

Getting to Know the Igorots – Education Mountain Style

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Mountain Province College

Around 2003 I set out into the mountains to tour the regional colleges in the Cordillera in the Philippines. There is one college in each of the provinces and my intent was to learn as much about them as possible to be able to set up a scholarship program. The tour was interesting.

The mountains were settled from the south to the north. So the southern part of the Cordillera is the most advanced, they have a full university there with relatively good funding and a good reputation. Another area that got attention early in the past century

was the central part of the Cordillera, here is a college that was reasonably well equipped too with a good budget. With the rest it was downhill from there.

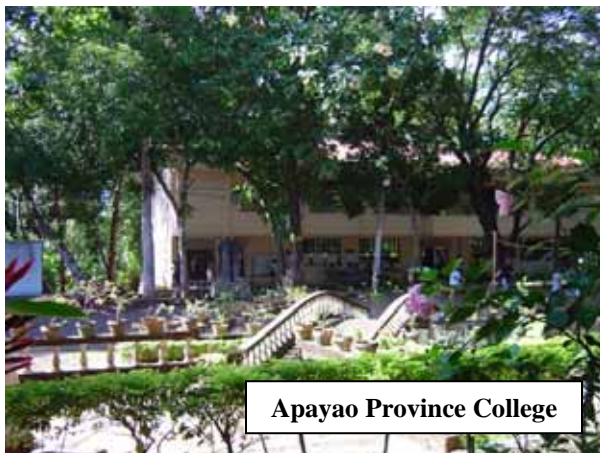
One serious problem is that the Philippines is only an emerging nation, it doesn't have enormous tax revenues since a good measure of its population is poor and since the tax system isn't sophisticated enough to catch tax dodgers yet. In the mountains it's even worse. Holding title to aboriginal lands is a relatively new concept so there are few major tax revenues there too while at the same time the costs of managing mountain infrastructure are enormous. One casualty of this reality has been the regional colleges.



Kalinga Province College

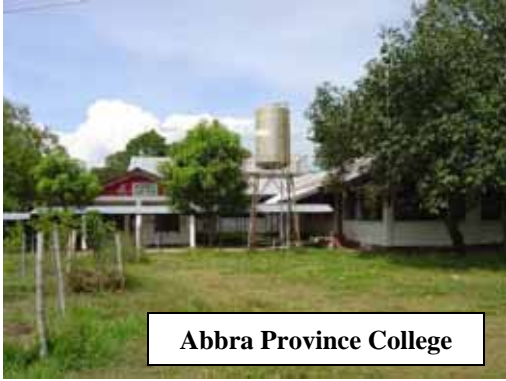
I was astonished by their differences. One college had a sharp administrator who spent

considerable money when it was still available on the infrastructure of her college and on supplies like computers. Other colleges didn't have such a sharp leader and so used their resources in different ways. This had interesting impacts. Most of the colleges had less facilities for their students than our high schools here in the West. Yet these institutions were responsible for training the country's future professionals and leaders. This was really disconcerting.



Apayao Province College

Another told me proudly that they have an amazing nursing program that is so



successful that all of their graduates are successful in getting overseas jobs. Well, I suppose that is something to be proud of in the sense of quality of education and yet I didn't feel that pride. The country needs those nurses even more desperately than countries in North America and Europe. Yet here is a school funded by Philippine taxes training kids so well that they are able to leave the country for good. In defense of the college though, the country has few professional job openings at the moment too. So often the kids have to leave if they want to succeed.

One college really distressed me. I had asked about a hundred students assembled to talk to me about what they needed most. One young lady bravely stood up to tell me they desperately needed computers for their computer science courses of which she was a part. I finished the thought by suggesting she probably also needed software. But that got me an odd look. It turned out that she didn't know what software was and yet she is in computer science.



I also learned a sad lesson. Everyone from students to faculty said to me that while they really do need scholarships, what they need even more is materials and facilities. You can't do labs unless there is something there to work with. You can't learn computers if there are none to work on. Clearly



more could be helped with materials than with scholarships. Alas, this was in conflict with political realities. It was going to be a lot easier to raise funds by talking about poor kids who need a break and an education than it is to convince people to fund notebooks, text books and stuff like that. So, sadly, I couldn't fix the materials issue. But the scholarship program is in place and each year six more disadvantaged kids are funded to attend college.



The tour raised interesting issues. For a nation to really be successful it has to invest in its educational institutions and its kids for that is the way to develop the future leaders who will help it to emerge from poverty. Yet, to invest in education requires you to already be successful with a sufficient tax base to pay those bills. And this is especially challenging when you realize that you have to also fund roads, health care, energy, and a myriad of other infrastructure issues. Those nations that pull off this balancing act really need to be admired.