**Thoughts on Community Colleges in Micronesia**

***Links with teacher training***

Historically there has always been a strong link in this area between community colleges and the training of teachers. Community colleges grew out of the teacher training institutes formed during the early years of the trusteeship to provide a little extra education for the men and women who were to be responsible for educating the coming generations of Micronesians.

In the earliest years of the Trust Territory, when general education was limited to six grades of elementary, with select students sometimes obtaining another three years of education at intermediate school, the routes for further schooling were very few. Medical or nursing school (based in Guam at that time) was one option. Another was teacher training.

MATTS (Marianas Area Teacher Training School), established on Guam in 1947, was the first teacher training program in Micronesia. In 1948 the program was moved to Chuuk and opened as PITTS (Pacific Islands Teacher Training School). Started as a two-year program, PITTS soon expanded to three years. The program ended in 1952 when PITTS was transformed into PICS, a four year high school based on Pohnpei.

The opening of PICS (and Xavier) in the same year signaled the beginning of full four-year high school education in Micronesia. As full secondary education became available to more and more young Micronesians during the 1950s and 1960s, teacher preparation was bumped up to the tertiary level. MTEC (Micronesian Teacher Education Center) was opened in 1963 as a territory-wide training program. It operated out of two classrooms on the PICS campus. By the late 1960s, as a single territory-wide high school was giving way to public high schools in each district, teacher training followed suit. MTEC was broken down into TruTEC, PonTEC, etc, in the late 1960s so that prospective teachers could be educated in their own districts.

Meanwhile, the teacher training institute at the tertiary level followed the same familiar pattern. Just as PITTS had evolved into PICS, a full high school, MTEC was transformed into a two-year college under the name of CCM (Community College of Micronesia) in 1971. Yet, CCM never lost touch entirely with its roots, for it continued to specialize in education.

In time, CCM evolved into the College of Micronesia-FSM. At first, of course, the College of Micronesia was composed of three campuses, but perhaps ten years ago the consortium broke down, with COM-FSM inheriting the title. Still, however, COM-FSM provides the same sort of emphasis on preparation of future teachers that CCM once did, since its only three-year program is an education degree program.

The state campuses of COM-FSM originated when the legislation on teacher accreditation was

enacted into law. Their initial function was to provide teachers with a means of acquiring their AA degree to fulfill the requirements for teachers. Even today, therefore, the community colleges continue to reveal their historic connections with teach training.

***Schools forever splitting and reproducing themselves***

Just as secondary education was once dividing and multiplying, college education was continually doing the same a few years later as attempts were made to make college education accessible to an ever larger segment of the population.

The territory-wide community college system was formed of the three institutions: MOC, CCM and Saipan Nursing School. They were transformed from training programs offering rather narrow training into junior colleges. Although at one time each had its own area of specialization (vocational education for MOC, education for CCM, and nursing for Saipan), they developed the same types of general instructional programs and range of course offerings. There was little distinctive in each place other than its emphasis on the island group(s) it served. The same thing happened to the College of the Marshalls, which started out with a strong nursing program. Even when the College of Micronesia was formed, it began as an uneasy federation of colleges that had started out as autonomous and had grown only more so in time.

In the early 1990s the COM system broke down into three separate colleges: COM-FSM, PCC, and CMI. In splintering, the college system repeated what had happened to MTEC when it was broken down into Trutec, Pontec, etc. It also foreshadowed what would happen within COM-FSM a few years later, when the state campuses, which had been organized to provide certification for teachers (something very much in line with the original purpose of the community colleges) began to branch out into other areas and request that they be allowed to confer degrees. At present the role of these state campuses is unclear, but each seems to have aspirations of becoming a community college in its own right to serve the needs of the people in its state. As the state campuses assert their own identity and seek more autonomy from COM-FSM, the process of fission and self-reproduction on the college level continues.

The pressures on community colleges throughout the region (and perhaps everywhere) are similar. They are regarded as national colleges, symbols of the national identity and pride. They are the plaything of public officials and leaders, and are called on to serve every need and meet every crisis. They must develop the economy by providing manpower trained to take whatever jobs are needed–hence, they must have a vocational education component. They must turn out dedicated citizens in tune with the culture, so they are seen as the preservers of culture. They must prepare young people to get advanced degrees, so they are seen as the last bridge to universities beyond. The community colleges find themselves pulled in many different directions, often unable to respond to all the demands that are made of them. Invariably academic standards will decline as the colleges, under pressure from their communities, attempt to do more than they are capable of doing.

What’s needed? Many things, but let me enumerate only a few here.

* A strong sense of the finitude of the community college: an awareness that it can do only so much, given the limitations in funding and staffing..
* A strong sense of priorities in what young people need today, with the resulting determination of the community college to meet this most urgent need.
* The willingness of political leaders to leave their hands off the community colleges, for most colleges are already pulled in many different directions–more than the colleges can sustain..
* A readiness to find ways in which they can collaborate once again with one another to spare needless competition and the useless expense of programs that duplicate those in other places.

***Proposal for Community Colleges in Micronesia***

The starting point for this proposal is the needs of the students who attend our community colleges. They need to be put in touch with their cultural identity and their past, but they also need to develop their thinking and writing skills at a level commensurate to where they are in formal education now. Ideally, it would be good if they could do this in multi-disciplinary approach. Somehow they must do all this under the supervision of teachers who may not have had much experience in Micronesia. Even if the teachers have the experience, they often don’t have many research materials on local topics.

While students are studying a course in, say, island history, they could be asked to engage in a research project on a specific site or village or event. They could also work on biographies of various island individuals, making use of their interviews with these subjects for the final work. Their research might be principally done by gathering oral accounts from different informants on the topic, perhaps after seeking written sources on this same topic. This would, by the end of the semester, result in a “paper” on the topic that would be posted on the internet–perhaps on the cc’s own homesite with links to other agencies.

Another example proposed by Liz Rechebei is the value of trees for the environment. Students in one college, working with their science and English teachers, could undertake a research/writing project on the beneficial effects of trees in the prevention of erosion, reduction of direct heat and ultraviolet rays, and the overall improvement of the atmosphere. As the students from this college build up a store of materials (and questions) on the topic, they could begin to involve the students at another community college. They could exchange via internet materials and ideas on the project. Eventually their projects would culminate in papers at the two colleges, which could then be published on the website alongside each other.

The colleges might want to post the papers themselves. Alternatively, MicSem could post these projects, perhaps also sponsor the forum discussion that was needed to gather input on these projects. It could interface with the other colleges in doing the same. Possibly some common projects could be worked on by students in the different community colleges. In another approach, the projects could be stitched together like a quilt to produce a monograph that might be published in a cheap desktop fashion after enough work was done on the project. Occasionally, this approach should result in publication (with some illustrations), even on a small scale.

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