

A HISTORY OF EDUCATION
IN COSTA RICA

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Abstract

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A paper presented on the history of education in Costa Rica and the level of importance given to English language instruction. In 1869, Costa Rica became one of the first countries in the world to make education both free and obligatory. So important is education in this country, that Title VII (Education and Culture) of the Costa Rican Constitution, addresses the issue almost in its entirety.

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Chapter 1

COSTA RICA AND EDUCATION

The government of Costa Rica has always earmarked a large portion of its budget for all levels of education. Rather than being dictators or men of the military, many of the country's presidents have been educators who have encouraged educational improvement of the country's citizens.

Neighbors of the city of San José, always distinguished for their progressive spirit, founded in 1814 the Casa de Enseñanza de Santo Tomás (Santo Tomas House of Instruction), whose goal was the education of youth. Prior to this institution, Costa Ricans seeking to pursue higher levels of education had to travel to Guatemala or to the city of León in Nicaragua, where universities existed.

Initial instruction included reading, writing, grammar, philosophy, and moral theology. In the month of December, 1816, the neighbors inaugurated the building they, themselves, had erected for the house of teaching. In the year 1818, the rector, the professors, teachers, and students requested of D. Carlos María Isidro, brother of Ferdinand VII, that he bring the Casa de Enseñanza de Santo Tomás under his protection. He refused, and the institution was forced to provide for itself.

In 1825, Don Juan Mora Fernández, as the first Head of State, founded the Casa Pública de Enseñanza de Santo Tomás (Santo Tomas Public House of Instruction).

During the year 1830, the country sees the introduction of the first printing presses, and in early 1833 newspaper publishing begins. The first Costa Rican

textbook, printed in 1830, was “Breves Lecciones de Aritmética” (Brief Lessons in Arithmetic), to be used by the Casa de Enseñanza de Santo Tomás.

During the short administration of José María Alfaro Zamora as Head of State, the founding of the Universidad de Santo Tomás (University of Santo Tomas) was decreed in 1843, through an initiative of its minister, Dr. José María Castro (who would become Head of State in 1847).

The public building for the Universidad de Santo Tomás was constructed under the presidency of Juan Rafael Mora, who held this post in 1849 after the resignation of Dr. José María Castro.

On April 25, 1869, Jesús Jiménez is elected President. He provides efficient and substantial support for education, and brings notable professors from Europe. As well, he efficiently organized elementary education, which he declared mandatory and free.

In 1872 Tomás Guardia is elected President, and he developed education programs for the masses, considerably increasing the number of schools. In May of 1886, Bernardo Soto moves into the Presidency. His administration is characterized by his liberal and progressive tendencies, primarily for his concern and support of primary and secondary education, through initiatives of Mauro Fernández. During that same year, the General Law of Common Education was emitted, establishing primary education as free and obligatory. Soon after, the Liceo de Costa Rica (Costa Rica Liceum), the Colegio Superior de Señoritas (Superior College for Young Women), the Instituto Nacional de Alajuela (National Institute of Alajuela), and a Normal School (Teacher’s College) were created.

In 1888, The Universidad de Santo Tomás was abolished, and the School of Law was its only survivor. The closing of the institution was brought about by the idea of establishing a more practical and technological center of studies—not a good idea, as no other university came into being until 1940.

On May 8, 1906, Cleto González Víquez moves into the Presidency. During his administration the building for the National Library was erected. During the third administration of Ricardo Jiménez, beginning in 1932, many important projects were initiated, such as the large buildings for primary schools.

From 1940-1944, under the presidency of Rafael Ángel Calderón Guardia, numerous social reforms were introduced, including social medicine services, the Labor Code, and the public University of Costa Rica. The latter was of extreme importance to the people of Costa Rica as, until then, only the very wealthy could afford to send their children abroad for a university education. Those not traveling abroad were left with the choice of remaining at the high school diploma level, or of studying law at the Universidad de Santo Tomás.

Obviously, the University of Costa Rica revolutionized the country as it came to create and grow prominent citizens who would later become lawyers, doctors, engineers, educators, artists and scientists. Until this time, primary and secondary educations were really all that was available to the Costa Rican.

It is clear that Costa Rica boasts highly literate people: among those citizens ten years of age and older, the literacy rate is a respectable 93% (94.8% at those above the age of 15); the country has the most literate population in Central America. In rates of literacy (over the age of 15), Costa Rica stands 10.7 percent above the average for Latin America, and 26.1% above the average for Central America (please see Tables I and II). Many of Costa Rica's earlier fathers, such as President José María Castro, were teachers who were very concerned about the education of their citizens. In 1869, Costa Rica became one of the first countries in the world to make education both free and obligatory, to be funded by the state through its share of the country's coffee wealth. In those early days only 10 percent of the population could read and write. By the 1920s, over half of the population could do so, and by the 1970s, literacy had surpassed 89 percent.

Table I

**LITERACY RATES
IN LATIN AMERICA**

**PERSONS 15 YEARS OF AGE AND
OLDER (1995 Est.)**

Sort: Alphabetical, by Country

Argentina	96.2
Bolivia	83.1
Brazil	83.3
Chile	95.2
Colombia	91.3
Costa Rica	94.8
Cuba	95.7
Dominican Republic	82.1
El Salvador	71.5
Ecuador	90.1
Guatemala	55.6
Haiti	45.0
Honduras	72.7
Mexico	89.6
Nicaragua	65.7
Panama	90.8
Paraguay	92.1
Peru	88.7
Uruguay	97.3
Venezuela	91.1
Mean	83.6
Median	89.9
Min	45.0
Max	97.3

Table II

LITERACY RATES IN CENTRAL AMERICA	
PERSONS 15 YEARS OF AGE AND OLDER (1995 Est.)	
Sort: Alphabetical, by Country	
Costa Rica	94.8
El Salvador	71.5
Guatemala	55.6
Honduras	72.7
Nicaragua	65.7
Panama	90.8
Mean	75.2
Median	72.1
Min	55.6
Max	94.8

Tables Source: CIA 2000 World Fact Book

Since the 1970s Costa Rica has invested more than 28 percent of the National Budget on elementary and secondary education. President José María Figueres Olsen, elected to office in 1994 and serving the country until 1998 (Miguel Angel Rodríguez is currently in office), advocated a computer in every classroom—within each of the nation’s 4,000 schools—as well as compulsory English-language instruction.

Costa Ricans are hungry for instruction, and in many rural areas of the country libraries are the only avenues for continued education beyond the sixth grade. There are approximately 100 libraries throughout the country, but this number is far inferior to the needs, thus there is a desperate need for books and funds to support additional libraries.

Primary and secondary schools can be found in every community, and students are required to pay about \$20 per year as a contribution to their education. Primary education is comprised of six years; secondary, or high school, education is five years. Each is divided into two cycles, and upon the conclusion of each cycle students are required to pass comprehensive tests on all subject areas studied during those periods. By far the most difficult of these tests are the ones corresponding to the Bachillerato¹--these are a prerequisite to obtaining the high school diploma required for admission into higher education. Of course, the high school diploma, for those not fortunate enough to have followed the traditional methods of earning it, is available through adult education programs.

In addition to public systems, there are numerous private elementary and high schools that use country-specific systems of education, such as American, European, Japanese, etc. All institutions, public or private, are under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. Article 82 of the country's Constitution clearly demonstrates the social tendencies of educational reforms, as it forces the government to provide clothing and food to poor students. Furthermore, students in public schools must wear the official uniform so as to lessen economic and social distinctions between students.

Albeit Costa Rica had no university until 1940, the country now counts four state-funded institutions and over fifty private institutions of higher education. Traditionally the state-funded universities were held in the highest esteem and respect, with the belief that they provided the highest quality education. Due to the difficulty of being admitted to these institutions (academic rigor), more and more students opted for admission into private universities, many whose prestige now ranks at, or above that of, the level of the public universities.

¹ The literal translation of "Bachillerato" is Bachelors. A student who graduates from high school, obtains a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science Diploma. Along the same vein, high school, in Spanish, is known as "colegio," which translates into English as college. This is, perhaps, due to the depth and scope of material covered during the secondary education years, where a student takes courses in areas traditionally of a United States junior college-level general studies program.

The University of Costa Rica (UCR) is the largest and oldest institution of higher education in the country. It boasts an enrollment in excess of 35,000 students, mostly on some form of scholarship. Even without a scholarship, however, tuition is quite reasonable at no more than \$200 per semester.

The main campus of the University of Costa Rica is in the community of San Pedro, situated in the northeastern section of the capital, San José. There are regional campuses in other areas of the country, the most important being in the provinces of Cartago, Turrialba, Alajuela, and Puntarenas.

The National University (Universidad Nacional, or UNA), in the province of Heredia, counts 13,000 students. This institution offers a variety of liberal arts, sciences, and professional studies.

The Technical Institute of Costa Rica (Instituto Tecnológico de Costa Rica, or ITCR), in the province of Cartago, focuses on science and technology, and seeks to provide education in the fields of agriculture, industry and mining.

The State Correspondence University (Universidad Estatal a Distancia, or UNED), was founded in 1978, and is modeled after Britain's Open University. It has 32 regional centers and offers 15 degree courses in health, education, business, and the liberal arts.

In addition, there are many other universities such as the Latin American University of Science and Technology (Universidad Latinoamericana de Ciencia y Tecnología: ULACIT), and the Universidad Latina. These are the most prestigious, and most fiercely competitive, private universities in the country. There are also the Autonomous University of Central America (Universidad Autónoma de Centro America: UACA) and the University for Peace (Universidad para la Paz), the latter sponsored by the United Nations and offering a masters degree in communications for peace.

Chapter 2

THE CONSTITUTION OF COSTA RICA TITLE VII : EDUCATION AND CULTURE

Title VII of the Costa Rican Constitution is very clear on the importance awarded education for the citizens of the country.

Article 77.- Public education shall be organized as an integral process correlated in its diverse cycles, from pre-school through university education.

Article 78.- Pre-school and General basic education are compulsory. These and diversified education within the public system are free and paid for by the Nation. In State education, including higher learning, public expense shall not be inferior to six percent (6%) of the annual Gross Domestic Product, according to the law, notwithstanding the implications of Articles 84 and 85 of this Constitution. The State shall facilitate the pursuing of higher education to individuals lacking pecuniary resources. The adjudication of scholarships and grants shall be under the Ministry specific to the area, through the organism determined by law.

Article 79.- Freedom of teaching is guaranteed. Nonetheless, all private docents shall be under the inspection of the State.

Article 80.- Private initiatives in educational matters deserve encouragement by the State, as indicated by law.

Article 81.- The General direction of official learning corresponds to a superior Council formed per indications of the law, presided by the Ministry specific to the area.

Article 82.- The State shall provide food and clothing to indigent students, according to the law.

Article 83.- The State shall sponsor and organize education for adults, destined to combat illiteracy and to provide cultural opportunities to whomever desires to progress intellectually, socially and economically.

Article 84.- The University of Costa Rica is an institution of higher culture, enjoying independence for the development of its activities, and full judicial capacity to acquire rights and contract obligations, as well as to name its own organization and governance body. The other institutions of higher education of the State shall enjoy the same functional independence and equal judicial capacity as the University of Costa Rica. The State shall award these institutions personal patrimony and shall collaborate in their funding.

Article 85.- The State shall award its own patrimony to the University of Costa Rica, to the Costa Rican Technological Institute, to the National University and to the State Distance University, and will create revenues of their own, independently of those created by the institutions themselves. In addition, it shall maintain—with current revenues and those that may be required—a special fund for the financing of State Higher Education. The Central Bank of Costa Rica shall administer that fund and, each month, will distribute it in twelfths, upon the order of the mentioned institutions, according to the distribution determined by the body in charge of the coordination of higher education of the State Universities. Revenues from this special fund cannot be abolished nor diminished if, simultaneously, other superior ones are not created to replace them. The body in charge of coordinating State Higher Education shall prepare a National Plan for said education, taking into account the directions established by the current National Development Plan.

This Plan shall conclude, at the latest, June 30 of the years divisible by five and shall cover the immediately following five-year period. The Plan shall include operational revenues as well as investment expenses as felt necessary for the proper operation of the mentioned institutions in this Article.

The Executive Power shall include in the general budget of expenses of the Republic, the corresponding amount indicated in the Plan, adjusted according to variations in the purchasing power of national currency.

The Legislative Assembly shall resolve any differences arising with respect to the approval of the budgeted amounts of the National Plan of State Higher Education. (So reformed by Law N° 6580 of 18 May 1981).

Article 86.- The State shall form decent professionals through special institutes of the University of Costa Rica and the other institutes of University higher education. (So reformed by Law N° 5697 of 9 June 1975).

Article 87.- Freedom of teaching is a fundamental principle in University education.

Chapter 3

COSTA RICA AND ENGLISH-LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Teaching of the English language in Costa Rica dates back to 1824, the year when foreign languages were first registered as a requirement among the subjects to be taught in the secondary curriculum. The country has undergone stages experienced by other nations where English is recognized as an international language, i.e., from initial reliance on imported books and adherence to strict methodological principles, to the actual condition of local authors publishing materials to meet local needs.

Professor Elsa Orozco is considered by many in Costa Rica as the modern founder of English language education in the country. She established the first English language degree program at the University of Costa Rica in 1960. Having concluded studies at the University of Michigan, she brought audiolingualism to the faculty of the University of Costa Rica, who in turn applied the method to prepare students to teach in the public secondary schools.

The year 1991 brought with it another important step to the teaching of English, with the introduction of the Program for English published by the Ministry of Public Education. At the high school level, foreign language instruction had been mandatory for many years, and while 10 percent of students chose French, the remaining 90 percent opted for English. As international tourism began to expand at unexpected rates, and exports expanded beyond the traditional coffee and bananas, English language materials and methodologies lagged seriously behind national needs. The British government provided technical and financial support through an Overseas Development Administration (ODA) collaboration with the Ministry of Public Education, known as Project LEARN. National English advisor Leonor Cabrera teamed with Michael Vaughan of ODA to work

on a team of materials writers and teacher trainers so as to upgrade English language instruction in the nation.

The five-year LEARN project has resulted in numerous publications by Costa Rican educators—Learning English (a two-book series) and Have Fun (a three-book series) are currently in use by public and private schools. The material is very current, and reflects the realities today's Costa Rica and its bilingual population. The material contains units on ecological tourism, sustainable development, technology, careers, personal health, public health, democracy, and cultural diversity.

In 1994, during his campaign for the presidency, one of José María Figueres' platforms was to make public education as solid and productive as private education. This was to be achieved, in part, by extending the school day and increasing the number of days during the school year. Upon his election, one of his first initiatives was the introduction of foreign-language instruction—English and French—in public elementary schools. Pilot schools were selected within economically depressed areas of the country, and within areas popular among ecotourists. During the three years of this pilot project, technical support was provided by the World Teach organization of Boston, Massachusetts, who placed more than 200 teachers from the United States into primary schools of the Ministry of Public Education.

There are numerous other developments and improvements in English language instruction in Costa Rica. The Center for Research in Teaching and Education of the National University in 1996 launched its Master of Arts in Education with a concentration in English Language Instruction. Many docents continue to write materials that align with local requirements. Roberto Benavides, of the University of Costa Rica, publish a work entitled *Getting Foreign Language Students to Write*, a book that blends traditional writing activities, such as controlled composition and business letters, with more recent techniques such as free writing and the process approach. The Centro Cultural Costarricense-Norteamericano is celebrating its

20th year of hosting the National Conference for Teachers of English. This major event draws participants from all the Americas, and even from Europe.

Eduardo Doryan, Minister of Public Education in 1997, addressed the National Conference by stating, “Globalization has always been on the minds of our people. Last century, we became global by being one of the first nations to install electric lights... We will continue to be global into the next millennium by putting computers in every classroom, and teaching English to our younger generations, to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to become citizens of the world.”

Chapter 4

CONCLUSION

The concern and dedication of Costa Rica's leaders and educators with respect to education, at all levels, in the nation, has certainly paid good dividends. In fact, it may even have created some problems—positive ones, but nonetheless, problems.

It seems as though every citizen is in pursuit of personal and professional growth and achievements, and they all seek ever-increasing levels of education. This has translated into a nation of students and professionals, a nation where it appears quite difficult to find people willing to work the land, pick the coffee...In a country where it is tradition for most middle and upper social classes to have at least one maid/servant, and perhaps a gardener, even these people are pursuing some form of education in their free hours. It is common knowledge that coffee and land are being worked, homes are being served, and gardens are being tended by people from neighboring countries, who see Costa Rica as a haven of earnings and growth potential.

On the quite positive side, high levels of education and bilingualism have contributed to the national economy by way of international companies opting to expand in Costa Rica. Intel, for example, searched extensively for a place to establish operations within Latin America. Courted by then-president Figueres, they selected Costa Rica, not because of lower labor costs (these do not come cheap in this country), but because the people they found were precisely what their objectives required: bilingual and highly technical people who had only to receive specific company training, versus other countries, where potential employees had first to be trained in technology, then language, then company-specific training and development.

Public or private, education in Costa Rica is rigorous, practical, and world-class. It is a country that claims to have an “army of teachers.” Having no military, the army is, in fact, docents preparing Costa Ricans for the battles of the business, technical, and scientific arenas of the world.

And the push for education continues—thus far, 2001 has seen the opening of 70 new primary schools throughout the country.

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