



**MURRAY ANGUS and
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The New “Three R’s”

An award-winning college program for Inuit youth shows the benefits of a small learning environment and culturally-relevant curriculum

The instructor draws a curved line on the flipchart in front of 22 newly-arrived Inuit students.

“Here’s your final exam,” he declares. “Your job eight months from now will be to explain what it means!”



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Eight months later, these same students will write 30, 40, 50 or more pages — freehand and without any notes — about what this line means.

What they'll be writing about is something they've never had a chance to learn before: their own story.

Learning this story — *their own story* — will change their outlook on the world and their attitudes about themselves forever.

* * *

Welcome to the world of Nunavut Sivuniksavut (NS). For 26 years, this unique Ottawa-based college program has been achieving remarkable success, helping Inuit youth make the transition from high school into the workforce and/or further post-secondary education.

While it enjoys universal praise among northerners, and has gained national recognition for its innovations and success, the NS program remains largely unknown in educational circles in the South. Yet its success offers valuable lessons for educators in a variety of settings across the South, especially in those programs that serve Aboriginal youth, and/or youth relocating from isolated communities into larger urban centres to further their education.

Overview of program

ORIGINS

The NS program began at a time when Inuit were negotiating their land claims in what was then the Northwest Territories. These negotiations spanned almost two decades prior to the signing of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement (NLCA) in 1993. It was this agreement which also committed the government to creating the Nunavut territory in 1999.

In the midst of these decade-long negotiations the Inuit leadership realized there would be a need for young people to be trained so they could assist with the negotiations and then later with the settlement's implementation. Thus was born the Nunavut Sivuniksavut training program in 1985. In its early years, it was a project of the Tunngavik Federation of Nunavut (TFN), the organization that was negotiating the land claims agreement on behalf of the Inuit of Nunavut; in 1999, it became

an independent non-profit educational organization, with its own Board of Directors (most of whom are now alumni).

The program obtained post-secondary accreditation initially through Confederation College in Thunder Bay. Since 1989, it has been affiliated with Algonquin College in Ottawa, through an innovative arrangement that allows NS to remain independent while at the same time providing for formal accreditation. Graduates of the program receive Algonquin College certificates, and NS staff are college employees.

EVOLUTION

The program began in 1985 with two instructors and an enrollment of 10 students. Intake has gradually increased up to the present-day 22 in the 1st Year program, along with seven to nine in a 2nd Year program. Although many more students apply than are accepted (applications range from 45-60 each year), financial and physical space limitations have dictated enrolment levels. Staff has increased to four full-time instructors, one full-time administrator, and several part-time lecturers and support workers.

For the first nine years, there were no “courses” in the conventional sense; rather, the two instructors worked with the students each year in a “popular education” mode to explore an ever-widening array of historical and political materials relating to Inuit history, politics, and land claims. In guiding students through this process and responding to their questions it became clear that what students were seeking was an understanding of “why things were the way they were” in their communities. They wanted to know “their story,” and how things in their world in the north had come to be.

In 1994, the content was packaged into a series of courses that, taken together, capture central elements of the Inuit story from pre-contact times up until the present. It is this “organic, from the ground up” design and pedagogical approach which underlies the success of the program.

In 2003, a 2nd Year program was introduced to meet the needs of 1st Year graduates who wanted to continue on with further post-secondary, but who lacked the confidence or skills to tackle regular college or university on their own. Enrolment for the 2nd Year program has ranged from five to nine students each year.

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PROFILE OF STUDENTS

In the early years of the program, the students were typically in their mid 20s, with very few having completed Grade 12. Most took the program to enhance their employability, at a time when there were very few jobs available in the north. This profile has changed considerably: the majority of students are now in their late teens, having just graduated from Grade 12 in their home communities. Most view NS as a “next step” in their education.

FUNDING

The NS program is funded by five regular sources, including: Indian & Northern Affairs Canada (Nunavut region), three Inuit economic development and training organizations that administer federal training dollars, and the Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI), the organization that administers the land claims agreement on behalf of the roughly 27,000 Inuit beneficiaries. With the exception of NTI, this funding has to be applied for each year. The program’s current (2011) annual operating budget is approximately \$1M.

Pedagogical approach

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At its core, the program is founded upon the desire to help the students learn about the world they’re stepping into as young adults (a.k.a. Nunavut), how it came to be, and their own place in it. This means learning their own collective story, which in turn involves learning history, land claims and politics from the point of view of the *Inuit* experience.

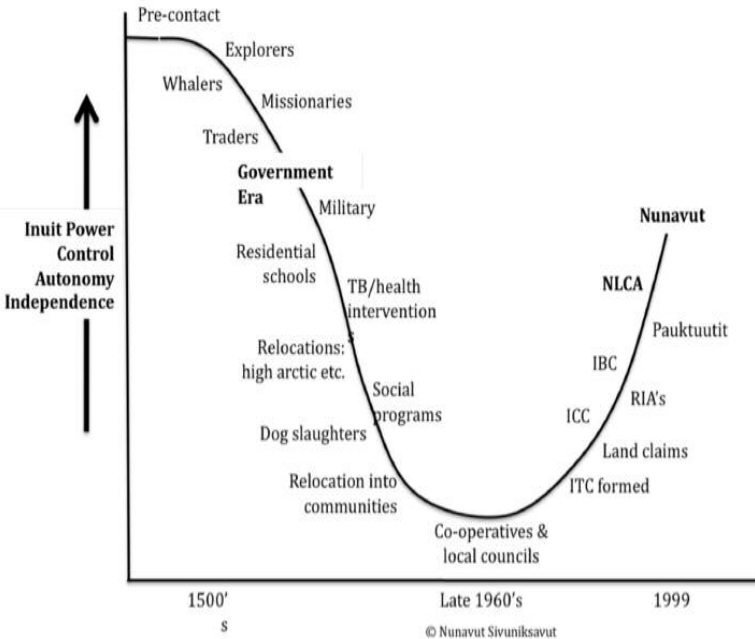
Students learn the details of how Inuit gradually lost control of their lives as successive waves of Europeans came into the north in pursuit of their own economic, military, or colonial interests. By the 1960’s, government had relocated them off the land and into permanent communities and had effectively taken control of most aspects of northern society.

Beginning in 1970, however, Inuit began to push back against those forces that had marginalized them in their own land. The first generation of Inuit to attend schools in the 50’s and 60’s were at the forefront of this political movement. During the 1970s they established a myriad of Inuit organizations to deal

with issues such as land rights, culture and language preservation, broadcasting, housing, land and resource development, and the constitution. The gains that Inuit made within the span of a single generation constitutes one of the most impressive stories in Canadian political history; a movement which has been characterized as Canada's other "Quiet Revolution".

This focus on the loss and regaining of control, autonomy and independence is the unifying theme that is central to all NS course material and pedagogy. This story can be represented visually by the following graphic:

INUIT HISTORY POWER CURVE



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Jena Merkosak, Caitlin Pangon, Becky Okatsiak, Aviaq Johnston, Terry Noah and Danny Ishulutak in front of a billboard representing their school (photo by Myna Kigutak).

A wealth of written, audio and visual materials have been assembled over the years supporting this objective. The affirmation of the Inuit experience is also reinforced by the regular participation of Inuit leaders, past and present, who visit the school and speak first-hand about the challenges — political and personal — that were faced in the quest to achieve Nunavut.

Another key goal of the program is to help students reflect on the interplay between past and present political, economic and cultural forces and their own lives: “How have they experienced the various outside forces that have influenced Inuit society? How have they responded? These are questions of ongoing relevance to their studies.

Courses

In the 1st Year, instructors currently deliver a combination of Inuit-specific content courses (Land Claims, Inuit History, Contemporary Issues, and Inuit-Government Relations) along with skill development courses (English, Inuktitut, Inuit Music, and Computers).

Students in the 2nd Year take a combination of Inuit-specific courses at NS (some of which are delivered by Carleton University) as well as regular university or college courses in Ottawa. Courses in the 2nd Year include: Political Science, Nunavut Public Administration, Circumpolar Peoples, Independent Research, and Nunavut Land Claims Implementation. Students are also able to take additional courses of their own choosing at either college or university, to explore an area of potential interest.

Another significant development since 1999 has been the introduction of cultural knowledge and skills into the curriculum. Students now take courses in Inuktitut language and Traditional Inuit Music. They also develop their cultural performing skills, learning drum making, drum dancing, sewing, traditional *ay ay ay* singing, and throat singing. These skills are taught by Inuit instructors, with the help of Elders who are brought down from Nunavut to lead special cultural retreats each term.

The Inuit world is not commonly known or understood in southern Canada, and the understandings the students acquire in their course work, along with their cultural performing skills provides them with tools to participate in valuable educational

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outreach. NS programming also involves regular Inuit cultural presentations at local schools and institutions. As well, students are often called on to perform at local festivals, conferences and meetings.

Organizational design

The NS program operates like a one-room schoolhouse, albeit with a few additional rooms attached. Students are part of a cohort from the first day of the program until the end, and stay together as a group for most classes. The spaces that the program has occupied since its creation have all been small and intimate, which has facilitated close interaction between staff and students, a feature critical to the success of the program. Staff play a multitude of roles in the students' lives: first and foremost as instructors, but also as counselors, mentors, guides, and supporters on the full range of student needs, be they personal, social, or academic. Staff are available 24/7 to assist students, as they might need.

The school also remains open for the students' use after hours; students assume responsibility for taking care of the facilities and ensuring proper security. It becomes their home away from home throughout the year.

Instructional approach

The NS program represents a unique model of delivery that has been developed outside of the traditional constraints associated with post-secondary institutions. Its pedagogical approach is not based on any preconceived theoretical model, but instead is the result of ongoing efforts to respond to the specific needs and interests of the students it has been serving. NS' instructors have enjoyed an exceptional degree of freedom in developing this approach, and the "program" which has resulted from this evolutionary process is now seen as one of the most successful components of Nunavut's post-secondary strategy.

The teaching methodology is also based on a presumption that the students bring with them a wealth of expertise derived from their lived experience in the north; by sharing this knowledge, they are contributing to the overall learning experience of the group. Thus, the learning is not a one-directional process from instructors to students, but rather a collegial one where



Myna Kigutak working with her assignment and a map of Nunavut in the background (photo by Amilia Ipkornerk).

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everyone's knowledge, experience, and perspective is brought to bear on a given topic. It is through this process that students gain confidence that their views about the world in which they live actually *do* count.

Student evaluation

NS is unique in that it has the flexibility to broaden the measures of success and to acknowledge and honour all of the learning that takes place during their eight-month experience, including that which takes place outside of the classroom. Marks alone are not the sole criteria for continuing on to the end of the program or for judging the success of the experience; rather, attitude, effort, and participation are also taken into account. Regular individual and small group meetings are held with students to reflect on how well they are doing in all areas of the experience.

It has often been said that NS students learn as much outside of the classroom as inside it. This is no exaggeration, since living on their own for eight months in Ottawa is a critical part of their overall learning experience. Coping successfully with new chal-



NS students singing traditional Inuit songs (photo by Amilia Ipkornerk).

lenges such as budgeting, homesickness, time management, and countless urban distractions is a challenge for any young person who leaves home for study; for NS students this challenge is magnified by the cross-cultural nature of the experience. And while this pushes many to their limits, in the end it reinforces their image of being able to live as independent young adults. By the end of the year, graduates have generally developed enough confidence from the experience that they realize they can live anywhere they need to in order to pursue their future educational or career goals. Their personal horizons are greatly enhanced as a result of this life-changing experience.

At the end of the program, all students who have completed the year receive a Certificate from Nunavut Sivuniksavut. Those who meet the academic requirements also receive a Certificate from Algonquin College. In general, about three-quarters of those finishing will acquire the academic certificate.

Measures of success

While not an official part of the Government of Nunavut's educational system, NS has become one of the flagship programs serving young Inuit. Its success can be measured in a variety of ways.

RETENTION RATES

While official statistics are hard to come by, anecdotal evidence has long suggested that the success rate for young Inuit coming south on their own for post-secondary education is very low. This can be attributed to a wide range of factors: culture shock, homesickness, the bureaucratic complexity of large educational institutions, the stresses and distractions associated with living in an urban environment, social isolation, inadequate academic skill level, lack of personal as well as academic support, and the irrelevance of curriculum to the north or to Inuit. The completion rate at NS, by comparison, is roughly 80-85% each year.

CONTINUATION ON TO OTHER POST-SECONDARY GOALS

NS is a transition year program, to help Inuit youth make the transition from high school into further post-secondary or immediate entry into the workforce. While most students return to Nunavut immediately following graduation, a significant proportion do end up pursuing further post-secondary studies,

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either at Nunavut Arctic College, or at southern colleges or universities. A 2008 survey of 143 alumni showed that 60 (42%) had attended some college after NS, while 22 (15%) had attended some university.

EMPLOYMENT

Employers in Nunavut are constantly searching for Inuit employees with higher levels of education. Government departments and Inuit organizations alike regularly recruit NS grads because of their knowledge of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, their familiarity with the myriad of Inuit organiza-

tions and government agencies, and for their personal enthusiasm, confidence, maturity and overall “worldliness” in comparison with their peers. The 2008 alumni survey showed 67% to be working full-time, and 6% part-time. The remainder were either

“Understanding where I come from is the most important knowledge I can receive because it defines who we are as Inuit.”

— Kelly K., Kimmirut, NS 2008

attending further school (11%) or out of the paid workforce altogether (8%). Only 8% were unemployed and looking for work.

ATTITUDINAL TRANSFORMATION

While NS students leave the program with greatly enhanced knowledge and skills, and with enhanced awareness of the forces that have shaped, and are shaping, their lives, the most significant impact of the program, by far, is on the students’ attitudes about themselves, both individually, and collectively.

In-depth interviews with incoming students have revealed the depth of insecurity that many youth feel about their identity, both as Inuit and as young individuals in the larger Canadian society. Having to negotiate two cultural worlds at home, they have often found themselves forsaking Inuktitut language and traditional skill development as they follow the school system for its prospect of employment and “better life” at the end. They often doubt their own ability to live up to the image of what it means to be a real Inuk, and find themselves even questioning the value of trying to do so. At the same time, with limited life experience beyond their small communities, they have little confidence in being able to measure up to the image of the successful individual, as por-



Myna Kigutak practicing an Inuit game (photo by Martha Kyak).

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trayed by media and institutions in their community. Caught between these two images, and developing proficiency in neither, they are at risk of becoming marginalized, of becoming spectators in the world being played out before them.

When they leave the program eight months later, however, their feelings about themselves — as individuals, and as Inuit — are dramatically transformed. They leave with a much clearer sense of pride and confidence in their identity as Inuit. Knowing their people's story, they develop great respect for those who have gone before them and pride in being part of a group that has persevered and accomplished so much. The effect of this inspiration is an enthusiasm and a passion for getting involved and for contributing to the future development of their territory. They have an awareness of the “big picture” and their place in the world, they understand their relationship with Canada and the world, and they want to be actors in the future of Nunavut, not spectators.

As well, their life experience in the South gives them a newfound confidence in their personal ability to pursue their educational and career goals as independent young adults. The South has become demystified and they see they have “measured up” and are as capable as anyone else in living in that environment — not that they'd want to. In experiencing the reality of southern urban living they develop an appreciation for the quality of their lives at home. Unless they stay to work in an Inuit organization, or to continue studying, all students eagerly head home at the end of the year.

RECOGNITION AND AWARDS

The NS program has had the strong and consistent backing of Inuit and government leaders in Nunavut since its inception, as evidenced by the funding that has been provided year after year, and in the regular presence of leaders visiting the NS school in Ottawa.

The demand for a program is usually a reflection of how important it is perceived to be. Although NS has enrolled 22 students in each of recent years, the number of applicants has typically been anywhere from 45 to 60, with the biggest influence on applicants often being former students. Every graduate enthusiastically encourages others to attend the program.

The program is popular with parents and educators as well, with several youth from the same family often attending the program in succession. Guidance counselors in Nunavut schools actively promote NS as a successful steppingstone to further post-secondary studies.

In 2006, NS was presented with a national award for “innovation and effectiveness in the area of aboriginal learning” by the Canadian Council of Learning. In 2008, NS was named one of Canada’s “top 10 social change organizations” by the Tides Canada Foundation.

The new “3 R’s”

The knowledge, skill development, and attitudinal transformations that students experience during their eight-month NS program can be attributed to three essential factors:

RELEVANCE

NS students take courses that deal with their own history, culture, land claims agreement, and politics, and they study them from their perspective of their own — a.k.a *Inuit* — experience. Students find it highly engaging because it helps them to understand, not only the world they’re stepping into as young adults, but also how that world came to into being. At a time in life when young people naturally question who they are and their place in the world, it’s the right thing to be studying, at the right time in life. Students leave the program feeling secure in their knowledge of their history, and inspired by what Inuit have accomplished in the last two generations. They leave with a passionate commitment to building the Nunavut dream.

It’s Day 2 of the program. Students are assembled around a long table at their orientation session.

“OK, everyone – here’s your first test!”

Students sit in shocked silence, as they wait to see what the announcement means in real terms.

The instructor hands out a sheet to each student. On it are forty acronyms, each one representing a different Inuit organization or government department in Nunavut, e.g. NTI, QIA, KIA, GN, NWMB, etc. Students are asked to identify as many of the acronyms as they can, to see how much they know coming into the NS program. At the beginning, the class average ranges from 25-30%.

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These acronyms represent the institutional landscape of the world they are stepping into as young adults. To know what the acronyms mean is to know what people are talking about in the media, in public meetings, or internally within organizations and bureaucracies. To know what each organization or department does, moreover, is to know how political power is exercised in Nunavut, and by whom.

The same test is sprung on the students three more times throughout the year. By the time they graduate, the class average has risen to between 65-75%.

RESPONSIVENESS

The organizational structure of NS has provided the instructors with the freedom to deliver the curriculum in a flexible and responsive manner — to take advantage of learning opportunities that are relevant to the program's overall learning objectives, and to adapt programming to the perceived needs of the students at specific times.



Lily Maniapik, Jena Merkosak, Myna Kigutak and Robin Ikkutlitsuk riding on the bus in Hawaii (photo by Amilia Ipkornerk).

Ottawa is a rich environment for studying politics of any kind. In the case of Inuit, there are numerous opportunities each year where students can attend meetings, conferences, and other events where issues relating to Inuit and the north are being discussed or negotiated. Likewise, there are frequent visits by Inuit leaders who are in Ottawa on official business. In all such cases, the immediate plans for the day are easily adjusted to take advantage of these unpredictable learning opportunities. It is these opportunities which provide students with a practical and relevant reflection of the learning that has been taking place in class.

In recognizing the nature of the program as a holistic experience the full range of needs of the students are acknowledged as being important — not just the academic ones. The program is designed to facilitate interactions that allow staff to support students and respond to the full range of their needs.

RELATIONSHIPS

At the heart of the success and functioning of the NS program is the idea of relationship. Students rarely succeed in isolation; in order for successful learning to take place they must be in a positive relationship with those who are facilitating their learning. The NS experience is a stressful one for students in many ways. This stress promotes learning, but can also have a negative impact. In order for students to persevere and find meaning in what they are doing they have to have a level of trust and affinity for those who are guiding them through the process.

Because of the small class size, and the ongoing contact between students and staff, each NS student becomes known as an individual, bringing his/her own experience, skills, and learning styles. NS program is respectful of, and responsive to, their individual needs and challenges. In short, it is able to treat the students as well-rounded individuals, not just as students alone.

“After taking this program I can now say I can do it and I am now an independent adult ready to take on the world and what it has to offer. I have become even prouder to be an Inuk woman with a unique history and I feel fortunate to live in this generation where the Inuit are taking back the control they once had.”

— Salome, Arctic Bay 1997

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The high retention rates that NS has achieved can also be attributed to the fact that students are part of a group from the moment they arrive in the south. They remain together as a single group for all their courses, and they share accommodations in rented apartments throughout the city. Between their classmates and the program's staff, therefore, students always have someone within reach when they need support of any kind. When the going gets tough (as it inevitably does), it's these relationships that can make the difference in keeping students in the program.

Conclusion: designing for success

WHO CAN BENEFIT

The NS experience contains important lessons for those wishing to develop transition-year programs. These lessons may be of particular relevance to educators working with the following student groups:

- students moving from rural and remote communities to larger urban centres;
- Aboriginal students;
- youth making the transition to independent adult living;
- students moving from one cultural milieu to another to pursue their education;
- students who do not yet have the academic qualifications needed to pursue regular post-secondary programs;
- students who belong to groups that have experienced colonization and who are in the process of asserting their rights and reclaiming their power

Design principles

A previously mentioned, the NS program was not based on any preconceived theoretical model; rather, it has been allowed to evolve in response to the perceived and expressed needs of the students. Reflecting on a quarter century of experience has enabled the staff to identify the following design principles that have been instrumental to its success; these are some of the guiding principles that should be considered by others wishing to emulate the program's success:

1. Acknowledge the full range of student needs

The chances of success (measured by completion rates alone) of any transition year will increase to the extent that it is capable of hearing, and responding to, the full range of needs that students have during their time in the program. These needs may be emotional, social, financial and material, as well as academic. Failure to have any one of these needs met is the primary reason why students drop out.

2. Maximize opportunities for relationships

The best way to ensure that the full range of students' needs are being heard is by maximizing the opportunity for relationships among students themselves, and between students and staff. The former provides a system of informal support that helps students cope with the many challenges they face; the latter increases the chances that the institution will be able to hear and respond to students' needs. The NS experience has shown that having students together in a single group pays big dividends in terms of the strength and quality of peer relationships. Identification with the group helps to anchor the students in a time of great instability and stress. Relationships with teachers are also enhanced by the extent to which they share a common work space and have opportunities to interact on a variety of levels; this enables staff to be attentive and responsive to the full range of students' needs (personal, as well as academic).

3. Allow staff sufficient flexibility

The effectiveness of the educational experience will flow from the quality of the working relationship between students and staff. Allowing staff to perform a variety of duties helps to ensure greater continuity in the attention students receive from an institution. This, in turn, increases the institution's ability to respond to the students' needs. To successfully achieve this goal, an institution needs to allow its staff a degree of flexibility in the performance of their duties, requiring a level of trust not typically allowed in an institutional context. Staff, in turn, must be prepared to play a variety of roles.

4. Incorporate relevant curriculum

The NS experience has demonstrated beyond a doubt the impact

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of using content material that is relevant to the students' own collective experience. The affirmation of their cultural identity, historical experience, and their aspirations for the future is a powerful inducement to continued studying for most students.

5. Affirm the students' individual and collective points of view

Allowing students to learn about their own collective story is only one step. The other is to give up all pretence of academic objectivity and reinforce the legitimacy of the students' historical, political and cultural experience, especially as it relates to the goal of greater self-determination.

6. Integrate skill development with content

The most challenging part of any transition program may be the development of the academic skills necessary for entry into a regular post-secondary program. The chances for doing so successfully can be enhanced by integrating the skill development activity with the learning activities that students find most compelling.

7. Broaden the measures of success

Education institutions generally measure success on one level only, i.e., academic performance. As indicated earlier, however, students will bring to a transition or an access program a whole range of needs which have to be addressed if they are to move on successfully to higher academic levels. As long as students are actively engaged in a stimulating and relevant program, important learning will result, regardless of the immediate academic outcome. This learning — in all its dimensions — must be acknowledged and affirmed by the institution.

8. Develop flexible relationships with accredited institutions

NS has the best of both worlds: it has the independence that comes from being incorporated with its own board of directors, and it has standing as an official college program because of its affiliation with Algonquin College in Ottawa. The independence affords staff the freedom to continually evolve the program without being tied down by the endless bureaucratic processes associated with a large institutions; affiliation with a college provides

official accreditation for NS' courses, and thus enables its students to qualify for post-secondary financial assistance from the Government of Nunavut.

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MORLEY HANSON, M.Ed has been the Coordinator of the Nunavut Sivuniksavut program for most of its 27-year history. Originally from Saskatchewan, his career has been dedicated to working with youth in innovative educational settings. While on sabbatical from NS in 2007-2008, he lived in Rwanda and assisted the staff of the Genocide Memorial Centre with the development of curriculum for Rwandan schools pertaining to the 1994 genocide.