**College Education for What?**

(COM-FSM 25th Anniversary, April 2018)

***Introduction***

• How important is it to be able to go to college? Why? This is a question that is being discussed world-wide these days, especially in the light of rapidly increasing tuition costs. Is it worth it?

* Let’s take a broad view of the situation. Helpful to put the question of educational goals in historical context.
* But first, let’s track the rise of education here in the islands in the past few decades.

***Education Explosion in Micronesia***

• Education was experiential, as in all traditional societies. The young learned what they need to know by listening and observing and trial and error.

* Formal education, or schools, was a foreign innovation–began with missionaries (Catholic and Protestant) and expanded by Japanese colonial government in 1920s and 1930s (3 grades for all, 5 for better students)
* TTPI in 1950s: 6 years of elementary education, with middle school for more capable students.

- Full high school limited to a handful (graduates of PICS and Xavier, both begun in 1952). Fewer than 100 high school graduates a year by the end of the decade.

- Post-secondary education available only for medical officers and for teachers at training programs (only tertiary education available).

* TTPI in 1960s: As a result of the Kennedy Administration program in 1962, full 8 years of elementary school for all, and a full high school in each district.

- By the end of the decade nearly 1000 high school graduates a year. Fewer than 100 went on to college each year.

- About 200 were in college abroad at any time, half in Guam, with most of the rest in Philippines and Hawaii. MTEC opened in 1963 as post-secondary institution; its mission was to provide teachers for the expanding school system.

* TTPI in 1970s: Pell Grant extension to Micronesians in 1972 resulted in great numbers heading to college in US. 2000 were in college by the end of the decade.

- Meanwhile, CCM opened on Pohnpei as first local college. Its opening coincided with the great flight to US colleges, interestingly enough. Help was needed in providing further education for all those high school graduates.

***Summary of Explosion Data***

* Elementary school: by the early 1960s, full 8 grades available to nearly all students.
* High school: From almost none in 1950, to 100 grads a year in 1960, to 900 grads a year by 1970, to 1,200 by 1980. [Slide 2: TT high school grads; Slide 3: Chuuk as example]
* College: in 1960s 200 were studying each year (many of them in Guam); by end of 1970s there were ten times as many (2,000) away. 200 or so were also attending CCM by the end of the decade. [Slide 4: Chuukese in college]
* In short, 1960s was the decade of high school expansion; 1970s was the period of rapid college expansion.

***What’s Happened Since Then***

* FSM in 1990s: School growth halted as population leveled due to emigration. Elementary and high school enrollment remained steady since independence. [Slide 5: emigration]
* In 1993 COM-FSM began as FSM’s own college. Meanwhile, college enrollment of islanders in US drops because of increasing costs.
* Between 1978 and 2008, college-bound students had fallen off by 30 percent even though the total population had grown by over 60 percent. [Slide 6: 1978 & 2008]. “...With allowance made for population growth, we are now offering a full college education to just one-third as many high school graduates as we did back then (1973).”
* College picture today in FSM: small numbers in US colleges. [Slides 7 & 8: detailed picture] Conclusion is that we must rely on local college more than ever before.

***Rethinking the Goals of Education***

* School was an alien institution brought to the islands by churches and colonial governments. It’s purpose was presumably to transform islanders into citizens of another land. Warning: Beware lest it turn you into a citizen of a foreign land.
* But an information explosion occurred with foreign contact in the islands (ie, different language and science), and an educational institution was needed to update the young. As time went on, the local environment in its own understated way reshaped education as it integrated it into island life. “Today the school is as much a Micronesian institution as the meeting house, the legislature or the church.” (quote from 1980?)
* Education also sharpens critical faculties and makes the individual more sensitive to the forces that are acting on him. Thus, education (whether originally colonial or not) develops the instinct to sniff out the inauthentic and leads to a critique of the new institution itself.
* Education can try to provide relevant work skills, but it can not create an economy. It can only provide trained manpower to fuel the economy. By the 1990s, the FSM economy had stopped growing. There were no longer government jobs for all college grads, but COM didn’t go out of business as a result. In fact, it took a new turn and expanded, becoming COM-FSM in 1993. (It should be noted that the trained manpower might well have to be retrained for other job opportunities every so often.)
* Goals citing citizenship, economic growth, and employment are all secondary at best. Primary is what happens to the individual who has been educated–not to the society as a consequence of this education.
* At the core of an education are these: 1) development of mental skills, beginning with the 3 R’s and extending through the range that we often call thinking skills (this leads to a lifetime of learning); 2) an understanding of the world, physical and social, surrounding the individual, allowing the person to exercise some control over his environment; 3) self-confidence that stems from mastery of difficult subjects.

***Why College?***

* There’s so much to learn–the more education the better. The world has become increasingly complex with each passing generation. Information grows at an astonishing rate. Even a “basic education” takes longer now.
* Standards have risen accordingly. In the 19th century, an American was lucky to have a full elementary education; most didn’t have that. By the end of the first half of the 20th century, a high school education was almost mandatory. Since then, we have come to see college as nearly essential.
* Societies around the world have extended the period of youth to allow young people more time before putting them to work. Teenage is longer than it once was. In the past, young teenagers might have had a full-time job with many getting married in their mid-teens. This “time out” offers us today the possibility of learning more about an increasingly complex world before going out to make our mark on it.

***Importance of a Local College***

* Everywhere today community colleges have grown in importance as their enrollments have steadily risen. This is an unmistakable trend in the US.
* Community colleges see themselves as providing two distinctive features: training persons for the skills they need for employment, and offering education in the milieu of the local community. Fine, but this is only part of the contribution they make. Most important, they develop human beings.
* In Micronesia, the value of the local college is even more important still. Schools like COM-FSM are more important than ever because they are affordable, as costs in US colleges escalate so that they are far beyond the means of islanders. For most Micronesians today, it is local college or nothing.
* For those few who have the financial resources to study abroad or are bright enough to obtain scholarships abroad, let’s wish them well. For the others, the local college is their gateway to the future. It is more than a place for job training; it is an essential piece in the development of the FSM population.
* I will conclude by citing here something I wrote several years ago on the purpose of education. It speaks especially to case for college education in our day.

“An education gives people what is sometimes called "cultural capital"–that is, a fund of knowledge on many issues that can eventually be converted into something marketable. It offers people choices–in employment, in entertainment, in lifestyle–that they would not otherwise enjoy. Even more, education makes it possible for a person to comprehend what is happening in his world. Without a good education, the individual lacks the eyes to see, the ears to hear, the tongue to speak to today's people.” (“The Myth of Education: A Second Look,” 2001)

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