

An Interview with the Rector of FC College Dr. Peter Armacost



Dr. Peter Armacost, the Rector of FC College gave an extended interview to the CPPG on the 5th of August. He shared his vision, outlined his plan for college and university education at FC College, discussed challenges and problems associated with the process of denationalization, reflected on the HEC and its programs, revival of student unions and the need for policy relevant research.

CPPG: What inspired you to opt for Forman Christian College and Pakistan?

I grew up in a family which considered life as an opportunity for service and to make society a better place. My father was a university president for 25 years and I grew up on a college campus. I heard the student point of view on the athletic fields and then also the administrative point of view at home and thus was well equipped to understand the problems in running an educational institution. My parents served as role models; they were deeply involved in the church and related national and international community activities but never at the expense of family life. Thus all my siblings have had an involvement in community service.

I had been a college and university president for 33 years, the last 23 years as president of Eckerd College, Florida. My life's mission had been higher education and working with young people in a church related setting. Our exposure to Pakistan and a relationship with the country started in 1988 when we became friends with a Pakistani couple—Ambassador Jamshed Marker and his wife. Through this friendship, we regularly met Pakistani dignitaries during their visits to Florida. Upon leaving Eckerd, I was approached by the Presbyterian Church (USA) to take up a challenging educational assignment in Pakistan, namely, recover and revive the FC College. The very thought of recovering and reviving an educational institution brought together the sense of service; my mission in higher education and the prospect of international experience which had always been a part of my thinking.

CPPG: What were some of the major challenges that you faced while working for the de-nationalization of the college?

Although the Presbyterian Church (USA) had been negotiating since 1994, the denationalization process had really started in the late nineties but the 1999 change of government delayed it. It started again after the formation of the political government in 2002. On my first trip to Pakistan in 2002, I realized that the government and alumni were

favorably disposed to denationalize FC College. However, the Governor issued a denationalization notice for 60 colleges in July 2002, and the faculty members on those campuses formed the Joint Action Committee to organize protest demonstrations. As a result, the government appeared unwilling to move forward with denationalization. Over 2,000 faculty knew that with 60 fewer colleges to which to transfer them, they could not count on staying in Lahore. I made three trips over the course of a year and it became clear to me that to carry the process forward, I needed to actually move to Lahore ready to assume leadership immediately upon the denationalization of FCC. So we made the move. Our Board concluded that if the College was not denationalized, the alternative would be to establish a new university, which looking back would have been an easier proposition.

As we worked on the modalities of taking over the College, I must share with you that the government was supportive all along and accomplished all required tasks except to get rid of illegal occupants who had taken a Stay Order from the Court. On two occasions the Court has ruled in our favor and some of the illegal occupants have been removed. However, that case regarding those still on campus is pending. The MOU with the Government required us to pay all faculty on the payroll for up to 6 months, interview all, those hired will stay on; while those who opposed denationalization and preferred government service would be transferred to other government colleges. The process was not easy and smooth, there were protests. Various faculty members met at 10 AM every morning, boycotted classes and along with mostly external help from Jamiat and some linked FC College students raised slogans outside the administrative block. One day following my invited lecture to a class, students from that class were forced to listen to the protest speeches for that day. However, it moved beyond peaceful protest when these elements entered a restricted examination area and tore up the statistics exam. The Controller Examinations, who as it turned out was against denationalization, was unwilling to stop them. I was appalled and could not approve this bad behavior, however, because of emotionally charged environment was advised to postpone the examination. When the College reopened after a couple of months, the atmosphere had stabilized as the faculty rehiring process was complete and teachers vehemently opposed to denationalization transferred to other colleges. Following denationalization we kept the intermediate (FA/ FSc) program intact, while the higher education program has been transformed into a four year baccalaureate. This has been harder than starting a new university program.

CPPG: FC College is still going through a transformation from college to a university and in the eyes of many, you are perceived as someone who has ‘rescued, revived and transformed’ FC College? How did you go about it? Could you give us a sense of your vision and what steps are you taking to achieve this?

We were faced with a number of challenges as we went through the denationalization transition. The buildings required Rs.145 million to get them in working condition, a task we have yet to complete. The culture of lack of accountability was prevalent among the faculty as attendance was full on paper but few students took their classes, instead going to evening academies. To revive the College and become a functional university, our biggest challenge was finding good faculty and re-establishing a culture of accountability.

My vision is to make FC College, the best liberal arts college in South Asia. Our goal has been to start a strong four year liberal arts program, build on the existing physical infrastructure and hire quality faculty. Our initial faculty in 2003 included many persons with only the Pakistani Masters degree of 16 years of education with no experience in teaching higher order thinking skills in a liberal arts program setting. For accreditation purposes we must have faculty members with at least 18 hours of graduate credit beyond the 16th year of education. Thus we have aggressively sought new faculty members with M.Phil and PhD degrees for our four year baccalaureate program and simultaneously conducted faculty development workshops. After five years, we are now at the end of the curve in implementing our 4 year program. We had hired only 35 out of the 200 Government FCC faculty at the time of denationalization and have since hired a total of 208 faculty members while the student enrollment has gone up by 38%.

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In my estimation faculty credentials are not the key issue so much as the quality of teaching, faculty willingness to be helpful to students and providing personalized education, and of being active in non-class room activities. Our major challenge is to inculcate a spirit of continuing education among faculty members; so that they remain current and abreast of new academic developments in their disciplines. At this point in our history, I consider it more important than even conducting research. In addition to our four year baccalaureate program, we are now concentrating on a small number of M.Phil and PhD programs. We plan to have them accredited in the West and thus want to maintain quality in both instruction and research.

Our faculty salaries were 20% higher than other institutions when we started our strategic planning process, but since HEC's public university Tenure Track System (TTS), faculty

retention is bound to come under pressure. We seek to be in a position to offer salaries that are competitive with those of the TTS, and we are concentrating on making FC College's environment its main competitive advantage. In this, we have been partly successful as we've been able to attract faculty from different universities without much of a difference in the salary structure. Eventually we plan to completely separate the college and university education; the budgets are already separate, the faculty may teach in both but we plan to make their decision making completely independent.

Fund raising is an important part of our strategy. A process is required to build a base of small donors – the challenge being to get a large number of donors to pay regularly over time and to cultivate major donors. After the missionaries left in 1973, we lost our church linked donor constituency in the US. Although we have raised \$2.8 million from private sources in the US in the last three years, it was primarily through personal contacts rather than through institutional mechanisms. We are thus fast building our institutional capacity and currently have a full time person working in the US specifically for this purpose.

Though Pakistanis are extremely generous, they usually donate to individual or religious causes rather than to institutions. Thus our biggest challenge on the domestic front has been to convince alumni and other donors to contribute collectively to institutions. When I first met the alumni, they were quite disillusioned with the college as a result of nationalization. They desired denationalization but the leadership was restrained. Since then, an alumni leadership committed to working with the administration has emerged and alumni have been vigorous in helping us solicit donations from the business community. We started an annual fund in our first year and 37 people donated for scholarships. To improve, we created a 3 to 1 challenge, where three alumni would contribute Rs 1 million each provided that 300 other donors contributed 1.5 million collectively. We were successful in achieving it. We are currently in the middle of a three year Rs. 542 million fund raising campaign to refurbish older buildings (N-block & North Hall), construct a new Science building, a Campus Center in addition to funding scholarships and creating an endowment. We need a cash endowment of Rs. 50 million to get a 'W' status from the HEC as it does not accept our revenue generating land assets. This designation would make us eligible for scholarships as well as for 50% matching funds for buildings.

Our library resources are currently limited and we have modified our strategic planning to create a new library that can hold up to 300,000 volumes, can accommodate at least 25% of the student body and is wired to access electronic journals and to provide required student services. We need about Rs. 3 Billion for all of our construction projects, almost half of which has been accomplished but the rest will be much harder.

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CPPG: For about 100 years FC College saw a rise and expansion and became the leading educational institution of South Asia. How and when you think the decline set in? Could you identify some of the causes of decline?

The reason for the academic decline was not simply government’s control of the college but its failure to manage it properly. The quality of the faculty deteriorated as hiring criteria became political rather than academic and accountability vanished. The students unions became hyper active while college administration lacked the required decision making authority. To improve quality of education, rote memorization has to give way to critical thinking and education has to include the length and breadth of various academic disciplines. The main reason we wanted to become a university was to be able to create our own curriculum and manage the examination system. In the new program we require students to take courses in all four areas – social sciences, humanities, natural sciences and mathematics. To ensure quality, each student has to pass a competency exam comprising of general subjects including Written English, Spoken English, Urdu, Quantitative Skills, and Computer Skills while before graduation each student has to pass a comprehension exam in their selected major. By training students on how to apply and integrate knowledge from various disciplines, their learning habits can be transformed. Therefore, I am of the view that until the examination system of FA/FSc is changed, one does not see much hope, as the only way to do well in these exams is through rote memorization. Some attempts are being made to provide an alternative examination system such as the Agha Khan University initiative; however, its outcome still remains a promise. Since our brightest FA/ FSc students go into professional colleges after graduation, therefore, we have started A-levels to create a feeder program for our baccalaureate program, hoping for a change and better outcome.

CPPG: You have been interacting with the HEC, in your view, what are some of the major challenges that University Education is confronted with in Pakistan?

The task of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) is extremely difficult; it is always a challenge to improve quality and increase access simultaneously. HEC’s goal to double enrollment in five and triple it in ten years requires a proportional increase in quality faculty members otherwise the quality of graduates will suffer. HEC has followed the correct strategy to invest in faculty development in the early stages including the scaling up of the USAid Fulbright program which is now the largest in the world. The concentration on the number of PhDs graduated in Pakistan is a bit misplaced, I think, until more emphasis is

placed upon the quality of these programs. I would also suggest that HEC select only a small number of public universities and invest heavily in the quality of those universities rather than attempting to lure foreign universities to come to Pakistan at huge expense to the government. I would also urge the HEC to work to strengthen the private not-for-profit universities as an integral part of the strategy to improve higher education.

CPPG: How is FC College different from other private universities?

What differentiates us from most private non-profit universities is that we are not a propriety body and thus have no concept of profit. We give scholarship support to 1600 – 1900 students every year and we also serve the minority community which is predominantly poor. I want to mention that for every Christian student, there are at least two Muslim students who get scholarship. Additionally what differentiates us from all private universities is the wide array of academic options we provide as most private universities concentrate only on financially lucrative academic disciplines. We are also different in that we provide a general education to prepare students for citizenship rather than focusing only upon career preparation. We plan to avoid discontinuity of pricing and would like to be able to charge tuition that allows us to pay good faculty salaries. A flat tuition fee can lead to loss of faculty and thus academic quality, on the other hand a huge raise in tuition leads to a loss of student enrollment. Our scholarship program is strategically linked to our tuition philosophy to avoid losing deserving qualified students. Our tuition is still a fraction of that charged by LUMS.

CPPG: Has there been a conscious effort behind the regional diversity that one sees among the FC College student body and how do you manage the vastly different educational background of these students?

The quality of the student body and thus student induction is critical for any university. We are self conscious of the diversity of our student body as it is an important aspect of the learning experience; the diversity is caused more by our reputation and history rather than aggressive recruitment. We aim to continue building on this diversity and be proactive to recruit nationally, after adding 1,100 hostel beds to the existing 550. Once this is accomplished, we also plan to encourage international students through regular and exchange programs.

We do try to provide a “level playing field” for students with varied backgrounds but we still need to do a better job. For English teaching, we have a structured program which places students according to their competency level with an opportunity to take higher level courses after developing a better mastery of English. More important is the degree of

personal attention given by the faculty in each class as most kids joining FC College are bright enough to make up the lag as long as some extra help is provided.



Dr. Saeed Shafqat
interviewing
Dr. Peter Armacost

CPPG: The new government has recently allowed restoration of the Student Unions. Do you have a suggestion on the model that can be followed?

A Student Government with active student body involvement is good for a university as student representatives help the administration understand what students are thinking allowing them to make better decisions. Universities that greatly impact student values have four things in common:

High expectations and a mission that is widely understood and shared.

The role of faculty is broadly defined to include comparable activity outside the classroom as well as inside. Faculty members with the greatest impact on students are usually ones involved in student societies or interactive laboratory work.

It provides meaningful opportunities to students, to make decisions that are important not just for students but also for the institution. Student government has been shown to be an important factor in this regard.

It provides students opportunities to use their classroom acquired knowledge outside in a completely different setting leading to a value laden experience. This inculcates in students that what they learn in class really makes a difference in practical life.

But unfortunately the student union experience in Pakistan is complicated by political parties using students to influence the management of the university. In the US, Young Republicans and Young Democrats aggressively try to involve students in local, state and national politics but they have no involvement in student government and thus

university administration. This clear demarcation between national issues based student politics and student government allows for a proper functioning of both.

I do think the Student Government idea can be implemented under a framework of our existing code of conduct as it covers most aspects such as destruction of property, but the key is to involve students so that they become stakeholders in the university and its betterment. Since student unions are still not operative at the FC College, I have met with the representatives of 29 student societies to get their feedback and to understand what they are thinking. The overlying issue for the administration is adequate student representation and not necessarily a student vote since it is not a democracy. A class based representation is hard to manage so societies currently seem the best option. Considering students are involved in mostly academic department linked societies, each with its own faculty advisor, their office holders can be constituted into a parliament to elect a student body leader.

CPPG: Public Policy and Governance are not business ventures, what prompted you to envision and encourage the launch of such a program?

Although the university directly transforms the lives of individuals, the context of the broader community has to be kept in mind. After being in Pakistan for a year with a better understanding of the ground realities, I thought that it was important to use the expertise of academia to make a difference in the life of the broader community. I had seen the impact of such a center at Eckerd College when I saw no existing example where practitioners and theoreticians came together to research and devise public policy. I have proposed the idea of an Academy of Senior Professionals, which fits well in this strategy as experienced practitioners can share their wealth of knowledge with academics and students to improve the overall academic experience and enrich research. This coming together of the various experts in their fields can auger well for Pakistan.