College Crisis Today

1) College Education Explosion–Back Then

In the early 1970s, with the extension of the Pell Grant to the Trust Territory, Micronesia went through an enormous education explosion. By 1978, there were nearly 3,000 young people from the islands (CNMI as well as the rest of the TT) abroad attending school, some in Guam and Hawaii, but increasing numbers in the mainland.

The magnitude of the exodus to college may be captured in statistics like these:

* In 1976, 189 high school grads, or 60% of the class of Truk HS, went off to college that year. While some of these enrolled on Guam or Hawaii, or even attended CCM, the vast majority went overseas to attend college in the US. (See Hezel Ed Explosion)
* Just ten years before, only 19 from the graduating class at THS went on to college.

*In 1972, 35 years ago, Micronesia (ie, FSM, ROP and RMI) was experiencing an education explosion (my article on Chuuk). [Slide 2]*

* *During the 1960s, only a limited number of Micronesians could attend college overseas–in Guam and Hawaii. A couple hundred were in college, supported by TT scholarships.*
* *When US government Pell Grants were extended to Micronesians, the surge to college began. By late 1970s, there were about 2,500 young people in college in Guam and US–a ten-fold increase.*
* *In Chuuk, eg, 189, or 60% of all high school grads left for college in 1976.*
* *A few years later there 660 Chuukese in college, two-thirds of them studying on the US mainland.*

Let it be admitted, however:

* Some attending schools no one had ever heard of–community colleges like Slippery Rock, and
* Not all of them should have been in college–indeed, some of them returned soon afterwards.

But still large numbers of the young had a chance to obtain a full college degree if they had the ability and perseverance to do so.

2) The College Picture Today

*The education explosion is long over–the picture has changed enormously today. [Slide 3]*

* *About 2,700 graduate from high school each year (30-40% dropout rate during high school).*
* *Most go to national two-year colleges–1300 from FSM, 600 from RMI, and 140 from Palau. Just over 2,000 go to local colleges–or 75% of all high school grads.*
* *Many of these drop out, some finish with certificates rather than degrees. About 300 wind up with AA degrees. Thus, only 15% wind up with two-year degrees (although the rate is reportedly much higher in Palau: 75%)*
* *Meanwhile, a few go abroad (US mostly) directly after high school graduation–not many more than 200 a year, or 7% of all high school grads.*
* *Meanwhile, vocational education programs are being added for those who can’t do degree work. Desperation move to offer something for less capable students. Touted as preparation for work. But where are the jobs? (Job picture in islands is poor at present)*

*Overall college education picture summarized.*

* *Vast majority of students go to local colleges–get whatever education they can, drop out along the way, or pick up a certificate. Only a small percent get their AA degrees, and not all of these continue their education abroad.*
* *Just 300-400 from any year are in four-year colleges abroad. Some will drop out along the way.*
* *College education has gone local, but the degree earners are few. This is a reversal of the trend 30 years earlier. Is it good preparation for a global economy?*

Now, 30 years later, the college picture has changed dramatically. There are a paltry number of Micronesians attending four-year colleges abroad (check figures for #). From far too many, we have retreated to far too few.

Where are the college degree holders in the next generation? The successors of the early political leaders? Those who are to be able to compete in the global economy?

Globalization may offer rich rewards to those prepared to take advantage of what it offers. An educated population can be a valuable asset. But Island populations of Micronesia may be experiencing a decline in college education. If so, how will they benefit from global trends–job outsourcing, investment opportunities, etc?

3) What has brought about this change?

* increasing cost of college education abroad (but have costs increased more than inflation? Check for article on this)
* the restructuring of college aid–less money in direct grants (SEOG, Work-Study) and more in the form of loans. (Compare Euke and Norlynn)
* lure of local community colleges in the region–which are not just cheaper, but actually offer allowance to students (eg, COM Pohnpeian student getting rebate of $1000 from his Pell Grant to spend as he wishes.

4) Effects of this Change

Many young people have learned to be satisfied with less–attending community college, perhaps taking a third year. Some may go on to finish their college, but a look at the numbers is not encouraging.

Meanwhile, most of the students going into the community college system here don’t complete a degree program. (Figures on percentage that actually get an AA–most end up with a certificate). Advantages for them:

* They go with the flow, follow their friends in college (nearly everyone goes these days).
* There are few jobs available anyway, so it’s not as if their career track has been slowed down. Indeed, this is a job (after a fashion) since they can use some of the money from their Pell Grant to support themselves. They are getting paid to go to college!
* It gives them and their families time to pull together the financial resources they will need to study abroad. (And, supposedly, it gives them a chance to get their feet on the ground–to slip into college slowly and in a culturally sensitive way, before taking on big schools in a big country.)

But it also saps the initiative and competitiveness of the best of the students, those already prepared to meet the challenge of college abroad.

College students in the US are taking longer to finish college, if they finish at all. Our tracking system for college students abroad seems to be non-functional, as it has always been.

Some students drag on for years. But why shouldn’t they? Under the Compact, any Micronesian has the freedom to obtain an outside job–and the attraction of a salary, even if it is close to minimum level, still pays $7 an hour–much more than the young person could earn in the islands. Often, these students take a part-time job that, little by little, becomes close to a full-time position, eclipsing the studies that were originally the purpose for which they moved to the US.

The overall impact is to lessen the number of young Micronesians who attend and graduate from four-year colleges abroad. This is to make the countries less competitive at the very time they need to be more so since their bright young people are competing for jobs in a global economy. This is a step backwards rather than forwards.

Impact on local colleges

Local colleges are under pressure to expand their programs in response to their clientele’s demands. The main colleges are tempted to expand into four-year colleges, granting an AB or the equivalent at the end of their program. Meanwhile, the state campuses of COM have been incessantly requesting that they be allowed to grant degrees, even three year degrees, to the students who complete their programs. But the students who attend the state campuses do so for the most part because they can not qualify on the entrance exam for acceptance into the main campus. The net effect of allowing them to grant degrees, then, would be “educational inflation”–offering a less demanding degree with requirements pared down to accommodate students with sub-standard backgrounds. In other words, it would be to scale down college still more so that they become compatible with the low standards of elementary and high school education in the states. Rather than requiring students to stretch to college standards, it would be to reduce the standards significantly so everyone could attend.

5) What to Do about This?

Use the scholarship money well–to supplement worthy young people studying overseas.

State college campuses. Should be seen as a means rather than an end in themselves. They suffer from the institutionalitis–the disease that looks to the preservation of the campus as the main end, with other things subordinated to that.

***Economics of College Education***

* Why the big change? Many reasons: desire to boost local colleges, offer students remedial courses as preparation for college overseas, stress on “relevant education.” But one of the main reasons is cost. The cost of education in the US becomes more prohibitive for young islanders. US college costs run $25,000 per year today–double the cost 30 years ago.
* At the same time, scholarship and education aid packages have been drastically reduced. Aid available for Micronesians today: Pell grants ($4,000 year). No Supplementary Education Opportunity Grants, as in the past. Fewer funds from colleges available. State or national scholarship funds (c$5,000) available for those who qualify. But scholarship funds in FSM and RMI are dropping or not keeping pace with the higher costs of education. Meanwhile, US has moved its aid into loans–and Micronesians are not eligible for these.
* Example of Euke and her daughter.
* Euke (1974): $9,000 (including room and board). Funding: Pell Grant $2,000, TT scholarship $5,000, SEOG and Work-Study for remainder.
* Daughter (2003): $16,000 (all expenses). Funding: Pell Grant $4,000, state scholarships $8,500. Difference made up by her own work–6 hours day @ $6 hourly.
* Even the relatively few who go abroad for college seem to be dropping out with greater frequency–in part because students are taking part-time jobs to support themselves, and then slipping into full-time work as they realize their comparatively high earning power ($6-8 per hour).
* Inexpensive education in local two-year colleges is attractive option for those who want some college. They can cover the costs of local college with Pell Grant funds and Work-Study Program money. Thus, two year college is becoming the norm rather than the exception–contrary to what we saw 30 years ago.
* Another option is the military. Large numbers of Micronesians joining the military–as a good paying job ($17,000 year starting salary) combined with an opportunity for education. Military offer education benefits up to $50,000, but person has to do this on his own time. Number of Micronesians in military now is 1,000-1,500.
* Rhetoric is of developing talent pool for national development and to assist in the economic growth of the nations, but the realities are otherwise. FSM and RMI are putting considerable sums of money into maintaining their two-year colleges. But commitment to this–and to the students who attend these colleges–leaves the more talented students capable of doing four-year college work unassisted. Students are left to their own resources more and more.