

Teacher Education at the American Sāmoa Community College

by James Kneubuhl & Tupua Roy Fua

While the American system of education may have been imposed on American Sāmoa, the basic value of education in contemporary life is accepted and appreciated by the Samoan people.

Dr. Richard H. Kosaki
Expanding Teacher Education Opportunities in American Sāmoa (1999)



Education in American Sāmoa

The only territory of the United States in the southern Pacific, American Sāmoa lies approximately halfway between Hawai'i and New Zealand. Consisting of five volcanic islands and two coral atolls, all of which cover a land area of only 199 square kilometers, American Sāmoa is home to a rapidly-growing population last estimated at nearing 68,000. The vast majority of this population resides on the main island of Tutuila, which is the territory's center of government, business, and education. American Sāmoa's student population is close to 17,000, accounting for about a fourth of the island's total population. The American Sāmoa Department of Education (ASDOE) oversees the territory's

twenty-three public elementary schools and six public high schools. A number of private schools on Tutuila also offer instruction at the preschool through grade twelve levels for approximately 3000 of the territory's students.

American Sāmoa also enjoys a far greater degree of federal funding for its public education programs than any of the other states or territories in the US. Recognizing that the American Sāmoa has not yet established an economy with a sufficient tax base to meet its educational needs, the federal government shoulders most of the cost for the territory's school system. As explained by American Sāmoa's delegate to the US Congress, Faleomavaega Eni Hunkin:



When it comes to public education, American Sāmoa gets more federal dollars per student than any other state or territory. In fact, the federal government gives American Sāmoa about \$2,800 per student while states get less than \$600 per student.

Across America and on average, states are paying for 93 percent of the costs associated with educating their children while the federal government pays for only 7 percent of their costs. In American Sāmoa, the federal government is paying for more than 76 percent of our costs for education. In other words, American Sāmoa is number one when it comes to federal funding for education.

Despite generous support from the federal government, the American Sāmoa public school system continues to produce students who have yet to catch up with their mainland counterparts when tested against the national averages in major subjects. Ninety-seven percent are enrolled in limited English proficiency programs. Ninety-five percent of local fourth graders lacked basic math skills in 2000. Figures from the same year were only marginally better with 93 percent of local eighth graders lacking basic math skills, while up to 95 percent lacked basic science skills. The average score of 157 for American Sāmoa fourth graders in math is a little more than one-half of the national average of 226 (on a scale of 0-500). Likewise, in fourth grade science, the state average of 51 (on a scale of 0-300) is a little over one-half of the national average of 148. (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004)

With so much federal aid at its disposal, as well as the repeated statements of commitment to education by the local government, one could rightfully ask “What could be going wrong with the school system in American Sāmoa?” The answers are never as simple as anyone would like. The shortage of certified teachers holding advanced degrees factors in, along with other challenges. Perhaps more crucially, while most students have at least a basic proficiency in English, the majority of them speak Samoan as their first language. As a result, when local teachers conduct their classes or utilize textbooks and other teaching materials in English, many students face a challenge comprehending that material, a challenge which only increases as the material becomes more complex. Other factors add to the strain on the education system. They include a student population that has increased faster than the infrastructure can accommodate and a salary scale that does not match what the best teachers could earn if they moved to Hawai'i or mainland America. While a variety of challenges need to be met, local educators and administrators are in agreement that focusing on upgrading teacher qualifications is the most appropriate place to begin their efforts toward an overall improvement of education in American Sāmoa.

A number of circumstances make it difficult for aspiring teachers in American Sāmoa to earn certification and/or advanced degrees. Young men and women who graduate from the territory's high schools have two options available to them if they plan to continue their education. They can pursue a two-year degree at the American Sāmoa Community College (ASCC), or they

can enter a four-year program at an overseas institution. Unfortunately, the distance between overseas schools and American Sāmoa, as well as the expense and other complications involved with local students living and studying away from home, results in only a limited number of them having the opportunity to pursue their educational career as far as their abilities might merit. Of the students who do earn degrees overseas, some eventually enter the field of education in the territory, but many others choose to seek more lucrative opportunities away from home. With teachers' salaries in American Sāmoa substantially lower than in Hawai'i or the US mainland, few highly qualified teachers are willing to travel from off-island to work in the territory's schools. As a result, both the ASDOE and the private schools face an ongoing challenge in recruiting and retaining qualified staff. The Certification and Teacher Training Division of the American Sāmoa Department of Education found that in 2002, less than 30 percent of the teachers in preschool to grade twelve had teaching certificates. Sixty to sixty-five percent had not earned a baccalaureate (BA) degree. Figures from 2000 showed that of the 394 elementary school teachers in American Sāmoa, only 281 (71 percent) had degrees of any kind. Of these, 23 percent had BA degrees, while 77 percent had two-year AA and AS degrees. (ASDOE, 2002)

In May 2005, an article in the Sāmoa News, a local newspaper, reported on twenty-two graduates of the UH cohort program, a local teacher training initiative administered by the University of Hawai'i, receiving their bachelor of elementary education degrees. American Sāmoa Governor Togiola Tulafono, who provided the keynote speech at the graduation ceremony, announced that he had signed into law an administration bill to provide \$1.46 million to the local department of education to supplement funding for teacher scholarships. Togiola further remarked that the government's goal is "to see 500 teachers with certificates and degrees in five years." This pertains to a workforce of approximately 700 teachers in the government-run public elementary and high schools alone, and clearly indicates the percentage of teachers in American Sāmoa's classrooms who need higher credentials.

Teacher Education At ASCC

ASCC plays a vital role in the process through which both pre-service and in-service teachers in the territory can earn or advance their credentials. While it should be noted that the long history of teacher education in American Sāmoa pre-dates the establishment of ASCC, for the last three decades the community college has facilitated significant advancements in the training of instructors for the territory's schools.

The American Sāmoa Community College opened its doors in 1970, and since 1974 has earned its accreditation from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). ASCC currently offers two-year programs leading to associate of arts (AA) and associate of science (AS) degrees in liberal arts, business, trades and technology, nursing, criminal justice, and most recently, elementary education. Although the community college began as a division of ASDOE, partial autonomy was granted to ASCC in 1992, and a board of higher education was established as the institution's governing body. Enrollment figures at ASCC have steadily increased over the years along with the growth of the population. The community college student body has grown from 138 during the first semester in 1970 to a total of 1,352 in spring 2005. (ASCC Second Quarter Report, FY 2005).

In its earliest years, ASCC offered an AA degree in education, but this program was superseded when the college became the site of a federally funded teacher training initiative. ASDOE secured federal funding in 1979 to create the Territorial Teacher Training Assistance Program (TTTAP), which contracted instructors from the University of Hawai'i College of Education (UHCOE) to travel to American Sāmoa to teach courses for in-service ASDOE personnel. These courses led to a four-year bachelor of elementary education degree from UHCOE. This program used classrooms at ASCC for UHCOE teacher training classes. ASDOE teachers attended in the afternoon, at the conclusion of their own teaching duties. To supplement the credits earned in these after-school classes, the program also required that the participating ASDOE teachers spend 12 weeks in Hawai'i taking additional courses during the summer. This 1979 program yielded satisfactory results, and over the years the collaboration between ASDOE, UHCOE and ASCC has evolved into two separate but cooperative entities, the American Sāmoa Teacher Education Program (ASTEP), established in 1989, and the UH cohort program. Still funded by TTTAP, both programs continue to conduct their classes at ASCC during late afternoons.

As the initial component of the training initiative for in-service ASDOE personnel, ASTEP offers these teachers both the core curriculum required for the AA degree granted by ASCC, and the required classes for entry into UH cohort. Some teachers taking ASTEP courses have not yet completed an AA degree or its equivalent at ASCC or elsewhere, while others are graduates of the community college, now teaching in the public or private schools, who earned their AA in a programs which did not require specific classes necessary for entry into UH cohort. Subsequently, the workload required for an ASDOE teacher to complete the ASTEP program varies depending on each teacher's individual needs.

Upon completion of the ASTEP program, teachers receive their ASDOE certification, and also qualify to continue by enrolling in the UH cohort program if they so choose. The UH cohort program takes the teacher through a more academically rigorous round of classes, the equivalent of a third-and-fourth-year curriculum, culminating in a bachelor's degree in elementary education from UH COE. A "cohort" consists of a group of teachers who remain together from the beginning of the program till its completion. As with the ASTEP program, ASCC faculty teach some of the UH cohort classes, while some others are taught by UH COE instructors or specially-contracted local personnel. In recent years, the requirements of the UH cohort program have been modified so that American Samoan teachers are no longer required to travel to Hawai'i for any of the necessary classes. (For further discussion of ASTEP and UH cohort, see the article by Dr. Peggy Haleck in this issue.)

The ASCC Teacher Education Department

In addition to the ASTEP and UH degree tracks for in-service teachers, ASCC has recently developed a third program to cultivate pre-service education majors from among its undergraduates. A new division within ASCC, known as the Teacher Education Department (TED), has established a curriculum which presently enables undergraduates to earn their AA in elementary education. Although the new program is still in its early stages, data from the ASCC Admissions and Records Office shows that enrollment in the Teacher Education Department, which started with eighteen education majors in 2001, has grown steadily to approximately eighty in 2003. In 2004, enrollment stands at 160. (ASCC Admissions Office, 2004).

The current head of the Teacher Education Department at ASCC is Tupua Roy Fua, himself a graduate of ASCC during the late '70s. Fua went on to spend ten years working in the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas in the field of teacher education before returning to American Sāmoa in 2000. After joining the ASCC faculty, Fua successfully applied for federal funding to launch the first TED classes in the spring of 2001. As the new program was unfamiliar to the ASCC undergraduates, Fua recalls that it had a rocky start: "During our first semester, the classes attracted only a handful of students. One section had only four sign up, and the registrar wanted to cancel it, but I thank Dr. Seth Galea'i, the Dean of Instruction at the time, for believing in the program and letting the courses continue despite the initial low enrollment (personal communication)."

Fua and his colleague, Dr. Vena Sele, designed the 100 and 200 level courses for the TED, while a council that included Fua, Sele, ASCC Vice President Dr. Seth Galea'i, Dr. Salu Hunkin-Finau, and Mrs. Tialuga Seloti

of ASTEP laid the groundwork to expand the program by developing 14 courses at the 300-level and 10 at the 400-level. In addition to the AA degree with an emphasis on education, the department offers an early childhood education teachers' certificate, and a childcare providers certificate developed in conjunction with the American Sāmoa Department of Human Services. It should be noted that the two-year TED curriculum includes the core classes required for an ASCC liberal arts degree, while integrating one course in education per semester.

In 2002, TED received a \$1.2 million US Department of Education Teacher Quality Enhancement (TQE) grant to improve the quality of the teacher workforce through training, certification, and a locally developed, four-year degree program. Key components of the project included the creation of an innovative early childhood education (ECE) teacher laboratory school and a state of the art teacher resource center.

The ECE lab school provides a model classroom setting for teachers in training. It is founded on the idea that novice teachers require ongoing support from experienced mentors and practical training in effective methodology. The lab school features developmentally appropriate learning centers as well as a kitchen, washroom, and play area. It is staffed with early childhood master teachers through a partnership agreement with the ECE Division of ASDOE (also known as Head Start). Additional support is provided through the ASDOE partnership including school lunch meals for participating children.

The practicum offers an additional feature incorporated into the 100–200 level TED courses that requires students to observe the learning process. Students visit the ASCC ECE Lab School for nine hours of structured observation to learn how an ECE classroom is managed. Thus, TED students gain firsthand experience of the responsibilities placed on the ECE classroom teacher. They learn how to develop and implement lesson plans, and observe a variety of teaching strategies used in teaching elementary students. TED students gain further instructional experience when they are assigned to work alongside a master teacher in a public school classroom.

In order to give students an intellectual foundation in the culture they will be serving, the TED curriculum includes two semesters of Samoan language. Most residents of American Sāmoa speak both Samoan and English, but their fluency in either language can vary a great deal. It comes as no surprise that some residents of the territory communicate better in Samoan than in English, but some find it shocking that a growing number of ethnic Samoans have a less than perfect proficiency in their indigenous language. This development, largely the result of the strong American influence on local culture

and the long history of travel and extended residency by American Samoans in Hawai'i and the continental US, has produced considerable concern among Samoan language educators. In local classrooms, teachers often deal with a combination of students, some of whom may not speak English proficiently, and others who may not speak Samoan. Given that most instructors at ASCC conduct their classes in English, the Samoan language classes required by the ASDOE provide a critical contribution in preparing teachers to develop the linguistic versatility to teach effectively in a bilingual society. Dr Vena Sele has expressed powerful reasons to support the Samoan language as a core subject: "I believe in the theory that a strong foundation in one's own culture makes it easier to learn about other cultures. A student's self-esteem, confidence, and learning ability all increase when they study their own society and history as seriously as they study the world beyond their shores (personal communication)."

Long Term Goals And Accreditation

The emergence of the Teacher Education Department is closely linked to the community college's longstanding aspiration to become a four-year institution. The vision statement in the ASCC 2004–2006 catalogue states that "The College realizes its potential by acquiring adequate resources to become an accredited four-year institution of higher education" (American Sāmoa Community College, 2004, p. 15). In the same document, the welcoming message from ASCC President Dr. Adele Satele-Galea'i gives a specific indication of how the institution plans to move in this direction. She writes

In early 2004, the Board of Higher Education and I set a number of goals that we hope to fulfill within the next five years. These goals include the continuation of our effort to establish a four-year Teacher Education program... Over the next several years, we hope to make some major improvements to ASCC, with our ultimate goal being to establish ourselves as a four-year institution. (p. 1)

The above summary statement by President Satele-Galea'i represents the culmination of years of discussion and planning towards the goal of ultimately making ASCC a four-year institution. These discussions involved a host of educators from different institutions—ASCC administrators, the Board of Higher Education, ASDOE personnel, and outside consultants, most notably Richard H. Kosaki, who was commissioned on two separate occasions to prepare reports on the viability of establishing a four-year program at ASCC. The first report was commissioned in 1987; the second, in 1998. In the later report, *Expanding Teacher Education Opportunities in American Sāmoa*, Kosaki (1998, p. 1) affirms that "there is a growing need for more educational opportunities at

the baccalaureate level ...the development of accessible opportunities in teacher education is the next logical step in the continuing expansion of public education in American Sāmoa." Kosaki's report proceeds to outline the challenges the community college will face in establishing its new program, and he suggests a number of strategies to confront these challenges.

It was agreed, following Kosaki's recommendations, that the creation of a new teacher education program at ASCC, separate from ASTEP and the UH program, would be the most practical first step in moving the community college towards its goal. The initial strategy involved the establishment of a two-year teacher training program for undergraduates. The program now in place leads to an AA degree in liberal arts with an emphasis in education. The TED has also prepared course guides for classes at the 300 and 400-level. Currently, the community college is seeking to have the third-and-fourth-year education curriculum accredited by WASC.

With regards to ASCC offering a four-year program, WASC policy states

For an institution which offers lower division programs but is adding one or more upper division baccalaureate degree programs and/or any graduate level work, the Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities will assume jurisdiction, consulting with the Commission for Community and Junior Colleges." (Kosaki, 1998, p. 13)

Kosaki describes the accreditation requirements of the WASC senior commission (ACSCU) as "more demanding," and he notes that if this senior commission were to assume sole accrediting authority over ASCC, this would place the community college in a position of having its two-year degree programs judged by the same standards as its four-year education program. For this reason, the community college has petitioned WASC to request "joint accreditation" status, whereby the senior commission would accredit only the education program, while the other degree programs at ASCC would remain under the purview of the junior commission.

Recent Developments

As of summer 2006, a number of ASCC graduates of TED have entered the local school system with their AA degrees, while others have opted to travel off-island in pursuit of even higher qualifications. ASCC is still awaiting an official response from the WASC Commission following a request for an official review of the TED, and of the college's plans to offer third- and fourth-year instruction in teacher training. The WASC response to the community college's request will have a major impact on the direction ASCC will take for the next several years.

As developments unfold, ASCC will continue to offer opportunities in teacher training for undergraduates through its TED, and for in-service teachers through its affiliation with ASTEP and UH cohort.

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