Next stop Nunavut for UVic law

Students in the remote new territory of Nunavut will be able to earn law degrees from UVic through a partnership program that’s the first of its kind in Canada. Financial support from the federal department of justice and the Nunavut government has covered the expense of developing the program and UVic’s law dean Jamie Cassels is hoping potential employers of the Nunavut law graduates will provide additional funding to cover the program delivery. The target start date is September, 2001.

“There is nothing like this in Canada, maybe even the world,” says Cassels of the proposal to send UVic law professors to Nunavut’s capital of Iqaluit to instruct a cohort of 10 to 15 Inuit students over a four-year program.

Nunavut’s Premier Paul Okalik is currently the only Inuit lawyer in the territory. The Inuit, representing 85 per cent of the territory’s population, want to increase their presence within Nunavut’s emerging government structure and, since few are in a position to head south to law school, UVic will bring legal education up north.

Cassels estimates it will cost about $30,000 per year for each student. He hopes to offer students the opportunity to receive a salary throughout the year whether they are studying or working. Cassels says about half the student costs will come from northern federal and Nunavut organizations with the remainder being sought from foundations and the private sector.

While admitting that UVic “is as far away as you can get” from Nunavut, Cassels says the territory targeted the university to be its partner. “They know we’re small, student-centred and committed to Aboriginal legal education. They want the credibility and the legitimacy of a law degree from a southern institution and they really wanted UVic to do this.”

The program’s first year will prepare the students for the rigours of law study. Distance education through email and the Internet will be introduced as the program progresses. Cassels feels that using a cohort model (where a group starts and finishes a program together without the introduction of new students each year) will give the students additional support.

UVic law has maintained the Fraser tradition of public service by being heavily involved in the community. The environmental law centre, the only one of its kind in Canada, gives students valuable experience conducting legal research for environmental and citizen groups. It recently launched a website cleanair.ca: A Citizen’s Action Guide to assist citizens trying to make a case for cleaning up their atmosphere. The UVic business law clinic heavily involved in the community. The environmental law centre, the only one of its kind in Canada, gives students valuable experience conducting legal research for environmental and citizen groups. It recently launched a website cleanair.ca: A Citizen’s Action Guide to assist citizens trying to make a case for cleaning up their atmosphere. The UVic business law clinic provides valuable business law information for a nominal fee to aspiring entrepreneurs, home-based businesspeople and small business owners thinking of expanding. The faculty’s William R. McIntyre Award is awarded annually to a student who best combines academic excellence with community service and student leadership.

“The law school has always been student centred, innovative and committed to the excellence of education and the improvement of justice,” says Cassels. “Over the years, every member of faculty has made a significant contribution to molding UVic law into a first rate academic institution.”

The graduates agree. Three times in the past four years they voted UVic the top law school in the country in an annual survey by Canadian Lawyer magazine.