Chapter 14
A Critical Approach to the Community College Model in the Global Order: The College Universitaire Régional de Bambey (Senegal) as a Case Study

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Introduction

In the last decades of the twentieth century, the Senegalese public education system has been plagued with numerous problems, including the shrinking of funding sources, the lack of adequate facilities with more and more overcrowded classrooms, and the lowest rates of success ever, to name but a few. For the purpose of tackling this daunting situation efficiently, the government has devised a series of strategies including the introduction of “La Case des Tout-Petits” and the “Collège de Proximité”, and lastly the building of Regional University Centers.

“La Case des Tout-Petits” is a new concept that is inspired by the kindergarten model, where children’s basic skills are developed through creative play and social interaction. The curriculum is largely rooted in Senegalese cultural values. With its health and nutrition components, it adds new dimensions to the education of young children. “La Case des Tout Petits” goes beyond children aged from 2 to 5 to target even those who are under 1. The idea of the “Collège de Proximité,” is to build as many local middle schools as possible, especially in rural areas. This initiative sprang from the same context and was concomitant with the government’s attempt to meet the rapidly growing needs in secondary education. It has resulted in a decade of notable increase in the number of elementary school graduates.

At the higher education level, the challenge was of a quite different nature and required another kind of strategy. It resulted in the creation of regional universities primarily intended for the decentralization of higher education to play a more important role in the country’s development, in the global context of knowledge and know-how creation and spread. Along with the University of Thies, the University of Ziguinchor, the Regional University Center (CUR) of Bambey was established in 2003. In some respects, the Senegalese CUR is inspired by the North American community college model and is meant to serve the residents of the community in which it is located. The CUR of Bambey on which this study focuses is in the administrative region of Diourbel, which is located in the northwestern part of Senegal, 146 km west of Dakar, Senegal’s capital city. This is a semi-arid, and hence barren and infertile zone, where groundnut production, which used to be the
main source of income in the region, has decreased extremely rapidly over the past decades. In 2004, the region of Diourbel had 902,327 inhabitants, of whom 20% were under 20, and more than 50% were female (Service Regional de la Prevision et de la Statistique de Diourbel, 2004). The region is divided into three geographical districts (Départements): Bambey, Diourbel, and Mbacké, with 252,834 (28%), 231,687 (26%), and 418,806 (46%) inhabitants respectively (DPRE/ME, 2003). Diourbel is one of the poorest regions of Senegal.

The CUR of Bambey is the first regional university to function, and will naturally serve as a blueprint for the future expansion of the community college model in Senegal. The relevance of this reform was summed up in the following assessment of the situation at the time of its establishment:

Senegal does not have adequate human resources to carry out effective development programs to reduce poverty, create jobs, or permit meaningful participation in the global economy. Rural-urban educational disparity is particularly acute, as is the relative lack of educational attainment by women in rural areas. Senegal’s lack of a better-prepared workforce base threatens economic development and social progress, and creates barriers to the country’s entry into the global economy (Sack and Witter, 2005, p. 3).

Using Bambey as a case study, we analyze the rationale behind the initial plan of the CURs, and the ways in which it continuously shifted over time. We also try to understand the actors involved and their respective agendas, the strengths and weaknesses of the project, and the prospects for a future impact on higher education in Senegal. We put all this in context by providing an overview of the Senegalese university system, with an emphasis on the major turning points of its history, and the most pressing issues the country has been facing lately in this area.

The Senegalese Higher Education System: A Brief Overview

The formulation of higher education in Senegal was deeply rooted in the history of French colonialism in West Africa. The oldest educational institution is the School of Medicine of French West Africa, established in 1918. Eventually, it expanded to become the Institut des Hautes Etudes de Dakar [Dakar Institute of Higher Education] in 1950, and Université de Dakar [University of Dakar] in 1957. This was an obvious and sufficient reason for the school to carry a mission primarily informed by the logic of French colonialism and fundamentally foreign to the aspirations and development needs of its immediate environment.² The University of Dakar became Cheikh Anta Diop University (UCAD) in 1986. For most of its existence, even after Senegal became independent from France, the French legacy has weighed heavily in the development of the curricula and research agendas, which left the university almost completely cut-off from the development imperatives of Senegal.³ Gaston Berger University in Saint-Louis, North Senegal, welcomed its first class in the academic year 1990–1991. Compared to UCAD, this second public