of students was the local centre coordinator.

I think the unsung heroes are the centre coordinators. They were half-time (we had to keep them under the threshold of the fringe benefits in the union contracts) usually on flexible hours. They had to hold office hours and be present when anyone was going to come in and use the equipment. The centre coordinators played a plethora of roles – advisors, counsellors, technical experts, security guards, etc.

We would have an annual centre coordinators meeting, a two or three day workshop to give them support and a pat on the back. I think we also had weekly audioconferenced meetings to keep up morale and let everyone exchange war stories as well as administer the organization. They all believed in it absolutely passionately and many worked many more hours than we paid them for. They were huge advocates in their community both for Contact North and also the concept of distance education. They made it happen for us! (Judy Roberts)

Gérard Lafrenière cites the case of the centre coordinator in Hornepayne when the office had to be closed because the new proprietor in the shopping centre where the office was located wanted \$150 a month for its continuation.

We said we couldn't pay by government decree and so we had to leave. In response, our centre coordinator operated the service from her living room. That's the kind of dedication we got!

Judy Roberts notes that Contact North has persisted while many similar ventures have long since been wound up – the Telemedicine network in Newfoundland, the Open Learning Agency in British Columbia, the TeleEducation network in New Brunswick and some of the Alberta educational consortia. An important reason for this must be the local support in so many remote communities. No less an observer than John Daniel, probably the most knowledgeable person about developments in distance education world-wide, cites Contact North's continuation as a clear measure of its success.

I don't know of any other example of a largely synchronous operation that has lasted so long with so many drop points. I think it has lasted because it was conceived in that way and not as a kind of institutional outreach thing.

For Gérard Lafrenière, Contact North helped to open up a new spirit of collaboration among all the institutions, helping to overcome what had been huge jurisdictional barriers. He points out that introductory courses to accounting or economics are the same everywhere and yet institutions usually insist on developing their own. He credits Contact North with encouraging course sharing across institutions, with concomitant cost savings and efficiency for all.

## 2. DRAMATICALLY INCREASING PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Extending accessibility was on everyone's list of top achievements. As noted above, the enrolments supported for the educational institutions continue to demonstrate how important Contact North has been to the learning needs of so many northerners. By 1994-95, Contact North supported 9,401 course registrations, in 617 courses (418 college, 137 university and 62 secondary) and over 85% of these students lived outside the five major centres of Northern Ontario. In the fall of 2010, the comparable figures were almost 12,000 registrations in 629 online courses with an additional 2,772 course registrations in the rest of Ontario (via the access centres serving Eastern, Central and Western Ontario that had been established by Contact North by that time).<sup>3</sup>

Through fairly simple steps to take education to northern communities, Contact North not only responded to significant demand but it has also had a considerable impact in terms of expanding that demand. Reflecting on his more than two decades of involvement, Denis Mayer underlines the achievement.

We've learned that we can set up education and learning opportunities in small, remote communities. We might have thought 25 years ago that that wasn't possible or sustainable, but it is. To me, the biggest learning is that we can also bring institutions together to collaborate and to bring that vision. 25 years ago, if we asked where we would be in 2011, we might expect that we would have outlived our purpose, but, we haven't. So, we've learned that we can collaborate and that a network like this has pooled the North together. It has brought people together to realize the importance of higher education and that accessibility is worthy of doing it.

Jack Playford notes that individuals can feel quite isolated in almost any community, not just those that are so obviously remote.

This is the type of program that allows people a chance, a second chance to deal with unfinished business, their dreams and hopes. We graduated a lot of people who would not have had a chance in all kinds of programs at the secondary, collegial and university levels alike.

## 3. EXTENDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR FRANCOPHONES

From the very beginning, it was crucial that Contact Nord help address the crucial issue of a significantly underserved Francophone population in Northern Ontario. When Judy Roberts came in as the first director in the Northeast, where most Franco-Ontarien(ne)s live, she made it an absolute priority to hire Francophone staff and ultimately to develop an office that really functioned in French.

A more daunting challenge, because it was in the hands of the post-secondary institutions, was to encourage more programs and courses in the French language. In this respect, Contact Nord was well served by the \$2 million it had each year for program and course development to ensure that there was as much progress in terms of content as there was in course delivery.

From any perspective, Contact Nord has made a very important difference to many French speaking people in Northern Ontario. Champions like

Denis Mayer are particularly positive about the achievements in the Francophone communities through college and university collaboration via Contact North and the later establishment of Collège Boréal in 1995. The latter's needs were too great for Contact North to handle and it developed its own network of regional centres.

There were strong pressures for Contact Nord to respond to Boréal's needs but, as Denis has expressed it, playing favourites in any way would have completely undermined the core working principles that defined the organization.

If Boréal had monopolized the Contact Nord's services, it would have made enemies very quickly and the whole concept would have collapsed. So we reaffirmed that it had to be used by all the key institutions equitably. That was a crucial decision and there were some tough meetings around it.

Hence, under the leadership of Gisèle Chrétien (a Contact North alumna herself), Boréal developed its own network, but ultimately shared it with Contact Nord and used the latter's réseau as well. The resulting collaboration gave impetus to both organizations and the ultimate winners have been the Francophones of the North.<sup>4</sup> Collège Boréal has gone on to be a leader in an integrated approach to distance and online learning, not only for northern Francophones, but also as an exemplary institution for all those interested in the application of the latest technologies to learning.<sup>5</sup>

Denis is particularly positive about the improvements over the past 30 years or so, represented by the mix of (and sometimes the clashes between) a number of strategic initiatives.

In the last 25 years with Contact Nord, we received more development money which we put into the French program development (e.g. Post-RN program). Coupled with that was the CNFS (Consortium national de formation en santé) which also has a major impact and some of their courses are run through Contact Nord. And then there was College Boréal. So, there were several strategies which came together to support the Francophones, increasing access and trying to keep them in the North.

## CHALLENGES AND CONTINUING ISSUES

Notwithstanding its many successes, Contact North has not always been as effective as it might have been and there are a number of continuing challenges that persist to this day.

### 1. THE FUNDING MODEL

Contact North has been funded from a special dedicated envelope for all of its 25 years and there are opposing perspectives on whether or not that is a good thing. On the down side, there is less security and certainty for an institution that has to defend its special allocation every year. The money stands out in a single account under the Colleges Unit of the Ministry and is therefore often challenged by the colleges as being part of “their allocation”. Some other institutions involved in distance education get no such grants and therefore resent this special envelope.

On the other hand, Contact North’s funding has been reaffirmed every year for 25 years under Liberal, New Democrat and Conservative governments. Looking at both approaches, former Contact North Board Chair Jack Playford prefers the current dedicated special allocation model:

We always shuddered at budget time, but I think Contact North is better off being an independent budget line - you’re not part of someone else’s budget. If you’re \$5 million out of \$500 million, it’s probably an advantage. As well, if you get assimilated into another budget, it will probably die – it’s just another program and will get swallowed up. But, if it stands alone, there are people to manage it and make it work.

The person closest to the government funding issue for most of that time, Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities Senior Policy Adviser, Barbara MacPherson, sees both sides of the issue, but prefers changing the current practice:

The special status is a plus and minus, which we have discussed over the years. The plus is that, in periods when all the operating grants were cut 15%, and we lived through that, Contact North was not cut. On the other hand, in periods where there was growth money or expansion or increases, they didn’t usually get any increases either. While government continues to discuss the status of Contact North, personally, I think, at this point, it would be better to be treated like any other institution. It’s older than a number of our colleges and universities. It is administratively awkward to do these transfer payment agreements and to constantly ask for special funding.

A tireless proponent of Contact North, Barbara continues to have to defend its budget on an annual basis, especially because it does not fit readily into any bureaucratic category:

“The struggle of explaining something different within government, trying to brief ministers, explain things to our funding people, hasn’t gone away. It’s an ongoing struggle so that we do keep performance indicators...You’d think after 25 years it would be more accepted. Some days, I get frustrated telling the same story over and over again. Trying to do something new and different in the traditional government setting can be a struggle at times - it takes a lot of patience and determination.”

While from Southern Ontario, Barbara is proud to have long ago been adopted by so many as a “northerner”, given her endless dedication to the Contact North cause. As Jack Playford puts it:

In all the years I have dealt with the Ministry, I have never seen a Ministry liaison person attached to a given program for so long.

An interesting issue is the way that the Government of Ontario has used funding to influence Contact North’s behaviour. Three issues in particular stand out in this regard. When the first \$20 million (\$5 million per annum for four years) was announced in 1986, it was made clear that 40% of it (\$2 million annually) was reserved for course development. This was a crucial decision because it gave Contact North considerable buying power in persuading the institutions to respond to the community needs that it had identified without affecting their existing budgets.<sup>6</sup> Without that, it might well have become a delivery vehicle with almost no product.<sup>7</sup>

It was a stroke of genius that they were able to roll some of the \$5 million a year into course development, especially in the first year when we weren’t able to spend all that money so quickly. It was smart that they were able to roll it into curriculum development. (Terry Anderson)

The second was the early decision that under no conditions would Contact North pay rent for the centres located in communities in the North. This is discussed further, later in this paper.

The third was that the Ministry did not just put money on the table, but it established clear rules about how it could be used, notably in the emphasis on partnerships and response to community needs in ways that helped to establish the whole collaborative ethos from the beginning. For example, a course development project had to involve at least two institutions, at least one of which was from the North.

The government also influenced what institutions did by cutting funding. For example, when the Ministry stopped subsidizing faculty travel for institutions like Lakehead, which had been sending instructors out into remote communities, it was an incentive to use the distance education services of Contact North instead.

An important factor in its credibility has been that Contact North has always balanced its budget, something that Jack Playford points out as giving important leverage with politicians. This was reinforced by its success in finding other sources of funds for specific projects as well.

With an infrastructure already in place because of its network of regional centres in the Northwest, Confederation College was a natural choice to handle the financial and personnel side of Contact North at the outset. In exchange for these services, it received 5% of the operating budget. While some believed that the college benefited from this, it would seem that it was a fair deal, given that Contact North now spends between 5 and 6% of its budget on the same services.

The visibility of the Contact North funding in its special envelope within the colleges sector has led to challenges. Sometimes, institutional presidents would want to claim their “share” of the money, even though it has always been awarded independently of them.

They’re not in competition, but have different roles, and that is why I am always surprised by the angst sometimes exhibited by the institutions when Contact North gets money and attention. (Barbara MacPherson)

## 2. ESTABLISHING AN IDENTITY

Contact North has always struggled with its public identity. While very prominent in the smaller and more remote communities it serves, it is far less well known in larger centres and among southern colleges and universities. Debra Betty believes that it has often been taken for granted by the institutions because its funding comes directly from government.

As Contact North is not on the list of standard educational deliverers, awareness of it can be limited within the government itself. Barbara MacPherson wonders if decisions made to allocate significant resources for educational technology to individual institutions would have been made differently if an enhanced role for Contact North had been taken into account.

I'm somewhat a lone voice in reminding people that we have a network on which we spent millions of dollars – why aren't we using that more as a base? Once in a while, it works, but as soon as the decisions are in another ministry or another part of our ministry, we can be inconsistent and you can't fault others for using the money they get for their own needs.

Debra Betty says that the identity challenges are the same today as they were 25 years ago. Contact North is very well known in the smaller and more remote communities, but has a comparatively weak identity in the larger centres. Given that the latter are in less need of such services, it may not matter that much but, in political terms, it may matter a great deal. Jack Playford echoes the comparison.

It has a strong identity in smaller towns, like Ignace for instance. When I was there, they were running it out of a strip mall and had a prominently displayed logo. It gets swallowed up here in Thunder Bay.

## 3. FACING RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Even innovative institutions quickly develop their own cultures and they soon can be as difficult to change as more traditional places. This is particularly the case when there is low staff turnover. While this is a very positive tribute to the dedication and enthusiasm of staff, it can also be associated with resistance to change. Certainly, there have been significant periods where Contact North was less proactive than it might have been, when it has stayed too long with existing technologies and been less than adept at responding to the changing needs of learners, especially young people in tune with the latest communication technologies. Even Contact North's strongest supporters, such as Barbara MacPherson, would like to see it take more initiative, rather than just responding to those of others. She concedes, however, that this may be one disadvantage of its neutral status with all the decision-making power residing in the institutions it serves.

Especially in the early days, there was considerable doubt about the quality and effectiveness of distance education. For many faculty, in particular, there was (and is) no substitute for face-to-face learning. Terry Anderson, now one of the best known distance educators in the world, recounts one such reaction early in his tenure at Contact North:

I was sitting in the Thunder Bay Airport, waiting for a flight to Fort Frances and talking to a Lakehead woman studies professor. Lakehead's idea of distance education at the time was the old "fly the professor out on the weekend" model. She really took exception to the notion that we were delivering courses at a distance. She thought it was destructive because it was taking away the opportunities of people like her and students to actually sit face-to-face with a real teacher, especially in the women's studies context. That was interesting because I had always seen myself as the shining knight who was bringing access, not taking it away. That was an interesting revelation about what it means to learn and how important face-to-face is, which is still an issue to this day.<sup>8</sup>

The issue remains a challenge on most university campuses, notwithstanding that distance education is much more widely accepted around the world because of its demonstrated success in so many colleges and universities.

#### 4. RETENTION IN THE NORTH

One of the more elusive goals of the setting up of Contact North was to retain more people in the North. It is difficult both to achieve and, without significant institutional research, to measure. Someone who is unemployed and achieves a credential might be as apt to move to a job elsewhere as to stay in the community. There are many cases of individuals being laid off by a mine or mill and returning for second career options under government funding schemes who have thus been able to retrain themselves and stay in the North. The colleges, in particular, have been responsive to these sorts of needs.

The primary evidence is derived from individual testimonials:

I have binders of letters written at various points to support the continuation of Contact North or to advocate for more money for extra equipment. Some of those letters brought tears to my eyes. It has now affected three generations of students. People fulfilling their dreams to be an early childhood educator, a welder or whatever say, "Contact North gave me the opportunity. I couldn't have done it without it." If they're 18 year olds and go off to university, they're less apt to come back, but many adults just don't have the option to go anywhere else and Contact North has enhanced their careers and lives. (Barbara MacPherson)

Particularly over the past 5-10 years where the second career options have come up – the mill has closed down and people ask themselves, "What can I take?" So, they take a certificate program and that keeps them in the community. I've had testimonials from people who say that it gave them the additional oomph to become more entrepreneurial. (Gwen Wojda)

Things have turned around in terms of people staying in the North. There's not a bad lifestyle in the North. Contact North has helped to create a whole new specialized class of folks who would not otherwise be available for the job market...It filled a need as I saw it as a professional educator because I had all

kinds of frustrations at losing people at 17. As long as the mill stayed open for them to get to 35 years, they were fine, but if it didn't, they were in trouble. It's pretty tough to go from making \$75,000 to unemployment. So, there's a huge need here.  
(Jack Playford)

In her community of Geraldton, Bernadine O'Brien has seen Contact North help 15-20 social service workers graduate over the past 10 years and, hence, stay in the North. On the other hand, a lot of people laid off by the mines in recent years have used Contact North's services to get new skills and then gone West for employment, often leaving their families behind. They are unable to sell their houses so they come back every few weeks to visit their families; a very difficult arrangement for everyone.

Debra Betty is less certain about Contact North's role in retaining people in the North.

It has to do with the lack of high-speed access, with a lot of communities still on dial-up. Also, there are always individuals who want to leave the North, even if they do subsequently come back. Retention is a more complex issue than just accessibility to education.

## 5. THE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Long before the establishment of Contact North, the Ministry of Education was able to ensure the provision of correspondence courses to secondary students in communities that lacked the numbers and resources to provide senior high school courses through its Independent Learning Centre (ILC). It made sense to enhance this with audioconferencing when Contact North was established and, for some time, there was success in the ensuing collaboration. There was a Secondary School Liaison Officer in each of the Thunder Bay and Sudbury offices and many of the access centres were located in local high schools. The program peaked in the early 1990s. Since schools wanted courses during the day and adult learners came at night, it made for efficient use of Contact North's facilities and services. With many access centres located in the high schools, there were good opportunities for marketing and supporting Contact North courses.

In the late '90s, however, there was a reorganization of the school boards and the decision was made to fund them directly for distance education rather than via Contact North. The latter's school board enrolments supported started to decline so that it soon became focused primarily on post-secondary education. In the end, the schools left Contact North because the government gave them their own networks.

While this is not a paper on why the schools went their separate ways, those interviewed offered a lot of reasons why the model was less effective in that sector. Briefly, these include the following:

- There were not usually school board people on the management committee. They were represented less directly, via the Ministry of Education, which meant less ownership of Contact North than there was in the colleges and universities, each of which was represented.

- The sector did not lend itself as readily to the kind of flexibility and entrepreneurialism that was required to change the way education was delivered in the North. There were many issues with teachers' unions, notably fears of job losses because Contact North could facilitate one large class serving many centres with only one teacher.
- Even when it could be shown that providing a course right in the community could save the school board money for buses, the bureaucratic rules did not allow them to spend the savings on the Contact North operation.
- Jack Playford suggests that if universities are defined by their faculties, schools are defined by their buildings, so that students who are not on site are out-of-mind: "We tried to get them to see that all they had to do was dial-up and we would be there, but it just did not catch on."
- A big problem in the secondary system was to negotiate across school districts to offer courses that were available to students in other areas. School boards were less used to collaborating with other institutions than were universities and colleges and the long-established ILC was perhaps challenged by the soaring enrolments in the post-secondary sector that were achieved in such a short period of time by Contact North.
- Judy Roberts suggests that part of the difficulty for the ILC making the transition to any kind of model incorporating Contact North's technology was its commitment to delivering a vast array of content through traditional, instructionally-designed correspondence education. ILC also had a very specialized target audience that was not seen as easily served in the Contact North model. Ironically, the schools had the content and the colleges and universities the flexible approach to delivery but each lacked the strengths of the other at the outset.
- There were even problems between schools in the same board when their timetables did not match and neither principal was willing to change them to facilitate common time slots for distance delivery. Rigidity in timetabling has been cited across Canada for problems in distance delivery of school programs.
- Secondary school teachers and faculties of education have traditionally been geared to classroom teaching and Jack Playford, for one, found it difficult to generate interest in distance education in the schools: "We had good luck with teachers who had diverse backgrounds, those who had come to teaching after doing something else. The issue of having a designed lesson plan with no deviation was not a big deal to them."
- Rory McGreal found the Ministry's big bureaucracy difficult to deal with: "We were constrained by the Ontario Government which insisted that we put telewriter systems into all the schools, even when a lot of them were not ready to use them. We should have saved the money until they were ready and buy new equipment, but they wouldn't let us do that – we had to buy all the equipment at once."

- It was also difficult to persuade the Ministry to spend some of its money on anything other than developing the technology. Rory McGreal recounts a meeting that he and Gérard Lafrenière had in Toronto when they had to refuse to accept any money at all until the officials relented and let them spend 15-20% of it on training. This was hardly unique to Toronto. I remember well a wonderful cartoon in the Edmonton Journal in the mid-1980s after Alberta's Minister of Education Dave King, without consultation or much notice, had Apple 2E computers sent to all the schools in Alberta. The next day, the cartoon depicted a teacher talking to a student across a desk piled with computers and saying: "If I have six apples and I give you two of them, how many apples do I have left?"
- Another frustration was the omnipresence of ineffective Icon computers in all the schools which required constant attention from full-time technicians. The latter thus had a vested interest in keeping them – the more unreliable they were, the more they fought to retain them!
- The natural scheduling fit between the schools (daytime) and adult learners (evenings) was changed when Confederation College started delivering full-time programs during the day. Suddenly, Contact North had to operate all day and at night. With so many of the access centres in high schools, adults would be hanging around the school during the day which did not please their principals who saw day use as their own priority.

All that said, the ILC has done a lot for many isolated high school students and the results are much better today than they were in an earlier era. Jack Playford notes that far fewer children are leaving high school without a diploma these days as board are more aggressive with alternate education programs of one kind or another in almost every community.

It is interesting to speculate whether or not Contact North would be more effective today had the school boards continued to use its technology platforms.

In many ways, distance education lends itself much more readily to adult learners, and, in any event, to highly motivated and independent individuals. Jack Playford notes the challenges of supervising teenagers in a relatively isolated environment.

It's one thing to have a program running out of a band office or community centre where people are 19-40 years of age. They don't have a lot of time to fool around in the afternoon – if they're there for an hour, they're there for an hour. If you're doing it from school-to-school and you have eight kids who are 15 years of age, management becomes an issue, and if you have to have a teacher to supervise them, you might as well teach a regular class.

During his tenure on the Contact North Board, he noticed that results with adult students were far superior to those with teenagers.

As I was on the Board, I would see the high school statistics and they were decreasing every year. The intent was there. I don't know whether we didn't have the energy, or the devices or the program. Contact North is only the conduit. If you don't get the school boards to buy in, it won't work. God knows we tried.

Thinking of the case of her own son, who plays junior hockey for the Sudbury Wolves and does the ILC courses on his own, Debby Sefton, who lives in Thunder Bay, wonders if there is sufficient support for high school students studying in this way. She worries that her son lacks the discipline to study on his own, especially with the distraction of hockey, and she has had to play a very strong role to help get him through his courses.

Judy Roberts believes that the secondary school liaison officers and ministry officials like Ralph Benson and Bill Summers did everything possible to encourage better liaison with schools: “Even though the schools could apply for and get money for course development, it was so counter-culture to them – I don’t know what the right approach might have been...”

On the other side of the ledger, Denis Mayer suggests that it is fair to wonder whether or not there would have been more synergy and continuity for learning in the North if the schools were still part of Contact North. With more young people using Contact North’s services, parents would be made more aware of its existence and strengths. High school students exposed to learning through technology might be better prepared for lifelong learning than they are with classroom experience only.

From this point of view, the loss of the secondary schools to Contact North was an opportunity missed. Too often, there is a large communications gap between levels of education and there might be many more partnerships across secondary and post-secondary boundaries than there are today. A good example is the never-ending challenge of extending literacy across the North – Contact North supported enrolments are flourishing in this area but the challenge might be far less if there was much better coordination among schools, colleges and universities in this critical area.

## SOME LESSONS LEARNED

What has 25 years of Contact North told us about extending educational opportunity and enhancing student success for those previously denied such opportunities?

### 1. SOMETIMES, IT REALLY PAYS FOR GOVERNMENTS TO JUST GET ON WITH IT.

One of the astounding achievements of Contact North is how quickly it moved from idea to implementation. While there is probably no one best way to implement public policy, it is hard to disagree with Ralph Benson's assertion that, in this case, at least, it was better just to get on with setting it up and then to allow the institutions to make it work. While Judy Roberts saw this as succeeding despite the lack of earlier consultation and process, one could wonder how much more would have been achieved had there been a comprehensive consultation process before the initiative was even announced. It would certainly not have got going as quickly and the ensuing discussions and debates might have even undermined it before it got going.

### 2. FOLLOWING A TRUE PARTNERSHIP MODEL

Whatever one's view of the initial process, there is no doubt that Contact North worked because of how collaborative its participants were in those early years. Roles and responsibilities were relatively clear to each of the participants as stated simply and clearly by Barbara MacPherson: "The institutions/professors give the content and credentials, the community gives the space and the government pays for the network".

Based on her own earlier experiences with telemedicine in Newfoundland and with the Toronto General Hospital, Judy Roberts attributes this in particular to the universal recognition of how badly Contact North's services were needed.

It is not at all an accident that some of the best known and earliest innovators in areas like distance education and telemedicine were in Northern Ontario, Newfoundland and New Brunswick where the need was great and they knew they would never have a chance of catching up if they didn't cooperate. Contrast this with Southern Ontario where the institutions are big enough that they think they can go ahead on their own or there's at least a subset that think they can. I think for partnerships to work well, everybody has to feel that they have pain, that others at the table share their pain and that they can resolve the pain if they work together. If you don't have that, you're going to have problems keeping a consortium together... If the key people around the table do not know and trust each other fully, you are not going to pull it off. In the end, it only works if everyone recognizes that they are part of a single whole and that none can function without the other.

For Gwen Wojda, it was critical that when the management committee or Board of Directors came together, everyone "took off their institutional hat" and gave primary consideration to the needs of the region and of the learners. Reg Jones made a similar point: "The higher purpose has always been to the people of the North – it transcended institutional interests".

Bill Summers also attributes the Contact North's success to the spirit of cooperation that prevailed.

Implementing Contact North reinforced my own personal view about collaboration. My experience convinced me that the collaborative model in Contact North resulted in a project implementation that was effective, responsive to a broad range of community needs and fast.

One should not paint too rosy a picture of all this collaboration. There will always be institutional rivalries and chauvinism and there were many instances when all of the institutions would have benefited more if they had not been so insistent on continuing to do things their own way. Nevertheless, there was a real determination to make the partnership principles work and they have contributed directly to the Contact North's success.

Barbara MacPherson cites the case of student support services which, even after much discussion about a collaborative approach, never seemed to get addressed satisfactorily. Hence, there was some cooperation in this area but many of the services were replicated by colleges and universities insisting on doing essentially the same things their own way.

In another instance, even though the need for courses in the French language was huge, Contact North had to deny the University of Ottawa access to course development money as long as it refused to collaborate with at least one other institution, a condition of awarding money for course development. The matter was eventually resolved, but not without considerable tension and conflict.

On balance, however, it is remarkable how few such examples can be cited and how much more collaborative northern institutions were after the establishment of Contact North. In looking at the success of the Peace River Consortium in Alberta, Harold Wynne also emphasized the importance of partnerships, not only for meeting a specific challenge, but for the longer term impact of collaboration and better communications among institutions on future endeavours. Judy Roberts believes that there will always be a demand for the kind of collaborative community approaches to learning that have characterized Contact North since the beginning.

You're always going to have to have some kind of cooperative model to serve the under populated regions even with all the technological advances. I personally cannot see any other kind of option – if you want to have the same access to education and training in the smaller communities, all of the users are going to have to gather together. Because you get users from health, education and business, it makes sense that everyone pays for the pipeline but each does their own content.

### 3. THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING A NEUTRAL COORDINATING BODY

A critical component of the Contact North's success was that it works on behalf of the communities to facilitate student interactions with the institutions. It does not offer its own programs, courses or credentials, nor does it give priority to any institution over another.

I think that part of the success of Contact Nord has been its neutrality. I think that's crucial. There are things that can be shared and should be shared because resources are always limited. For those things that should be shared (like student services, tracking, and staff training), there is a real role for a neutral body. If that neutral body starts competing with the institutions, you get conflicts and the possibilities for rejection. (Gisèle Chrétien)

One of the reasons that Contact North is not better known provincially and nationally is the behind-the-scenes nature of much of its operation. By contrast, it has a very high profile in many smaller and more remote communities in Northern Ontario where it can be an instrument of hope for those seeking further education and employment.

There were tensions around the identity issue from the outset. Although the courses were given by the colleges and universities, many local residents using the service saw them as Contact North courses. The institutions reacted quickly and Judy Roberts emphasizes how important it was for Contact North to make sure that courses were promoted according to their institutional affiliation.

We were scrupulous in upholding this principle. This was a huge pressure on us not to be directly associated with the courses: i.e., they are Laurentian University courses, not Contact North courses. We also tried to avoid having any direct role in needs assessment. Our directive to the coordinators was, if they heard wishes for a specific course, that they should contact the appropriate institution in that catchment area and let them decide what to offer. We did not make these decisions but just passed on what we heard to the institutions for their consideration. We could informally give feedback to the institutions but we did not have any say in their decisions.

As Gwen Wojda puts it: “We have to remember that the network is there to support the institutions with their different mandates – we’re ready to work together but we need that separate identification as well”.

Nevertheless and especially in the smaller communities, Contact North is the most visible entity and tends to get both the credit and the blame for community perceptions of the courses delivered by the institutions. Debby Sefton emphasizes Contact North’s responsibility to ensure that students take responsibility for their own interaction with the educational institution.

If a student is having a problem with a particular instructor, we always try to make sure that he or she takes it up with the college or university. We don’t pass judgment, we are neutral and don’t promote one institution over another. We are there to help connect the student to the institution and we tell them: “you need to be working with the institution to which you are paying tuition and which pays your instructor. But people still say, “That Contact North course that I took...”

This approach carried over to the distribution of program development money across the institutions. Gérard Lafrenière terms the government’s decision not to implicate Contact North in course production a “brilliant” one. Instead, the allocation of monies for such purposes was made by the Advisory Committee comprised of institutional and government representatives and not by Contact North itself.

These complexities have frustrated efforts to brand Contact North, a challenge that is now even greater with the expansion of its services to other parts of the province. Debra Betty is very supportive of the expansions but, like all whom I interviewed, wants to ensure that the North does not lose out in the process.

Jack Playford is philosophical about how Contact North has evolved over the 25 years.

I thought we had come a long way in terms of re-branding it from a quasi-government supervised and run program to an organization that was independent enough to make its own way and still provide a service. We struggled with the secondary and First Nations mandates and the challenges remain. Contact North has evolved into a post-secondary institution and I don't think you can do much about that. It's just the way it's going to be.

#### **4. THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT SUPPORT WHATEVER THE TECHNOLOGY**

Although modern communications technologies are ideally suited to independent learners functioning in their own time and place, most people need deadlines, incentives and support to succeed. This is particularly the case for adults who have been outside formal learning institutions for a number of years and those of any age who live in families and communities where higher education has not been a priority. Contact North has done much to provide this sort of support, notably through its centre coordinators who play all sorts of roles, both formal and informal, in helping their student clients to succeed.

Debby Sefton stresses the importance of the local access centre and its centre coordinator.

Many of the students haven't been to school for years and they need help to deal with the institutional bureaucracy. I think that is critical for students to be successful – having some place where they can go to for information and support, a place where they can have coffee with other students.

For students to be successful, there needs to be a support network for them. There has to be someone there for them, if they want to pop in, even if they are doing it asynchronously. There has to be a physical site for them to go to– they don't have to use it, but it must be there. There is somebody there who understands how the particular institution works – how to get books, how to contact the people you need to talk to and what questions to ask. We'll go so far as to write the questions down with them, but it's always up to them to follow through.

In the early days of Athabasca University, there was a perception of much higher completion rates than was actually the case. This was very hard to track, because there was no class cohort – you could start at the beginning of any month and every student was on his or her own timetable. Through painstaking work by institutional researcher, Doug Shale, we discovered that completion rates for first-time distance learners were abysmally low whereas they soared to over 80% for those who had previously successfully completed at least one course at a distance.

We quickly realized that adult learners needed more guidance, more personal support to succeed. This is especially the case when they are home-based, studying at a distance. On a traditional campus, a student feeling mystified after a given class or lecture normally has the opportunity to discuss this with a fellow student. Chances are, they both soon realize that their concerns are shared, it is not necessarily their own fault and it may be that the professor has not explained things clearly. This makes them feel better and less apt to lose confidence in their ability to do the course. It is often a very different story for the isolated distance learner who may feel personally inadequate after a similar experience at a distance. With no one with who to share one's insecurities readily available, too many of such students lose confidence, blame themselves and drop out. This was such a common phenomenon in the early days of Athabasca that we had a term for such students – we called them “non-starts” because they would drop the course before really giving it a chance. Few would claim a refund, because they were too embarrassed to admit that they didn't feel up to the course.

That is why student support, however delivered, is such a crucial variable in the performance of a distance learning operation.

Even a high profile Contact North student as Gisèle Chrétien really appreciated the encouragement and support she received from the staff.

Your link to the professors was limited, you didn't meet them face-to-face, the students were scattered all over Northern Ontario and Toronto. It was amazing because Contact North became my link, part of my family. People got to know you fairly well, they watched and encouraged your progress. They were aware of what was going on in your life and helped celebrate your achievements. That was very important in the end. These were the technologists – they weren't educators, they had no student services experience but they were a great people to help you through and celebrate your success with you. Théo de Noel de Tilly is a key example. They were always there to help with connections and any problems.

In no way should student support be confused with spoon feeding the student. On the contrary, helping the individual to develop as independent learner who takes full responsibility for his or her learning is one of its primary objectives. This lesson has been understood from the start at Contact North.

Centre coordinators are instructed to do everything possible to connect the student to the institution but that it is always the student's responsibility to take responsibility for his or her own learning. This is both a matter of philosophy and also acknowledgement of the reality that Contact North has no authority over how an institution interacts with or responds to a student. To quote Debby Sefton:

We don't allow our centre coordinators to speak to the institutions on behalf of the students, but we will facilitate students who haven't had any previous dealings with the institution to develop their relationship with it until they are able to do it on their own. We provide the information but the goal is to get them to have a relationship with the institution – we can't do that for them. And the institutions want the relationship with the student. We tell our centre coordinators that the students who are paying \$6000 tuition will get more response from the institution than if a centre coordinator whines to the institution.

## 5. PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

There were good reasons for the first decision to divide Contact North into East and West divisions but, as the organization matured, it became obvious to everyone that a single CEO model was needed to ensure efficiency, coordination and accountability. By 1995, when there was a major study of Contact North, the tensions between the regions were so evident that the two directors, Gérard Lafrenière and Sam Shaw, advocated a single directorship, even though that was in neither of their personal interests.

The move to a single director was accompanied by the transfer of full responsibility and authority for finances and human resources from Confederation College to Contact North. The college's services had served Contact North well at the outset, but it was clearly time for it to take full control of all of its operations. For example, if its leadership was dissatisfied with Confederation's personnel policies or union rules or what kind of computer support was provided, it had very little power to make changes unless the college agreed fully with the analysis.

The former management committee was turned into a board with institutional presidents as the predominant members. While this helped the Board to focus on the bigger picture and longer term planning issues, according to Gisèle Chrétien, it also rendered it more competitive than the previous governance model. It was thus important to have some members closer to the on-the-ground operation to ensure a balanced approach to institutional governance.

Gwen Wojda has witnessed the dangers of having directors who are either too close to the details or too far removed from the learners.

When we made the transition from the management committee into the Board, it was a big development because it took us "out of the kitchen". On the other hand, when we morphed into a board, some of the members were three or four steps removed from the learners and so I keep grounding myself in what are the needs of the learners in the communities. You need a balanced board that is out of the kitchen and on the ground at the same time. In some cases, there are different perspectives on the board and that's when a board is effective.

She also stresses the importance of everyone understanding that it is always a work in progress.

It's easy to fall into a state of inertia but you really cannot afford to coast. The external environment is constantly pushing. You need to build change into your structure, in your strategic planning, your milestones, and always to have the involvement of the stakeholders. Instead of just coming in and saying, this is what we have for you, use it, you have to recognize the changing environment and having people feel that they can contribute and have a stake in the result. We have to constantly recognize that these are our taxpayer dollars, these are our kids, our communities and we want them to flourish."

## 6. ENSURING COMMUNITY BUY-IN AND OWNERSHIP

From the beginning, the Ministry made it clear that no monies were to be spent on rental facilities in the northern communities. While this may have been driven initially by financial constraints, it was absolutely critical to community buy-in and remains a central policy at Contact North to this day. This requirement was part of the earliest documentation coming out of the Ministry and matched the orientations of people like Marian Croft and previous practice in a number of similar ventures across Canada, including at Confederation College and the tele-medicine network that Judy Roberts ran in Newfoundland.

The policy has been challenged many times, including very recently. Debby Sefton, who is now responsible for the centres in the Northwest region, has had to deal with direct challenges in a number of communities, especially given a provincial government decree that school boards now have to charge for space used in their schools by other community groups. As a result, a couple of centres were lost and others threatened. To retain the centres, Contact North has to make community leaders realize that it cannot renege on the 'no rent' policy for two reasons:

- a) paying rent in one community would quickly mean paying rent in them all – even at \$100 a month, that would require over \$100,000 in additional funds, money that would not thus be available for course development or delivery or student support;
- b) contributing learning space is one of the most important ways a community can demonstrate real commitment to Contact North and this would be lost if the facilities were being formally rented.

Terry Anderson also stresses the importance of such community buy-in:

We started out with the idea that it was about the institutions, but the more I got into it, the more I realized that it was the community drive and the will and the politics that really decided which communities adopted and took advantage of the opportunities.”

While contentious in some communities, the policy was readily accepted in others. In many cases, the various groups (Francophones, Anglophones, Catholics, Protestants, and First Nations) already had an informal bartering system in place. If the last project had been located in the Catholic school, the next would be taken on by the Protestant school.

In the end, Contact North officials had to be very firm on the policy and follow it through – if you don't pay, you lose the service – and this has worked in the vast majority of cases throughout Northern Ontario.

## 7. THE QUALITY OF THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

In these days of institutional accountability, there is a lot of concern about the quality of the individual student's experience. For remote northern communities, however, the programs and courses delivered via Contact North have long been the only option for many students. The early efforts with teleconferencing faced many technological glitches, but they were much better than what had been there before.

Every briefing I've ever done, I emphasize that this is not alternative, this is not an add-on, and this is all they have. This is it. I think the students put up with a lot of problems and even bad teaching because they can't go down the street somewhere else. (Barbara MacPherson)

What struck me about Contact North was the ability to replicate the traditional classroom by allowing students to interact with each other and with the faculty member. Teleconferencing wasn't perfect but it was better than what was there before. Because there was more money to cover line costs that hadn't been there before, it changed the cost equation for the institutions. Beyond the increased availability of courses, it brought more connectivity to students. (Bill Summers)

An important component of ensuring academic quality is to pay close attention to the needs and concerns of the learners themselves. Gwen Wojda underlines the importance of learner feedback, and is particularly appreciative of a recent decision at Contact North to provide monthly, rather than quarterly, reports on identified program and support needs.

I have valued the information we get from the centres that shows where the interests are. Of course, we have not always been able to respond to learners' demands for programming. But it is wonderful to have that information flowing into the institutions – it means that we need to continue with distance education and we're always knocking on the academics' doors to see if the timing is right. It has been helpful to see the trends – business courses, social work, are always there, but environmental courses are more in demand, for example. We don't otherwise have those eyes and ears out there so it is an important service. Consumers want just-in-time delivery – the days of long term planning are long gone. Students are used to going online and getting what they want.

## 8. THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES

The only significant population growth area in Northern Ontario is in First Nations communities. Serving their educational needs also poses one of the biggest challenges for Contact North, especially in terms of the younger learners. The first 25 years of Contact North have involved significant efforts to find the right approach for First Nations education in remote communities.

Barbara MacPherson suggests that, while there are 23 remote Contact North centres in First Nations communities, the gaps have not been addressed as well as all had hoped and that there is much to be done. She cites the whole issue of control as a key challenge for Contact North, given the increasing desire of First Nations leaders to govern their own affairs. Terry Anderson reinforces this concern, noting that in the early days of places like the Sioux Lookout region, local groups had a kind of love-hate relationship with Contact North, appreciating the efforts, but resenting the competition. An ongoing challenge in the more remote communities is finding appropriately qualified staff to run the local centre. Debby Sefton stresses the importance of recruiting local First Nations leaders, finding one or two champions to mobilize and energize the community.

Perhaps the biggest difference for First Nations communities is the difference in learning style. Their traditions emphasize the community, group work, learning together and the key role of elders. Even though more and more First Nations communities have improved access to technology, it must be tied into community learning to be effective – the technology will have to adapt to the community as much as the community will have to adapt to the technology.

## 9. TECHNOLOGY'S THE ANSWER – BUT WHAT IS THE QUESTION?<sup>9</sup>

The spectacular developments in communications technologies over the past 25 years have greatly facilitated Contact North's operations. While there are still significant problems of access to sufficient bandwidth, today's technological problems pale in comparison with earlier days of undependable phone lines, weak modems, and Icon computers that needed daily attention from technicians to work.

Gérard Lafrenière remembers all of the challenges of setting up teleconferencing at a time when too many of the telephone companies had "horse and buggy" technology. Bell was chosen for no other reason than it was the only provider that could offer the necessary megabits – the decision was politically difficult but practically necessary.

There were also fights over how many teleconferencing units each centre received, with many demanding more than Contact North could provide.

There was a lot of discussion and much fighting across the communities (Kirkland Lake vs. Timmins, Sault vs. Parry Sound, etc.). The directors were put in the middle of this maelstrom and Contact North was blamed.

Contact North had no money for scotch – I had the feeling that they were even blaming me for that! (Gérard Lafrenière)

On the other hand, Terry Anderson remembers when Contact North was somewhat of a leader in technology, notably in its use of CoSy, an early computer conferencing system developed at the University of Guelph:

It was just at the time of the start of the Internet so that one of the real successes was that we were able to build a little network of the centre coordinators and give them access to each other and to a variety of resources through a computer conferencing network. We bought a CoSy licence and it was a way to run a distributed organization with ongoing discussions which had never been possible before asynchronously... There had always been opportunities via Waterloo or others by correspondence but our approach was perceived as being quite high tech. It's funny because it was just audio speaker phones, basically, but people had high expectations, almost expecting a human to come jumping out of the audio speaker! And people could come into the access centres and go online and get e-mail so we were right on the cusp of that. We hired early adopters as well and that contributed to the excitement.

Rory McGreal remembers the CoSy system as a precursor to today's social networking. Debby Sefton waxes nostalgic about it:

We talk today about how we are all connected but in those days, we had the old CoSy conferencing system...The first thing you did in the morning was grab your coffee and sign on to CoSy – the centre coordinators did all their work in the evening and they would leave messages on the system. You would do all your replying – they even had a “coffee room” site with all the chit chat (e.g. “someone had a baby”) – so it was a very early use of social networking. It was like a blackboard posting – when you posted, everyone got to read it. For the time, it was pretty progressive.

For most of its 25 years, however, the strength of Contact North has been on the softer side of the ledger, not its leadership in technology. Barbara MacPherson, for one, sees this as an opportunity missed:

One of their objectives was to promote innovation in technology for sharing globally, and that is one thing I think they have not really done. It should be a resource that is there because a university or college needs it.

Debra Betty would also like to see more leadership from Contact North and stronger support from the Ministry for technological leadership. She looks at the effectiveness of developing a common learning platform like Blackboard and Open Source across institutions as a key step forward in encouraging partnerships. She has seen it work in Newfoundland where Memorial University works with its Ministry and wonders why it doesn't happen in Ontario.

Denis Mayer strongly supports more leadership from Contact North in keeping institutions abreast of changes in learning technologies. Rather than relying on suppliers to persuade one to use the latest gadgets, he favours a rigorous program of field testing so that institutions can make their own decisions, but with professional, non-partisan advice from Contact North.

Of course, you're moving into muddy waters because you're going to favour, or not, certain developers and certain providers. But set yourself up to say that you are prepared to field test them and then respond to learner inquiries.

Gwen Wojda agrees, noting the frustrations that Lakehead experienced during times when Contact North lagged behind in technological applications and the university decided to go ahead with its own distance initiatives such as videoconferencing over dial-up lines.

There's always been, and always will be, a need to be up-to-date on new technologies and what's emerging, what's on the cutting edge, what's going to be there so we can plan ahead and set up the curriculum to take advantage of it.

Bill Summers agrees with the need for better information for colleges and universities about new learning technologies and their effectiveness, and noted that this information is needed both for courses delivered on campus and at a distance:

One of the challenges for the post-secondary education and training sector is to go just beyond improving access to those who live in remote communities or have work and family pressures – it is also to improve online learning on the campuses. Is this part of the future for Contact North or not, in terms of being a leader in Ontario, working with the institutions in bringing online into the classroom? It probably should be.

The role of the centre for technological developments notwithstanding, Contact North has been extremely effective, even with the most basic of technologies. Debby Sefton puts it very well:

People are people and we have to not lose sight of them with the technology. Technology can assist, but it is not the technology that really matters – it's who's on the end of that technology, who is working with the students. Some instructors play a huge role...a good instructor in the classroom is a good instructor through technology.

## 10. SYNCHRONOUS AND ASYNCHRONOUS LEARNING

Most of Contact North's success has been built on synchronous learning – students gathering together on at the same time to participate in a class, either face-to-face or virtually via whatever technology was available – audio, video or web conferencing. Even where students were working independently in their own time (asynchronously) via correspondence or, more recently, online learning, their efforts have usually been supported by one or more forms of synchronous networking.

An important component of the first ventures was the provision of an instructional designer for each of the Eastern and Western regions. Combined with the funds for program and course development, this gave Contact North additional clout in persuading the institutions to respond to community needs and in assisting them to design courses that would have higher completion rates in the relatively unfamiliar world of distance education. Terry Anderson puts it in perspective.

The ongoing dilemma of distance education was whether you spent a lot of money on content like the United Kingdom Open University with the big course packages or you had a model of just interaction with an instructor winging it as it went along. We were very early in the synchronous delivery models so it was quite possible just to do your lecture on an audioconference. There was always that tension between the institutions that really embraced the instructional development model and others which just hired the instructor and told him to deliver it this way instead of in a classroom.

There are those who argue that more and more learning will be asynchronous as communication technologies continue to develop and as students become increasingly familiar with using them. However, much of Contact North's success has been the result of delivery models that emphasize community and group learning in a synchronous mode. Starting with audio teleconferencing and moving to more sophisticated forms of web and video conferencing, the practice of assembling groups of learners at specified times has been a very successful one. While individual students interact with the professor through whatever technological approach is used, they also interact with each other, both formally (as in teleconferenced course discussions) or informally (over coffee before and after class). Just having a place to meet has many benefits for learners living in a relatively isolated community, even if they are not taking the same course.

While more and more distance education is delivered asynchronously, given the incredible developments in communications technologies and the modern propensity for social networking, most commentators believe there will always be a strong role for synchronous approaches. As David Perron observes, some people just need to know they must be at the centre at a certain time and believes that will not change with the new generation of learners. He suggests that even today's young people, who have a completely different approach to learning through their facility with handheld devices, will still need the motivation of synchronous delivery in many cases.

Terry Anderson points out how synchronous delivery is too often confounded with face-to-face learning. Given today's technologies, individuals in independent locations can all be easily linked for group sessions. He did his PhD research on community building in an audioconference environment, observing from the back of many classes in community centres what was going on, especially the chatter that went on "over" the professor – over 50% of this "side talk" was actually on topic as students shared their own experiences of learning. It helped him to appreciate how much students learn from each other and persuaded him of the importance of motivation and pacing. To this day, using much more sophisticated technologies at Athabasca University, he builds a few synchronous sessions into his asynchronous courses to help pace the students and to increase their social interaction. He is most comfortable with this blended approach to learning.

Now responsible for Contact North's Northwest centres, Debby Sefton has seen no decrease in demand for access to community centre workstations even though more and more students can work at home with their e-learning platforms. She finds that many of the students who study almost completely on their own from a home base tend to procrastinate and leave too much to the last two weeks of a course. Contact North surveys regularly quote students as saying that they might have quit had it not been for the centre coordinator.

They might have failed their first test or they missed a deadline or they were struggling and the centre coordinator would encourage them, say that everyone faces such challenges but they get through. Sometimes just that little word of encouragement can make all the difference to a student's success.

Of courses, individual learners have their own preferred learning styles. The most highly self-motivated love the independence and flexibility of asynchronous learning which allows them to proceed in their own way and according to their own timetable. Others much prefer regular social interaction, either face-to-face or through audio, video or web conferencing, and need the discipline of a formal timetable to succeed.

Debby Sefton cites another rather more unusual benefit to learning through Contact North in a more remote community. A student in Kenora shared her story, from her own perspective, with the local centre coordinator. Having completed her first three years of university education by distance education, she decided she would complete her final year on campus to enjoy that experience. After a couple of months, she went back home to Kenora, disillusioned with her experience. She felt she had more access to her instructor at a distance from Kenora than being on campus: "When I'm on campus, I'm just a number. There can be 200 students in the class and nobody paying any attention. When

I'm the distance student in Kenora, I can talk to the professor, we have discussions online, and everyone gets to say something..." She might also have enjoyed interacting with fellow adult students rather than the younger students she encountered on the university campus. It doesn't mean it's the answer for everyone, but it meets the needs of many.

Jack Playford also remembers one young man who was following a Confederation College program in Dryden because his father wouldn't let him go to the campus in Thunder Bay "to have a good time at his expense" at least until he proved that he was succeeding academically. In this sense, Contact North helped both the family finances and the son's motivation at the same time.

One can also overestimate the spread of technologies in the North. Some areas still lack broadband access and the more remote communities still rely on inconsistent dial-up services. As well, students living in overcrowded homes may not find them conducive to learning as a relatively quiet haven of the access centre. A lot of parents, especially women, may prefer to come to the access centre because, even with a computer and high-speed Internet at home, they have to compete for computer time or they have very young children and want to get away for their coursework. And it should be noted that 75% of students using Contact North's services are women!

Long-time Laurentian University expert in distance education and community development, Denis Mayer is fascinated by how the access centres have evolved and believes that they will continue to develop new ways of learning. He sees a blending of global networking with local places to learn and especially the benefits for young people of interacting with more experienced adults whom they already know. It may be an ideal combination of local and global.

He worries that, with the online infrastructure so home based now, there may be perceptions that an asynchronous course has less value if you can access it at home. In response, he wonders if there is a role for Contact North, maybe even provincially, to combine home-based learning with a community learning environment. This may be another form of the blended approach taken by Terry Anderson.

Gwen Wojda has sometimes had concerns in the past that Contact North was living too much in the past, too reliant on synchronous learning and older technologies.

Yes, having synchronous learning at the outset was important but, increasingly, it is going asynchronous. The kids in junior kindergarten are using the new technologies, the teaching strategies are different and there's more active and independent learning. At Lakehead, we've really embraced the blended approach – there are times when it is really important to have everyone together, whether its videoconference, audioconference or streaming. But there are other times that the asynchronous approach really works – because different learners have different styles.

Notwithstanding the advances in technology, there are key Contact North roles that will persist long into the future – catering to the different needs of different learners and the appropriate learning technologies, getting advice or access to materials, recruiting students to colleges and universities and helping to demystify them. Most importantly, there will always be many learners who need the impetus and support offered at

an access centre and by tutors enforcing deadlines. As Jack Playford put it: “Doing it at home is one thing, being at home and getting it done is another. Some people need to go somewhere (or even need to be made to go somewhere)”.

## 11. THE VALUE OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

There has never really been any systematic effort to collect data on the impact of Contact North. Anecdotally, there are lots of wonderful stories but knowledge of what has happened would have been tremendously enhanced by more formal and persistent data gathering. While it is understandable that the focus at the beginning was on getting the organization up and working with the institutions to develop more programs and courses, there have been many occasions since then when those promoting Contact North to government or to the public would have been better served had they had credible institutional data to back up their assertion.

Jack Playford, in particular, pushed hard for this during his time on the Board and regrets that he was not more persuasive:

One of the things the Americans do very well is track – they have all kinds of statistics to assess their performance. I think that is something that we didn’t do very well at Contact North – using data to show the impacts of background, age, gender and other factors in adult education....If nothing else comes out of this review except a commitment to do something about that over the next 5-10 years, that would be great. It should not be onerous with the new technologies. Everything is anecdotal, but you need names and real people and we didn’t do that very well. We lacked the money, the energy and the dedicated staff to address this issue.

Apart from stretched resources, there was another reason why this was never really pursued. Contact North was the vehicle serving the students, but the enrolments belonged to the institutions and they were unwilling to share student numbers, which would be important to tracking an individual’s movement through the system.

We didn’t collect data because the institutions wanted to do that. It was always the potential tension – we wanted to collect the data ourselves but they were possessive about “their” students. (Judy Roberts)

This might be even more of a concern today, given the importance attached to privacy considerations. Nevertheless, credible data has a wide variety of applications, especially in long-term strategic planning, and Contact North would still benefit from developing more formal institutional research.

<sup>1</sup>Throughout the paper, quotations attributed to individuals came from personal interviews from each. The list of interviewees, their roles and supporting information is contained in Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup>Laurentian also flew professors into remote communities. Marian Croft remembers the occasion when a professor who went to Moose Factory got stuck there for two weeks because the ice went out, but he couldn't get a canoe across and it was too misty to fly – his bar bill was apparently bigger than his hotel bill!

<sup>3</sup>More details on course registrations can be found on the Contact North | Contact Nord website ([www.contactnorth.ca](http://www.contactnorth.ca)).

<sup>4</sup>It is appropriate here to recognize the special role played by the Collège de Hearst, known for years locally as the Université de Hearst, which has been led for well over 30 years by the remarkable Raymond Tremblay who stepped down from his post as recteur on July 1, 2011.

<sup>5</sup>For example, Collège Boréal was chosen as one of seven “best practice” institutions for the American Productivity and Quality Centre’s 1995 benchmarking exercise. It has taken an increasingly innovative and integrative approach to the application of technologies to learning. See Chantal Pollock et. al., “The Evolution of Faculty Instructional Development in the Use of Technology at Collège Boréal, Ontario” in Rhona M. Epper and A.W. (Tony) Bates, *Teaching Faculty How to Use Technology: Best Practice from Leading Institutions*. 2001. Westport, CT: American Council on Education, Oryx Press, 59-78.

<sup>6</sup>Harold Wynne noted this as an important issue in the success of the Peace River Consortium he directed in Alberta in the 1980s.

<sup>7</sup>This concern was repeated with the establishment of ORION, the high speed fibre cable network for the province. Its first task was to build the electronic “pipeline” to link and serve all communities, central and remote, but its second and bigger challenge was to persuade people to make full use of the facility.

<sup>8</sup>Ironically, it was a women’s studies professor in Australia who, when forced to teach one of her courses by correspondence from China one year, found that the quality and introspection of the work done by students in their learning journals was more liberated without her direct presence. See Jackie Cook, “The Liberation of Distance Teaching Women’s Studies from China” in Terry Evans and Daryl Nation, *Critical Reflections on Distance Education*. London: The Falmer Press, 1989, 23-38.

<sup>9</sup>I used this title in a musical revue written for the International Council for Distance Education conference in Vancouver in 1982 and in several publications since. The same title was later used by Sir John Daniel in a publication for Contact North.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, Asha Kanwar (COL) and Stamenka Uvalic-Trumbic (UNESCO), eds., Neil Butcher (author). *A Basic Guide to Open Educational Resources (OER)*. July 2011, a new book available from the Commonwealth of Learning website ([www.col.org](http://www.col.org)).

<sup>11</sup>In this regard, Contact North has some interesting information on its website about similar networks in Australia that are directly relevant to the current issues in Ontario.

## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW LIST

The following generously consented to interviews. All were conducted in English with the exception of the one with Gérard Lafrenière which was in French.

INTERVIEWEE	PLACE	DATE
Terry Anderson	Edmonton	February 1, 2011
Ralph Benson	By telephone	March 28, 2011
Debra Betty	Sudbury	November 15, 2010
Gisèle Chrétien	Sudbury	March 23, 2011
Marian Croft	Sudbury	March 23, 2011
John Daniel	Vancouver	January 21, 2011
Jean Desgagné	By telephone	March 30, 2011
Arlene Evans	By telephone	March 31, 2011
Reg Jones	Thunder Bay	January 26, 2011
Gérard Lafrenière	Sudbury	November 15, 2010
Barbara MacPherson	Toronto	November 19, 2010
Denis Mayer	Sudbury	November 16, 2010
Rory McGreal	Edmonton	February 1, 2011
Bernadine O'Brien	By telephone	March 28, 2011
David Perron	Thunder Bay	January 26, 2011
Jack Playford	Thunder Bay	January 25, 2011
Judy Roberts	Toronto	November 19, 2010
Debby Sefton	Thunder Bay	January 25, 2011
Bill Summers	Toronto	November 16, 2010
Gwen Wojda	Thunder Bay	January 25, 2011
Harold Wynne	By telephone	December 2, 2010

**Terry Anderson** was the first director of the Northwest Region in Thunder Bay. He is now Canada Research Chair in Distance Education at Athabasca University.

**Ralph Benson** was Assistant Deputy Minister in the Ministry of Colleges and Universities when Contact North was launched in 1986. Retired from the Ministry, he is now a consultant in Toronto.

**Debra Betty**, Vice-President, Program Development, in the Sudbury office of Contact North, has worked for the network since its inception.

**Gisèle Chrétien** is a former president of Collège Boréal (1998-2006) who now chairs TFO (Télé-Française d'Ontario). She lives near Sudbury.

**Marian Croft** was Director of Continuing Education at Laurentian University at the time of Contact North's establishment. She was subsequently Executive Director of University Advancement and is now retired and living in Sudbury.

**John Daniel** was president of Laurentian University when Contact North was founded. A former vice-chancellor of the UK Open University, he is now president of the Commonwealth of Learning in Vancouver.

**Jean Desgagné** has been Centre Coordinator of the Wawa office of Contact North for more than 20 years.

**Arlene Evans** has been Centre Coordinator for the Ignace office of Contact North for almost all of her 16 years there.

**Reg Jones** was Vice-President, Administration at Confederation College. He is retired and living in Thunder Bay.

**Gérard Lafrenière** succeeded Judy Roberts as Director of the Northeast Region. He had previously been a professor in the School of Commerce at Laurentian University and Director of Continuing Education. He is retired and living in Sudbury.

**Barbara MacPherson** is on a phased retirement as a Senior Policy Adviser in the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (formerly Colleges and Universities) where she has worked for more than 20 years.

**Denis Mayer** came to Laurentian University in 1988 as Associate Director of Continuing Education and is now its Associate Vice-President, Student Affairs. He has been actively involved with Contact North for over 20 years.

**Rory McGreal** was Secondary School Liaison Supervisor in the Sudbury Office of Contact North from 1990-1993. He is now Associate Vice-President Research at Athabasca University and was very recently appointed UNESCO Chair in Open Educational Resources.

**Bernadine O'Brien**, the former Centre Coordinator for the Geraldton office of Contact North, is now Coordinator, Recruitment & Student Services, Northwest Region. She has worked for the network for about 20 years.

**David Perron** is Scheduling Officer for Contact North in Thunder Bay. He has worked for the network for 24 years.

**Jack Playford**, a former Director of Adult, Continuing and Alternative Education for the Lakehead School Board, is a past Chair of the Board of Contact North. He is retired and living in Thunder Bay.

**Judy Roberts** was the first Director of the Northeast Region of Contact North in her native Sudbury. She is president of her own consulting company in Toronto, with extensive experience and expertise in educational technology, distance education and open learning, and telemedicine.

**Debby Sefton**, Vice-President, Recruitment & Student Services, responsible for the northwestern hub of the network, has worked for Contact North in the Thunder Bay office for more than 20 years.

**Bill Summers** was Special Assistant to ADM Ralph Benson in the Ministry of Colleges and Universities during the genesis of Contact North. He is now Vice-President, Research and Policy for Colleges Ontario in Toronto.

**Gwen Wojda** is Director of Continuing Education and Distributed Learning at Lakehead University. She has represented Lakehead on the Board of Contact North for many years.

**Harold Wynne** is the former Director of the Peace River Educational Consortium in Alberta. He is now a consultant living near Edmonton.