

A National College with a Global Mission

The main campus of FSM's national college is nestled in the foothills of Pohnpei, not far from the more elevated heights in the interior of the island. Even as community colleges go, it's a small campus of less than eighty acres. But then, too, so is the population it serves—about 100,000 people scattered over some fifty islands in the Federated States of Micronesia. The 800 or so students at the main campus hail from all these islands and beyond.

Outside the library at the center of the campus students congregate between classes in small groups, usually in same-language clusters. There are at least a half dozen languages spoken in FSM, depending how one counts. And then there are the others—the occasional Palauan, Marshallese, Filipino or American attending the college, usually the son or daughter of long-term residents or even contract workers in the islands. At times a few Japanese can be found among them, short-term exchange students familiarizing themselves with an area that once was part of the Japanese empire.

Teachers scurry back and forth to their classrooms. Sylvia Henry, books tucked under her arms, is off to begin her English class at the same college she attended two years earlier. Emerging from the administration building is Dana Lee Ling, middle-aged but lean, known throughout the island as the “joggler”—the fellow who on most afternoons can be seen jogging around town while he juggles tennis balls. Dana, an American married to a Kosraean woman, has been teaching at the college almost since its founding and is usually the odds-on favorite for teacher of the year. Down the road a few hundred yards, Francisco Mendiola, a Pohnpeian, steps out of his office in the maintenance department that he has been running for years.

College of Micronesia-FSM was formally founded as a national college on April 1, 1993, even though the main campus in Palikir would not be completed and occupied until three years later. At the dedication ceremony, the significance of the college was underscored. As FSM's own college, this institution of learning that would be intimately linked to the growth of the new island nation. FSM, after all, had just had its independence formally recognized just two years earlier when it was admitted as a member of the United Nations. According to the old saw, every new island nation needed two things: its own airline and college. FSM may have never had the funds or desire to establish a national airline, but it could boast of a college of its very own from the beginning of self-government. With a stroke of the pen, the Community College of Micronesia (CCM), which had been the post-secondary institution operating on Pohnpei for twenty years before FSM's independence, was renamed COM-FSM and converted into the national college.

Although first officially recognized in 1993, COM-FSM did not spring from the earth fully formed. Ancestry is always regarded as important, nowhere more so than in the Pacific Islands. The college's parentage stems from the Community College of Micronesia (CCM), established in 1971 as the first community college serving the islands, which were then still a part of the Trust Territory. For over 20 years CCM, situated in Kolonia at the site of the present Pohnpei State campus, welcomed students who wished to continue their education beyond the high school

level. Even after young Micronesians became eligible for Pell grants in the early 1970s and began swarming to US colleges straight out of high school, the college resolutely continued to offer an education to those who preferred to begin post-secondary studies at home.

By that time other post-secondary institutions had been opened in the islands. Micronesian Occupational Center (MOC) was established in Palau for those in search of vocational training. There was also a nursing school, situated on Saipan before its relocation in Majuro, that was eventually integrated into the college. But CCM remained the college of choice for those who wanted to continue with a general education in familiar surroundings. Throughout this period, CCM was linked to MOC and the nursing school to serve the three nations that had once been part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific.

With the transformation of CCM into COM-FSM came not just the facilities and a student body, but staff members and teachers who had already become memorable, almost legendary figures and would continue to serve the college for years to come. Norma Edwin, who was running the office back in 1975, can still be found doing the same work today and serves as the institutional memory of the college. When anyone wonders how something was done back in the past, they are told “Ask Norma; she knows because she goes way back.” Then there was Gene Ashby, who moved from Africa to begin teaching on Pohnpei in the 1970s, drove a battered old jeep with a plant in the back, and was prepared to spend hours with students who came to him for help. Another was Harvey Segal, who began as a contract teacher in Kosrae in the early 1960s and later brought his Kosraean wife and family to Pohnpei where he taught at the college until shortly before his death in 2008. He is gone, but his son Gordon, who runs the information technology office today, carries on the family tradition of service at the college. Susan Moses, wife of late governor, ambassador and congressman Resio Moses, served with distinction as president of the college for several years. Sue, who has worked there from 1976 to the present, is still teaching education because, as she readily confesses, she has a passion for the classroom.

How is it that so many of the staff seem to have found a home at the college? Don Buden, the lanky American biology teacher ever in search of new bug specimens, has taught there for years. So has Jasmine Gonzalez, originally from the Philippines. Then there is Joe Habuchmai, born on Eauripik, who has had many different administrative assignments. How about Arinda Halbert, Marion Luke and Albery Benjamin, each of whom goes back to the CCM days and has served the college for forty years or more? Richard Womack and Paul Gallen, both retired now after long years of service; John Haglelgam, national president turned professor the names go on and on. The hold of the college on these people, local and foreign-born, must be more than just the grip of tenure, one must conclude.

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Teacher training was the force that drove post-secondary education from the very beginning. CCM itself had its origin in the teacher training institute known as the Micronesian Teacher Education Center (MTEC). MTEC, which at first operated out of two classrooms on the PICS campus, was bumped up to the tertiary level when full high school education became available to everyone throughout the islands. In 1963 MTEC became a territory-wide training program aimed at providing teachers for the public schools that were opening and expanding everywhere at that

time of furious educational growth. Within a few years, branches of MTEC sprouted up in all the major island groups so that prospective teachers might more easily earn their credentials in their own districts.

Education has always held a place of prominence for island societies as they go through initial phases of development. In the early post-war years in Micronesia, a high school education was a privilege reserved for a gifted few. The expectation at that time was that those few who received a full high school education might become educators themselves—if not doctors or nurses—and so contribute in their turn to the development of their island home. Training teachers was the sole mission of MTEC, the grandparent of FSM’s college today, and it has exerted a strong influence over its descendants as well. CCM never lost touch with these roots; it not only continued to specialize in the field of education, but it saw its main mission as training teachers.

Even in our changed landscape today, COM-FSM attempts to provide some of the same emphasis on preparing future teachers that CCM once did. Indeed, the only four-year Bachelor’s program offered at the college today is an education degree program in collaboration with the University of Guam. Moreover, the four state campuses assumed special importance soon after new legislation on teacher accreditation was enacted into law. The original purpose of these campuses was to make it easier for local teachers to acquire the AA degree they needed to fulfill the new requirements for teachers. So it is that the present structure of the college still bears the imprint of its original mission: to prepare teachers for the classroom.

Yet, the mandate of COM-FSM today goes well beyond teacher training. According to its current mission statement, the college is viewed as “an *institution of higher education that is committed to the success of the Federated States of Micronesia.*” An earlier statement proposed that such a college must “recognize and respond to the needs of a culturally diverse student population while promoting a sense of national unity.” Years ago, island leaders dreamed of establishing a local college, no matter what its specific objectives, that might reflect the culture of the island nation and speak to island students of the importance of their own milieu. As David Ramarui, then Trust Territory Director of Education, put it in 1975: “CCM is rooted in the desire that Micronesians be able to obtain a basic postsecondary education at home, one which can act as a unifying force for the diverse ethnic components in our population.”

Others then and since took a more pragmatic view of the matter. They wanted a college that would do more than fly the national flag and bond its people; they proposed using the college to educate a productive workforce for the islands. They feared that by sending hundreds of people to college in the US, the important jobs would remain unfilled and the young students sent abroad would never return home. They would like to see the college grounded in the realities of island life today and students provided with the skills needed to fill open positions here and now. They acknowledge that to do this successfully will mean constantly adjusting programs and curriculum to changing needs. But this, they argue, is what it means to be a community college.

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Meanwhile, the college greatly expanded the programs it offered its students. The pillars of the

original system that had once defined the college—education, liberal arts, nursing, and business administration—gave rise to new fields of study. Education, once the keystone of the entire post-secondary system, grew into more than the four-year BA degree program the college first began offering in 1997. The education department also broadened the variety of courses offered to include such things as child development, special education and bilingual education.

Liberal arts, too, has spawned other program areas like literature and social science, the latter now offered as a major for the AA degree. The Micronesian Studies Program, aimed at developing a richer understanding of the islands' past and present, has flourished under instructors like John Haglelgam and the late Mariana Ben Dereas. To support this program the college developed a distinctive Pacific Collection, built up through the pioneering efforts of Dakio Syne and Iris Falcam, whose work is being continued today by Bruce Robert and others. Besides print materials the collection contains a large number of visual and audio materials.

Math and science, once part of the liberal arts program, has expanded into a full-fledged degree program of its own. This was proposed in the original master plan for the college in response to the nation's need of specialized manpower "such as doctors, engineers, architects, health technicians and other technical specialists." Associate of Science degrees are now offered in this field as well as in marine science.

Nursing, like education, may soon become a full four-year program, once the college establishes ties with an outside institution that can partner with COM-FSM to bestow a Bachelor's Degree. From the time of its founding, the college has offered a two-year degree in broader health-related programs, thanks to funding from the Health Careers Opportunities Program (better known as HCOP). Public Health is another option for those who want to consider an educational path that is not as narrowly defined as nursing.

Business administration may have been a single program at one time, but it has now diversified at least as much as the other fields that served as the cornerstones of the college academic system. Accounting, for instance, has become a major of its own. A related field of study and one that has flourished in recent years is information technology. The Computer Information Systems program, one of the most popular majors today, has been grouped with business administration in the college structure. An Certificates are now offered in areas such as hospitality and tourism management to prepare students for emerging job opportunities in those fields.

But the diversification of educational programs has gone beyond even these conventional areas. The five-year master plan for the College of Micronesia, written in 1986, notes that even then there was a "diverse array of short-term, in service training programs, primarily for government employees but... for private sector employees as well." Numerous examples were cited: tourism training, small business writing and advertising, clerical and secretarial workshops, training for telecommunications operations, as well as mechanical trades and construction workshops. Could these short-term training programs, which were then farmed out to consultants, be consolidated into the college? In considering the ways in which it might serve the community by responding to these needs, the college has always had almost unlimited opportunities to draw from.

Over the years it has done just this. Hospitality and Tourism Management, once merely an after-thought, has expanded to become a major field of study for those aspiring to an AA degree. Certificate programs are now offered in 16 fields, including a half dozen in construction and engineering and trades. Others include bookkeeping, secretarial services, training for nursing assistants and preparation of legal aides. Certificate programs at the college normally run for two or three semesters. In its race to keep up with the most current training needs, the college administration meets with the community regularly to determine what kinds of training programs should be added.

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With the formal recognition of the three different Compact states—FSM, the Marshall Islands and Palau—in the late 1980s, the bonds joining CCM to its sister institution in Palau (MOC) and to the nursing school in the Marshalls were badly frayed. Clearly it was time for each of the newly independent nations to have its own college. Each of the three Compact nations, then, began the task of building the institution in its own country into a full-fledged national college.

FSM inherited the main campus of CCM in downtown Kolonia, but this location offered little room for expansion. So it was that, in 1990, construction of a new and larger campus began in Palikir, a part of the island that was still largely undeveloped. The college campus was situated just a mile or two down the road from the new national capital. Construction of the main buildings was completed with a funding grant of \$8 million from the US government, and the new campus was first occupied in June 1996. Much later the China-FSM Friendship Center was built with the assistance of a grant from the People’s Republic of China. This multipurpose building serves as an athletic arena and conference hall. Graduations, regional forums and public addresses are held here in addition to basketball and volleyball games.

The campus can now easily accommodate a thousand students and two hundred boarders. The full-time faculty at the national campus number about 45, but the total staff come to 140. Student enrollment has expanded over the years from the 400 who studied at the main campus originally, up to a thousand in 2010, settling back to about 800 today. The dormitories currently house about a hundred students; the rest of the students live at home or with relatives elsewhere on the island.

Like colleges everywhere, COM-FSM provides a variety of extracurricular activities for its students. The clubs for the various island and language groups, each with its own recreation house built of local materials in traditional island style, are the most popular student organizations. But there are other activities as well: a diving club, a marine science club, and a media arts organization with members making radio programs and editing their own videos, among others.

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From the very beginnings of the college movement in Micronesia, the hope was to keep college as close to home as possible. That was certainly the motivation behind the split up of the Micronesian Teacher Education Center into branches in each major island group in the 1960s. In the same spirit, the Master Plan for COM made it clear that one of the main priorities of the new

college would be to “establish continuing education centers at locations throughout Micronesia where there was no college campus.” Soon land was purchased and buildings constructed to set up new campuses in Yap, Chuuk and Kosrae. Pohnpei was able to take over COM-FSM’s central facility once it moved out to the new campus on Palikir.

The state campuses began functioning when the legislation on teacher certification was enacted into law. The instructional programs in these state campuses were expected to continue to provide AA degrees in education for teachers seeking to meet the new requirements. This was the first and foremost goal of the state campuses in the early 1990s, and it was what brought to the campus most of its early students, largely men and women well on in their years.

About that time, the state campuses also began accepting students who were not able to pass the qualifying exam for the degree programs. The campuses were soon doing remedial work in English and math for young people who hoped to be able to make up what they needed for acceptance into the main associate degree program. In recent years, though, the requirements for admission into state campuses have stiffened. Today a passing score on the COM entrance test is required even for admission to its satellite campuses.

A third purpose served by the states campuses was to provide certificate training programs for those seeking job skills. Currently all the state campuses provide short-term training programs, some of which have turned into longer-term certificate programs. None of them, however, have done this quite to the extent of the Pohnpei campus, which in recent years has become heavily vocational in nature, preparing plumbers, electricians, auto mechanics and carpenters for future employment. Indeed, it has evolved into a vocational school and is now known as Career and Technical Educational Center. The center offers programs in a variety of technical skills: telecommunications, electrical engineering, construction and design, and other trade areas. Of necessity it has taken on many of the functions once performed by PATS, the Catholic trade school on Pohnpei which was closed in 2005, and MOC, successfully operating in Palau but at a considerable distance from FSM.

Yap has a second campus known as the Fisheries Maritime Institute; it currently has 60 students, female as well as male. Once run by Pacific Missionary Aviation, a church-sponsored organization, to train seamen in skills, the institute was picked up by the government and affiliated with COM-FSM as its program expanded over the years.

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FSM’s national college, like the education institutions that predated it, has experienced some ups and downs during its short life span. Early on the college sought accreditation as recognition that COM-FSM meets those basic standards set for institutions of higher learning in the US. In 1998 the college was granted accreditation for six years, but ten years later COM-FSM found itself in danger of losing accreditation when it was put on probation. Most recently the status of the college has improved markedly under President Joe Daisy.

Enrollment, especially at the state campuses, has fluctuated over time. Over the past ten years, however, the total enrollment for the main campuses and its satellites shows about 2,000

students. The downward trend in enrollment at the national campus in the past eight years, from over a thousand in 2010 to about 800 currently, may be due to increased competition from other regional schools, mainly CCPI, the new Catholic college in Chuuk, and Palau Community College with its open enrollment policy. But there is another, more telling explanation of the recent fall off in enrollment. As emigration of Micronesians steadily grows, more and more islanders are graduating from high school abroad and entering college there.

Completion rates at the college have improved over time. In contrast to the unimpressive numbers of earlier years, since 2010 about 300 to 400 students a year have been finishing their programs, with most of these receiving either an AA and an AS degree. For many of the graduates this marks not the end of formal schooling, but a springboard to continue college abroad. Roughly half of those who complete their program at COM-FSM these days are going on for further college studies. The demand for higher education, even in a remote Pacific nation, is greater than ever.

Many of those who go on to US colleges to complete their BA degrees would never have been able to do so unless they had been able to get a start much closer to home. Shaun Suliol, young webmaster at the college, can attest from personal experience to the importance of adjustment time before starting college abroad. He points out that beginning college studies on familiar soil and having the chance to establishing a circle of friends is a key element in gaining the confidence young people need to go on.

The young do not swarm directly into US colleges as they did during the 1970s and 1980s, but hundreds still study abroad to earn a full four-year degree. Hence, the mission of the college has shifted to serving as a gateway to higher education for young Micronesian men and women. This is of great importance for the increasing number of students who are continuing tertiary education abroad once they finish their two-year associate's degree at COM-FSM.

Not all those students who choose to continue their college education overseas are lost to the islands forever. Take Jennifer Helieisar, for instance. After her graduation from Xavier High School in 1991, she attended COM and finished with an AA degree in health studies in 1993. Afterwards, she attended Chaminade College for a time before she returned home to Pohnpei, where she began working for COM in 1996 as a tutor in English and math even as she worked to finish her BA and eventually an MA in library science. Despite job offers from the University of Guam and other places, she decided to remain at COM, where she now serves as Director of the Learning Resources Center. But Jennifer is not the only one who ended up working at the college where she began. There is Sylvia Henry, Maggie Hallers, Joseph Felix and Francisco Mendiola, among others.

So, the wheel is turning full circle. Although no longer in the exclusive business of producing teachers for the country, COM-FSM is embracing a more global mission and preparing its students for a larger world with many more potential career paths. Even so, at least some of the people it has sent out have returned to the college to devote their lives to educating the next generation.

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On the 25th birthday of the College of Micronesia-FSM, an educational institution founded to answer to the changing needs of the FSM, we can celebrate the ways in which the college has responded to this challenge. Its beginnings might have been as a teacher training institute, but it went on to provide tertiary education for those who would take jobs in the nation during its early years of independence. Now, more than at any time before, it serves as an entry way to full college education. Tomorrow its function might be something else—but almost certainly something that will genuinely serve the needs of the country in the future.

The mission of the college at bottom will always be to develop human capital, to educate those young people in the islands who have tasted education and want more. The hope is always that wherever these islanders end up living and whatever jobs they might take, they might become an educational force among their own people, if only for the enlightened and productive lives they themselves lead.

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Oct 12, 2017

(Published in booklet *College of Micronesia-FSM: 25th Anniversary*, April 2018, pp 12-20, under the title: “Twenty-Five Years of Fostering Student Success”)