

## Notes from the Margins: WAC, WID, and the Politics of Place(ment)

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**Abstract:** This institutional autoethnography (IAE) explores the political and pedagogical dynamics of WPA and WAC/WID work within an exceedingly small, resolutely single-sex, and assuredly rural liberal arts campus ecology. Working within a theoretical framework informed by WAC/WID's historical commitment to increasing literacy in students from diverse educational backgrounds (Zamel, 1995) and recent studies of "aspirational" colleges and universities (Tuchman, 2009), my goal in this piece is to reflect on my own experiences and connect these to larger concerns about WAC/WID's vulnerability in rural SLACs. My exploration is structured around an interrogation of what happens when a rural college's historical mission and lofty aspirations run up against (1) the philosophical constraints (self-) imposed by institutional identity; (2) the material limitations of location, institutional ecology, and faculty labor and expertise; and (3) the pedagogical realities of the underprepared students it serves. In short, this article explores how the very things that make Cottey unique—its historical commitment to women's education, its diverse student population, and the inherent flexibility that comes with having an unusually small student body—are challenged by the dynamics of institutional identity and the intensifying scramble within higher education for resources, students, and prestige.

rural, *adj.* and *n.* 1.c. Employed or stationed in country districts.  
--*Oxford English Dictionary*, Online edition (2012)

When I began as Assistant Professor of English, WPA, and WAC Coordinator at Cottey College, an extremely small, non-sectarian, two-year women's college in southwestern Missouri, I could not imagine a more rural place. The town of Nevada (pronounced "Ne-vay-da"—and don't you forget it), is typical of many rural American towns in the early 21st century. There's a quaint town square, gradually made irrelevant by fast food restaurants, gas stations, and strip malls. There's a Super Wal-Mart, strategically placed on the outskirts near the main artery and serving almost as a kind of company store for the region. (New tires? Gallon of milk? Low-wage job? Wal-Mart's got it.) Then there are a few struggling mom-and-pop-type diners, a cinderblock beer joint or two, and a handful of pharmacies. But, in the case of Nevada, Missouri, there is also a small liberal arts college (SLAC) comprised of about 350 women from 40 states and almost 26 countries (Cottey College, 2013a).

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I was immediately drawn to the friendly, rural nature of the Cottey campus and the community. Having grown up in the rural South in what I then believed was a small town, I enjoy exploring the possibilities embodied in out-of-the-way places. Despite my pluck, what I discovered at Cottey was indeed a challenge, and it opened my eyes to both the promises and the difficulties of developing a successful WAC/WID program at what is quite possibly one of the more unique academic institutions in the United States.

The following institutional autoethnography explores the political and pedagogical dynamics of WPA and WAC/WID work within an exceedingly small, resolutely single-sex, and assuredly rural liberal arts campus ecology. Working within a theoretical framework informed by WAC/WID's historical commitment to increasing literacy in students from diverse educational backgrounds (Zamel, 1995) and recent studies of "aspirational" colleges and universities (Tuchman, 2009), my goal in this piece is to reflect on my own experiences and connect these to larger concerns about WAC/WID's vulnerability in rural SLACs. My exploration is structured around an interrogation of what happens when a rural college's historical mission and lofty aspirations run up against (1) the philosophical constraints (self-) imposed by institutional identity; (2) the material limitations of location, institutional ecology, and faculty labor and expertise; and (3) the pedagogical realities of the underprepared students it serves. In short, this article will explore how the very things that make Cottey unique—its historical commitment to women's education, its diverse student population, and the inherent flexibility that comes with having an unusually small student body—are challenged by the dynamics of institutional identity and the intensifying scramble for resources and students.

## What Is Institutional Autoethnography (IAE)?

What I'm calling "institutional autoethnography" (IAE) combines elements of the sociological method of institutional ethnography (IE) with the emergent practice of autoethnography (AE), a method of self-observation and critical reflexivity that attempts to inscribe (*graphy*) the self (*auto*) within a particular institutional or social culture (*ethnos*) (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Ellis & Bochner (2000) have defined AE as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 733). Rambo (2007) has called AE "a postmodern reporting format...[that] does not speak to 'capital T' truth but instead seeks to turn the gaze inward...and both deconstruct and reconstruct 'small t,' local truths, which are... conversations which generate ideas without necessarily resulting in consensus" (p. 364). AE places the researcher herself at the center of the investigation, along with her emotions, prejudices, recollections, snippets of her autobiography, and her innermost thoughts. The researcher privileges narrative, "vignettes," and storytelling (Ellis & Bochner, 2008; Humphreys, 2005), personal reflection (Chang, 2008; Sparkes, 2007), and the articulation of potential linkages between individual experiences and larger institutional or cultural dynamics (Jubas, 2012; Wall, 2006). AE "pos[es] more questions than it answers" (Rambo, 2007, p. 364), and quite often it "simply asks for your consideration" (Sparkes, 2007, p. 521). The best autoethnographers connect their experiences and reflections to their cultural, social, or institutional milieus, thus shedding light on the complex of discourses, attitudes, and practices that both permeate and concretize those milieus.<sup>[1]</sup>

The nature of WPA work, as readers of this publication are well aware, is often deeply personal (George, 1999). As a method, IAE mirrors and thus underscores the inescapably personal nature of WPA work, while respecting the epistemological anxieties and misgivings that often attend more "personal" approaches to research and the imperative to produce disciplinary knowledge that is useable across institutional contexts. IAE is certainly not the only method I could have chosen to use to undertake this kind of study, but I believe it is the best insofar as it permits me to reflect candidly

on my own experiences and perceptions, while at the same time scaffolding these observations with peer-reviewed research, historical texts, and verifiable institutional data.

## A Brief History of Cottey College

Cottey College had never had a WAC/WID program. Some interested faculty had made isolated efforts in the decade before I came to Cottey in the fall of 2010 to increase the amount of writing in classes other than English and writing courses. These efforts yielded limited success. As often happens, well-meaning attempts at curricular and institutional change over time became the victims of atrophy, burnout, and the lure of new programs and fresh ideas. From the first day of my tenure-track position, I was regaled with tales of the difficulty of getting such a program up and running again: it's too political, it takes too much time, there's too much else going on, there's not enough interest or "buy in" from the faculty. I even heard from some that "the culture" won't tolerate the level of involvement WAC/WID programs require from faculty and administration.

Several years earlier, my predecessor had implemented an annual writing contest that collected essays from students across the disciplines. This popular event was in some ways the last vestige of that earlier era. With my hiring, the administration signaled that it now wanted a fully-formed WAC/WID program, and they wanted it fast, on the cheap, and with a junior faculty member at the helm. It's not at all uncommon for rural, branch, or regional campuses to hire eager junior faculty as WPAs to usher in a WAC/WID program in resistant—if not downright hostile—institutional cultures. And the dynamics surrounding my hiring were similar: as a junior faculty member in his first year on the job, my institutional power was almost nil, while my capacity to make enemies and career-damaging mistakes seemed almost infinite. Still, in a way that I think is common among many newly-minted, untenured WPAs, I was enthralled by the possibilities this position offered. Everything seemed up for grabs, and everything seemed possible. When I arrived on campus, I found myself at a college with a unique institutional history and mission, as well as a highly-specific vision for the future: to become a leader in women's higher education on a national and even global stage. Despite the mundane obstacles I found on the ground—the unfamiliar politics, the lack of institutional resources or knowledge or even *allies*—this lofty vision fueled and informed my desire to do good at my newfound institution.

Founded in 1884, Cottey College was originally the vision of Virginia Alice Cottey (Stockard)<sup>[2]</sup>, a pedagogical pioneer who devoted her life (and her life savings) to women's education at a time when most Americans viewed higher education in general as something of a lark. Born in rural Missouri in 1848, VAC's early years were shaped by the smoldering embers of America's second Great Awakening and her involvement in the Southern Methodist Church (Kerbs, 2005; Troesch, 1955). VAC's mother and father encouraged her to explore her educational aspirations from a young age. They even provided for her to attend two boarding schools in her youth—an undoubtedly significant influence on her early education that may well have also shaped her views on *Suite Life* when she founded Cottey College (see below).

Frustrated by women's severely limited opportunities for formal education and bolstered by her conviction that women were "called... to a high and holy destiny [as]... co-laborer[s] with [God] in the great work of enlightening and saving the world" (Kerbs, 2005), VAC set out at the ripe age of thirty-five to build a college for women in Nevada, Missouri. She considered other sites as far-flung as Fort Worth and Kansas City (Troesch, 1955), but she decided on Nevada when she cannily convinced town officials to gift sixty acres of farmland to the cause (Kerbs, 2005). The college grew over the years from a small, one-room building to a full-fledged campus, and in 1927, VAC (now Stockard) deeded

Cotney to the Philanthropic Educational Organization (PEO) Sisterhood, a national women's philanthropic organization (PEO International, 2013).

Today, Cotney is the only non-sectarian private college owned and operated by a national women's organization, and due in large part to the PEO's enormous generosity, Cotney routinely ranks with the likes of Princeton, Harvard, and Yale in terms of its endowment-per-student ratio (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2010). Because of its ties to PEO and its unique historical mission to educate women, Cotney draws students from the US, Canada, and all over the world. Consequently, its student body is extraordinarily eclectic both in terms of students' cultural experiences and diverse educational backgrounds. Some students are from the very top of their high school classes and could easily succeed most anywhere in American higher education; others come to Cotney from underserved populations and ESL backgrounds. Many of these students are first-generation learners or international students who often need basic writing/reading courses and/or significant ESL support.

In terms of its institutional identity, Cotney is something of an "inbetweenner." Exclusively a two-year transfer school for almost 127 years, Cotney is not a community college. Though it began offering select Bachelor of Arts degrees in English, environmental studies, and international relations and business in 2011 (psychology was approved in 2013), Cotney isn't exactly a four-year small liberal arts college (SLAC) either, or at least not primarily. I was hired in part to assist with the transition to the four-year programs by helping to design writing-intensive and interdisciplinary courses and a minor in writing and rhetoric. I was also responsible for directing the Writing Center, developing and coordinating the WAC/WID program, assisting with the design of the four-year English degree and the interdisciplinary courses housed within the Institute for Women's Leadership and Social Responsibility (the administrative umbrella in which the four-year program is metaphorically housed), overseeing the annual writing contest, carrying a 4/4 load, advising students, and attending numerous after-hours campus events, speakers' series, student presentations, and galas. Research and writing—as I was told up front and honestly when I interviewed for the position—did not factor into the tenure equation and was a "summer pursuit" to the extent that it was to be a pursuit at all.<sup>[3]</sup>

When I arrived on campus, the push was to stuff two or three years' worth of careful planning, deliberation, and faculty input into a couple of semesters so that the four-year BA programs could be up and running as quickly as possible. There were several reasons for the rush job: first, sagging enrollment in the wake of the economic downturn had created some considerable anxieties (both financial and to a certain extent "existential") among upper administration; second, the senior administration, unable to boost enrollment through other means, seemed to view the transition to a four-year college as a way to accomplish what had proven impossible through marketing and recruitment (the specific enrollment goal at one point was 500 students); and third, Cotney's metamorphosis into a four-year SLAC meant playing in the "major leagues," which—the thinking was—would translate into both greater prestige for the college and (again) higher enrollment numbers. No topic of conversation during my tenure at Cotney was more important or more carefully broached in "mixed" company than the sticky issue of how to boost sagging enrollments. It stands to reason, then, that enrollment also played a significant role in how Cotney's institutional identity and its future aspirations were shaped.

## Competing Visions, Institutional Aspirations

The administration's general attitude regarding basic writing and ESL courses had been that to implement such support structures would be to "segregate" students by ability (and perhaps also by class, race, ethnicity, and/or nationality). Basic writing and ESL courses can be a hard sell at any

institution (Matsuda, Ortmeier-Hooper, & You, 2006), and some universities have even jettisoned existing ESL programs in their quest for greater institutional prestige (Dadak, 2006). Given the close quarters of Cottey's intimate educational environment, the administration's explicit argument was that placing students in these "remedial" courses would inhibit proper socialization into the mainstream. By the time I arrived, this mindset had become the administration's de facto party line.

There was some merit in the administration's concerns about how students placed into these courses might come to view themselves or be viewed by others as "different" or deficient. Indeed, Bartholomae (1993) and Shor (1997) have each made similar claims about the potentially negative social(izing) functions of basic writing courses. What I found noteworthy, however, was how frequently the administration's concerns were couched in terms of institutional identity: "A Cottey student is a Cottey student," was essentially how the tautological thinking went. Remediation of any sort was simply not in keeping with Cottey's liberal arts ideal or its evolving institutional identity.

There were, in effect, two competing visions of the writing program and of WAC/WID at Cottey College, but whereas both were based in considerations of place and changing institutional dynamics, they differed significantly in their endpoints.<sup>14</sup> In my capacity as WPA and WAC/WID Coordinator, my vision was that we needed to re-attune our curricular and institutional structures to more effectively meet the diverse literacy needs of our current and incoming students. Specifically, I felt we needed to develop a more sensitive and sophisticated placement mechanism for incoming students—a writing sample, a written placement exam, or even a more careful consideration of ACT/SAT scores—that would place students into at least one semester of basic writing or ESL at the 100-level (let's call it "English 100-A"); from there, students could decide for themselves whether they were ready for English 101 or whether they wanted to enroll in a second (but optional) course in the second semester (let's call it "English 100-B").

Both courses would be credit-bearing. Because of our small size, we could have run as few as two separate sections of either 100-A or 100-B each semester, depending on the specific needs of incoming students from one semester to the next. One section might emphasize developmental writing and reading for first-language learners, for example, while the other would focus more on skills specific to second-language learners. This plan would almost certainly have required hiring someone with the appropriate training on a full-time basis. Because of our rural location, we had enough trouble finding adjuncts to cover regular sections of FYW, so recruiting qualified ESL specialists in the area was probably a fool's errand. We could have potentially hired someone from Kansas City or nearby Pittsburg, Kansas to perhaps work on a course-by-course basis, but to make it attractive and worth the driving time, we would've had to pay the new hire at least double the going rate for adjunct faculty, or around \$4,000 to \$4,500 per course. This, too, was an impossible sell to the administration.

As visions go, mine was decidedly utilitarian and didn't exactly make for good marketing copy, but it was necessary for the types of students who were becoming a larger presence in our incoming classes: international students and minority students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds. I recall one rather enthusiastic PEO member from Texas who would send us quite a few students each year. These students were given an extraordinary educational opportunity and some received generous scholarships from the Sisterhood, but many were native Spanish speakers who had just spent the last ten years of their schooling navigating the bowels of the Texas public school system in an economically disadvantaged part of the state. Because of this PEO member's connections and zeal, however, the majority of these students were admitted to Cottey, despite their low test scores or GPAs. Some had never written more than a paragraph in English, and they tended to flounder in FYW. I was excited to think what we could do in the future with the appropriate curricular and financial



support, but it pained me to know that we weren't providing our current students with the attention and coursework they needed now.

The administration's vision, fueled in large part by Cottey's ongoing transformation into a four-year institution, was of a unified institutional identity—a vision of "Cottey College" well-suited to marketing materials and to its considerable fundraising efforts, as well as to the ever-present enrollment goals and growth benchmarks. This is what I called "the Cottey Going Forward" vision, since anytime it was discussed it was accompanied by a breathless rush of forward momentum, almost as if talking about it in such terms would help the vision materialize more quickly and concretely. Ginsberg (2011) has suggested that such administrative visions, which are often communicated through strategic plans and other high-level administrative documents, constitute the symbol systems through which administrators assert their authority, co-opt faculty to buy-in to their version of institutional growth, and distinguish themselves from their administrative predecessors or even competing faculty-led factions on campus. The plans themselves are often vague and open-ended, with long-term "vision statements" and priorities rather than specific, here-and-now solutions; this view has led Ginsberg (2011) to suggest that the substance or product of strategic plans is far less important than the *process*: that is, the "impression of feverish activity and forward movement" they are intended to provoke among faculty, staff, and the general public (p. 51).

Accompanying this unified vision of the institution was also a unified vision of a Cottey student: well-prepared, "fits in," ready to go on day one, a sort of universal student-subject. Given Cottey's history as a women's college, and given the difficulties women have historically faced in gaining access to educational opportunities, it's significant that a key part of the administration's vision was of a homogenous, universal liberal arts student who could be placed most anywhere, one who didn't need any extra scaffolding or assistance. Moreover, to their way of thinking, if Cottey was to exist—much less compete—on a national stage with other women's SLACs, then what was taken to be its inherent provincialism, an inescapable side effect of its rural location in southwestern Missouri, would somehow have to be reckoned with.

## Global Awareness or Local Evasion? The Politics of Ruralism

The administration's method for dealing with Cottey's unavoidable ruralism was to pursue as one of the cornerstones of the new four-year programs an emphasis on "global awareness." Closely related in some respects to what Ball & Lai (2006) have called an "ethos of placelessness" (p. 264), global awareness has recently become part of contemporary higher education's lingua franca. Considered something of a hot topic in literature geared toward higher education administrators (Pace, 2012, p. 44), global awareness has been defined as "a perspective comprised of intellectual, psychological, and social attributes that allows a person to function capably anywhere in the world" (Pace, 2012, p. 44). With social responsibility/social justice and leadership, these three memes are now firmly entrenched in contemporary "admini-speak," the rich patois of management theory and business jargon used by today's administrative-managerial class. When Cottey made the shift to offering four-year BA programs, it's no surprise that global awareness, women's leadership, and social responsibility formed the three intertwining "threads" of Cottey's Institute for Women's Leadership and Social Responsibility.

None of this is necessarily problematic on its own, but where it presented challenges was in terms of how it came to shape faculty discussions and administrative decisions at the departmental and curricular level. Though never made explicit in precisely these terms, I believe the same administrative vision that motivated the adoption of global awareness also led the administration to neglect the more concrete and ultimately more practical focus on the pedagogical scaffolding many

of our incoming students needed. This attitude was further bolstered by the assumption that because a relatively small percentage of Cottey students were actually from the region, a "cosmopolitan" emphasis on global awareness might function as an antidote to any lingering perception that Cottey's ruralism spilled over into its curriculum or its institutional presence. In other words, a key part of the administration's vision ("solution" might be the more appropriate term here) was, in effect, to project an image of *placelessness* onto an institution that was not only resolutely place-bound and indelibly marked by its rural location, but that also had a great deal to offer the surrounding community—a region in need of the cultural or pedagogical assistance Cottey could offer. And the community could in turn enrich the educational experiences for students.<sup>[5]</sup> Given our institutional flexibility, it was deeply frustrating for me to think about what Cottey could *do*(today) if the administration wasn't so fixated on what Cottey could *be* (in the future). This, in short, was the crux of the philosophical difference at the core of Cottey's growth and its future, one with which many institutions large and small are now coming to terms: to fulfill institutional and ethical obligations to existing students or to shore up institutional identity for a hoped-for tomorrow.

It needn't be an either-or proposition, of course, but keeping this place-based context in mind, one can begin to imagine that even initiating a serious conversation about developing tiered courses into which students would then be placed—whether basic writing/ESL, on the one hand, or even advanced or honors sections, on the other—was politically fraught, as discussions of institutional identity tend to be among aspirational colleges and universities. Tuchman (2009) has dubbed these institutions "wannabe U's": schools with lofty aspirations to jump from one tier to another, whether this is driven by a desire for greater institutional (or individual) prestige, money, or the seemingly never-ending quest for higher enrollments. The problem with the current zeitgeist surrounding prestige-chasing isn't that SLACs like Cottey are trying too hard to recruit students, or to compete, or even to move up the food-chain. To some extent, as other commentators have suggested (Anctil, 2008; Szekeres, 2010), costly marketing campaigns and fund-raising blitzes are a necessary part of growing an institution in today's über-competitive higher education landscape. Rather, the problem is that schools like Cottey are trying too hard *to be just like everybody else*. This is another of Tuchman's (2009) main points: that the homogenous groupthink currently popular among the administrative-managerial class who control higher education is undermining some of the very things that make schools like Cottey unique and impressive. Culturally and economically, it's an attitude well-suited to our anxiety-ridden times. Like the one-dimensional corporate culture from which today's administrative-managerial class have borrowed liberally in order to write their own playbook, "uniqueness" is good, but uniqueness that transcends or challenges a narrow, focus-grouped understanding of what constitutes "the unique" is often viewed as an unnecessary (and potentially costly) risk.

## The Suite Life

One of VAC's most strongly-held beliefs was that young women needed to learn to live, work, play, and study side-by-side; she arguably pioneered in the late-nineteenth century the fully-integrative, suite-style student housing that Student Life gurus now consider a matter of policy and a key tactic in the never-ending battle to increase retention. Immersive education was so important to her that in 1889, discouraged by reports of excessive euchre-playing, dancing, and parties during Christmas recess, VAC canceled the break for the following year (Troesch, 1955, pp. 88-89). (The institutional reticence regarding school holidays has continued on to the present day: classes are still held on both Labor Day and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, which is somewhat ironic given Cottey's pronounced commitment to social justice.) VAC's dream also lives on at Cottey in the form of "Suite Life," and it is not only a central component of a Cottey education (in 2012, only around 1% of

students lived off-campus), but it's also a factor that looms large in any attempt to examine Cottey as an educational institution (Cottey College, 2013b).

Suite Life means that students live, work, study, dine, relax, and play in close proximity to each other, virtually around the clock.<sup>[6]</sup> Despite the occasional school-sponsored trip to Kansas City (1.5 hours away) or unauthorized house party in nearby Pittsburg (a more manageable 45-minute trip), the Cottey campus and the town of Nevada form a tight seal around students' experiences. There just isn't much else going on off-campus that can function as an intellectual or emotional respite—big or small—from the routine pressures of school. Families and friends are often hundreds or even thousands of miles away, and it's difficult to find an anonymous place to get a cup of coffee and simply blend in for a few hours over a good book. At an institution as small as Cottey, in a town as rural as Nevada, Suite Life assumes a somewhat overdetermined significance; by design it is intended to be an immersive educational experience for students, and the fact that Nevada is surrounded on all sides by cornfields and pastures assists in honing the effect. But for all of the positives it has undoubtedly yielded for almost 130 years, in a climate in which higher education is increasingly viewed as just another purchasable commodity, Suite Life can be a difficult sell to new generations of college students. The rhythms of work, study, and friendship that develop in the suites can make or break a student's college experience and affect her education in profound—though not always positive—ways.

While the explicit spillover from the suites into the writing classroom was usually minor (e.g., a couple of times I had students who didn't get along "inform" on one another as to why one or the other didn't make it to class, and in a few instances simply placing students into groups would expose long-held grudges that could transform something as innocuous as peer review into an exercise in skilled diplomacy), Suite Life did present more serious problems. At the end of my first semester, for example, I sat down with a couple of my first-year students; I had heard through the always-buzzing Cottey grapevine that they weren't going to return after the break, and they wasted no time in blaming it on Suite Life: "There are too many girls." "It's just too much drama." Not totally sure how to proceed, I asked about their ability to study in the suites, and their response was that social concerns—warring factions of students, shifting allegiances among suitemates, and even the pressure to engage in Cottey's many student traditions<sup>[7]</sup>—monopolized much of their time. "I don't know when I'm supposed to study. It's all just too much." At the end of my first semester, Cottey lost between 30 and 35 students out of approximately 300, or more than 10% of the student body.

## Location, Location, Location: Faculty Expertise and Material Limitations

The close proximity between the writing classroom and the suites did have more subtle pedagogical effects, such as when it came to grading and evaluating student writing. WPA and WAC/WID scholarship has explored the sensitive politics of grading (Yancey & Huot, 1998; Allison, Bryant, & Hourigan, 1997; Zak & Weaver, 1998), particularly for untenured junior faculty (McEachern, 2004), and I quickly learned that the comments and grades I wrote on student papers often became the objects of CIA-level scrutiny back in the suites. McEachern (2004) and Sandman & Weiser (1997) have written about faculty members' anxieties concerning grade-norming sessions with other faculty, and it's something of a commonplace of scholarship on grading theory that grades are "symbols that speak to many audiences" (Carbone & Daisley, 1998, p. 80). However, few scholars have examined the symbol-system of grades vis-à-vis a suite full of students, many of whom might be enrolled in the same section, and all of whom might be enrolled in FYW. Once I had nearly an entire suite of close friends in one class, and even though these students were capable and eager to learn, I



found myself rethinking my entire evaluative/feedback schema to reflect the fact that I was writing comments that likely would be read and shared by all of these students—each with different pedagogical needs, strengths, and weaknesses. As a few faculty members told me when I arrived on campus, Cottey was something of a "fish bowl," but I didn't expect this level of surveillance in evaluating student writing.

The commenting and grading strategies I had picked up over eight years' of college-level writing instruction and five years of a rhet-comp PhD now had to be significantly revised as the subtleties of grading became increasingly visible and therefore political. Research on evaluating student writing suggests that grades are often used to motivate students (Yancey & Huot, 1998), but where once I might have used a lower grade or a strongly-worded comment to prompt a student to apply more effort to the next draft, I now had to consider the "feedback loop" that stretched from student to student, and even from student to faculty member. During my first semester, an upset student barged into my office without knocking and demanded an explanation for a grade. My mind raced so furiously with visions of my own imminent demise ("Junior Faculty Member Lasts 3 Weeks on the Job" is how my overactive imagination envisioned how the blurb might read), it took me almost five minutes to realize this wasn't my student. This was a student of my senior colleague across the hall, and what she wanted from me was not so much an explanation as an ally in her fight against the "C+" she had received from my colleague.

While it ultimately made me a sharper and more conscientious grader, I also felt hamstrung. My training and my teaching instincts had always been to develop one-to-one, dialogic relationships with individual students and their writing: comments and feedback over the course of a semester would conform to where an individual student happened to be in her development as a writer. This was a central part of my overall approach to grading and writing pedagogy, but it was consistently undermined by my anxieties about reaching some golden mean of fairness and my fears of being (mis)interpreted outside the bounds of the ostensibly *personal* teacher-to-student correspondence that grading and evaluating student writing presumably entails. The angry student episode had shown me firsthand what happened to other faculty—*tenured* faculty. Tobin (1993) has remarked that "[w]hile our colleagues are not literally present in our classrooms, we are almost always aware of how our attitude, our approach, our goals and our grades compare with theirs" (p. 141). The feedback loop made me feel as though nothing I wrote on anything was sacred or safe from scrutiny. Even the industry-standard checkmark on a freewrite began to take on sinister implications. In short, the evaluator had become the evaluated. And it was an uncomfortable negotiation.

I quickly gathered from conversations with colleagues that grading in FYW had always been a sensitive issue at Cottey, but there was yet another layer to the onion. As the de facto WPA and WAC/WID Coordinator, I was supposed to have all the answers. Institutionally, I represented the "fix" for these issues. But an even more pressing "fix" than even this was the matter of what to do with the students—first- and second-language learners alike—who needed to be in an ESL or basic writing course. How could I provide them with the painstaking scaffolding they needed to improve their writing while also remaining attuned to the equally specific and no-less demanding intellectual needs of the stellar students? For that matter, what about the more run-of-the-mill student writers in the same class? At a rural, almost-fully residential institution like Cottey, the "spectrum problem," as I call it, takes on a renewed sense of urgency and significance.

One of the common pedagogical problems in FYW, for example, was that a fifth of the class might be so far beyond the rest of the students in terms of writing ability, reading level, and intellectual maturity that it was exceedingly difficult to make sure everyone was getting the kind of attention they needed: some students needed significant support outside of the classroom just to complete a one-page personal narrative, while other students were hungry to discuss complex ideas about

politics and culture and wanted reading lists and regular, protracted discussions during office hours and after class. For a new junior faculty member, one whose tenure case would be made almost exclusively on his teaching (i.e., teaching evaluations and little else), this was an odd and unsettling experience. On some days I felt like a professor at a tier-one SLAC: chatting with a first-year student from suburban San Francisco who had already read *Nicomachean Ethics* or *On the Genealogy of Morals* in her spare time in high school, or advising a student from Colorado whose 11th-grade geology teacher had combined environmental policy documents with Earth Mother-manifestoes and excerpts from *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. On other days, I felt like a basic writing teacher who didn't know what he was doing: there were students from Texas who had never written more than 250 words on *anything* and who couldn't read our textbook, or students from Japan who couldn't speak or read English any more than I could speak or read Japanese. All of these students were placed into English 101, the first course in our two-semester FYW sequence.

If I'm being completely honest, the overwhelming temptation was to focus my energies on the stellar students and the more promising middle-of-the-roaders. The overall workload at Cottey was intense, in part because we were so seriously understaffed, but also because the faculty in the four-year BA programs were tasked with their overall design and implementation—easily a full-time job in its own right. Whereas I could riff with a student on Nietzsche or environmental politics with little effort, I felt totally unprepared to meet the needs of the underprepared students. (Those of us in the English department often joked that we did our course prep and grading in our free time, which was largely true.) But "teaching to the six," as Bérubé (2002) has proposed, just doesn't cut it at a place like Cottey College. "Writing off" students and leaving them to flounder between the rocks of an indifferent bureaucracy and the hard places of institutional rigor, as sometimes happens at large public universities, isn't an option at a place like Cottey where an integral part of the culture is that everyone can succeed—really succeed. Even if I had wanted to—and I probably *needed* to—I couldn't write off any students.

As the newly-hired, untenured WPA and WAC/WID Coordinator, then, I found myself in an interesting situation. I had been hired to cultivate the writing program (intellectually, administratively, etc.), among many other duties, and I immediately began to see cracks and structural imbalances in how we did things. But I felt powerless in the face of not only the administration and what I increasingly felt were curricular decisions driven primarily by funding priorities and institutional politics (familiar foes to any WPA), but also against a 130-year tradition of doing things *a certain way* at an unusually small, single-sex institution. In other words, and as predictably as any veteran WPA might imagine, the administration wanted something done—they wanted writing "fixed," they wanted more writing in more classes, and they wanted all Cottey graduates to be proficient writers (i.e., capable of producing documents free from surface errors)—but they were unprepared or unwilling to respond in kind to a challenging, multi-faceted problem. The administration wanted to keep patching a leaky roof; those of us in the English department knew we needed a new roof. The support the students needed was structural support. Instead we received patches: empty words of encouragement, promises that we could reopen the conversation when enrollments improved, and reassurances that we were being heard and that shared governance was working.<sup>[8]</sup>

What the institution wouldn't provide, the students sought out themselves. Sort of. All full-time English faculty at Cottey teach first-year writing in small courses (during my tenure the cap was set at an enviable fifteen students). However, none of the four tenured or tenure-track members of the English department had any formal training in basic writing or in ESL; I was the only faculty member with a PhD in rhetoric and composition studies. Aside from our one adjunct, a local high school teacher with an MA in English, we four full-timers taught the lion's share of the FYW sections.

(Ironically, our extremely small size and rural location made us decidedly more progressive in our staffing practices; it's not uncommon for rural, regional, and branch colleges and universities to be able to claim an 80/20 [or greater] full-time to contingent faculty ratio in FYW.) In any case, students who needed ESL support sought it out, though not in the form of an ESL specialist, but in the form of an English faculty member who they knew would go above and well beyond the feasible to spend as much time with them as they could. In the way a stream shapes the banks around it as it finds the path of least resistance, some of our students in effect "placed" themselves by taking courses with those faculty who they had learned—through both informal conversations with suitemates and institutional lore—would spend as much time with them as necessary.

At first glance, it is tempting to view this as a serendipitous side-effect of teaching in a small college: if the faculty can't use institutional flexibility to their students' advantage, then perhaps the students can. Certainly, this appealed to our desire to see evidence of student empowerment, but it also led to some challenging pedagogical and administrative problems. For example, each of the four full-timers in the English department (all of whom were tenured or tenure-track), taught either two or three sections of FYW each semester; our fourth class was generally an upper-level course in literature or in my case advanced writing or rhetoric. Given the institutional context I've sketched thus far, it was imperative that we maintain consistency among the roughly 12-15 sections we offered each semester, perhaps even more so than at larger institutions. This was not only central to our departmental mission, of course, but it was a practical and pedagogical necessity as well: as I've mentioned, students compared notes, grades, comments, syllabi, readings, etc., so if something didn't "match up" to their satisfaction it could create problems in and out of the classroom. Given that the students who self-selected came to expect a certain *kind* of FYW experience with a particular instructor, not giving these students that experience might have negative consequences for both parties. The colleague who was deemed to be the most useful for ESL students and basic writers, for example, taught FYW sections that were nearly full of students who needed this special attention, which made it difficult for this instructor to maintain consistency and meet departmental standards in areas such as number of pages assigned, number of drafts, reading loads, and even grades. This instructor also spent a great deal of time at school after hours working with students on essays and drafts, which led to some rather glaring labor inequities among the English faculty and between the English faculty and faculty in other disciplines.

## Conclusion: Philosophical Constraints, Material Limitations, and Pedagogical Realities—Higher Education in Anxious Times

I've tried in this article to not only suggest how the arms race for homogenous articulations of institutional identity constitutes a pressing concern for many in higher education, particularly for WPAs and WAC/WIDers in institutionally-vulnerable positions, but also to show the deleterious pedagogical effects to which this phenomenon can lead. Call it the "Applebee's" approach to institutional identity: a mode of thinking, planning, and action that is both the result of and increasingly wedded to the anxious economics and cultural timidity of our present era. In short, you find an institutional identity that has worked for the greatest number of colleges and universities, and then overlay that identity onto your institution (Tuchman, 2009). Whatever doesn't fit—curriculum, programs, departments and schools, and even the needs of incoming and current students—can always be dealt with later on. Or not, as the case may be. Like the street signs, team photos, pennants, and other detached signifiers that adorn the faux-exposed brick interior of a ubiquitous, casual-dining chain restaurant, my experiences in higher education have led me to see the administrative-managerial class's favored philosophy of institutional identity to be so much

homogenous and unconvincing adornment. When the look, the marketing, and the experience are the focus, does anyone really notice whether the food is any good?

There is certainly no shortage of commentary painting American higher education with a broad brush and in a negative light. There are the intractable labor problems, the strained ethics of student debt financing, the textbook industry. Cottey was in some important respects a respite from all of this, an outlying oasis with the flexibility, freedom, and financial resources to do things its own way and, crucially, to actually get away with it. This is precisely what had drawn me to Cottey in the first place: I saw an opportunity to have a lasting, positive impact on an institution, a chance to leave my mark. Many of us, whether WPAs or WAC/WID specialists or some other strain of rhet-comp enthusiast, when we finally do complete our PhDs and transition—gingerly and with great trepidation—into our first engagement with what is still euphemistically called the "academic job market" (Bousquet, 2008), we do so with the memories of our graduate institutions firmly in place. And with just a few notable exceptions, these are mostly large, flagship programs with layer upon layer of stultifying bureaucracy and writing programs that require an act of Congress to change or revise. In this way, rurality needn't be seen as a handicap to identity-building, even in this "global age," but as a potential boon to growth, to *authentic* shared governance, and, far more importantly, to education. Perhaps, then, the special lure of the rural, regional, and/or satellite campus is the lure of the possible, the "what ifs?" that attend all acts of speculative thinking. *What if I can apply what I've learned to a new institution? What if I can do good in a visible and concrete way—for my students, my colleagues, and my community? What if I actually succeed?*

Unfortunately, however, at least as far as my story is concerned, this did not occur. Instead, I soon learned that even independent, rural institutions like mine—small colleges with the make-up to break away from the pack and try something new, as Cottey's founder VAC did—rarely seize upon these increasingly-rare opportunities to embrace those features that make them unique. At the risk of deflating expectations with an anti-climactic ending or indulging too heartily in "QuitLit,"<sup>[9]</sup> the ongoing material, pedagogical, and institutional challenges I faced at Cottey led to my resignation. In my annual review meeting with the Vice President of Academic Affairs, I announced that I had accepted another position, and that I would (of course) close out the year and do my best to leave the institution and my colleagues and students in a good position going forward. Powerful though it was, the lure of consistency and the possibility of a starting over were greater than the excitement that had initially attended my choice to become WPA and WAC/WID coordinator at Cottey. My experiences there led me to look elsewhere for non-WPA employment. In short, I felt as though I had failed.

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I now believe that Cottey was caught in a bind constituted by at least three factors: (1) a top-down institutional vision of what Cottey could do, could be, and could achieve in the future; (2) a rather conservative, traditional, and stubbornly tautological understanding of what a Cottey student should *be* and should be expected to *do* as "a Cottey student" in the here and now, as well as the nostalgia of "that's how we've always done it here"; and (3) the bedrock pedagogical realities that our actual, current students brought with them to college. As WPAs, WAC/WID specialists, and as teachers of writing, we should be reminded that competing notions of institutional identity and different visions for the future of our institutions are not merely abstract or "academic" philosophical questions; they are central to the future of our institutions—whether public or private, large or small, rural or urban, branch or flagship—and they have decidedly concrete effects on our students, our curricula, our time, and our quality of life as faculty members.

Finally, be it rural, regional, satellite, or otherwise, we have a duty to ensure that our campuses and our students receive the best we can offer. Against the conventional wisdom of our own era, in which jeremiads and calls of crisis abound everywhere in our publications, institutions of higher education in the United States are serving more students—and more diverse students—than ever before in history, even as the price of admission continues to skyrocket to unethical and frankly dangerous levels (Frank, 2013, October). Rather than shrinking from this sizeable responsibility or allowing ourselves to be ushered out of our own decision-making processes, as faculty we have a duty to our students to seize upon *this* time, our own era, as a time that is ripe for setting ourselves to the enormous, and enormously important, task of reshaping our institutions to meet the needs of changing students in mercurial times.

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## Notes

[1] In recent years, higher education has become a popular site for AEs. Sparkes (2007) has written an ostensibly fictionalized account of higher education's growing audit culture and its effects on faculty, while in

a similar vein Jubas (2012) has argued persuasively that academic neoliberalism works to constrain and limit faculty autonomy in research and teaching and even reaches into their personal lives. Delving further into more explicitly personal territory is Rambo (2007), whose shockingly-detailed AE describes how her article manuscript concerning incest and her sexual relationship with a student was denied approval by her university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). But perhaps most germane to this examination is Humphreys' (2005) reflection on his own academic career and the "feelings of despair and disappointment" he felt as an avid researcher at a non-research intensive university in the United Kingdom (p. 845).

[2] As has become common practice, particularly when referencing Virginia Alice Cottey (Stockard) in social media, I will refer to her throughout the rest of this essay as "VAC" in order to differentiate between Cottey (the person) and Cottey (the college).

[3] With perhaps a few exceptions, the majority of faculty at Cottey, at least during my tenure, did not have active research agendas. In fact, as I quickly learned, having an active research agenda (or having any sort of research agenda) could be a liability for untenured faculty insofar as it opened one up to potential criticism from the administration (i.e., if you have time to research, then you must not be doing everything you can for students or the College) and even sideways glances from one's faculty colleagues (i.e., how do you have time to do that when it's all I can do to meet with students and grade papers? Etc.) There has been little published work on this matter, but online discussion boards—like the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* popular forums—contain discussions of similar circumstances at some community colleges and similar institutions lacking a research requirement for tenure.

[4] Not everyone was opposed to Cottey's transition to a four-year BA-granting institution—though many were—but there was a sense that in the rush to become a four-year SLAC and to shore up the "right" institutional identity, the administration was ignoring some significant concerns.

[5] I want to be careful to avoid the impression that learning, enrichment, and fruitful interaction between Cottey and the Nevada community never occurred—it did, often in decidedly productive ways. Nevada depended on Cottey for cultural events, employment opportunities, and a more or less immobile consumer base that it otherwise would not have had, while Cottey benefited from the welcoming spirit and even the leadership of Nevadans (one of Cottey's Trustees was a prominent local businessperson). However, my goal here is to suggest that the administration's vision for Cottey was one that was predicated on transcending Nevada and the region (a global awareness) that could have been much more closely attuned to the uniqueness of the region, its people, its environment, and its economic needs. What the administration ultimately wanted for Cottey—a level of recognition, national presence, and ballooning enrollments—was not necessarily incommensurable with either a greater sense of engagement in the local community or a more evenhanded approach to the pedagogical needs of its current students.

[6] Suites at Cottey are well-appointed, and each suite contains the same basic layout: a common living area with full kitchen, four bedrooms (most of which are double occupancy), and high-speed Internet, cable TV, couches, chairs, tables, and so forth ("Suite Living," 2013). Students are encouraged to personalize their suites. According to [Cotteyphile.com](http://Cotteyphile.com) (2013, May 2), VAC hit upon the idea for Suite Life in 1903 after seeing a similar layout at the University of Toronto.

[7] Traditions are a significant part of the Cottey experience, and based on my limited experience, they are taken quite seriously. The second-year students place a great deal of pressure on the younger students to participate, to such an extent that a first-year student risks being ostracized if she refuses to take part. Traditions range from the "Hanging of the Greens" at Christmas to "pass-downs" (gifts, trinkets, songs, and other memorabilia) from second-years to first-years. A fairly comprehensive list of such traditions can be found at [www.cotteyphile.com/traditions](http://www.cotteyphile.com/traditions). For faculty, the situation was similar. Though we do not take part in the traditions, there are certainly expectations placed on new faculty to become familiar with the activities of the students and attend all (or most) extracurricular events (cultural events, lectures, plays, recitals, sporting events, etc). As a new faculty member, I felt a great deal of pressure from senior colleagues to attend all of the events my first-year, and I always felt as though my attendance was noticed.

Though not exactly extracurricular, nothing else sums up the general attitude towards faculty (and student) attendance/participation at Cottey quite like the following anecdote. In my final semester, I taught an upper-level rhetoric class that met once a week on Tuesday evenings, so I had no scheduled courses on Thursdays and I did not schedule any office hours on that day (though I held office hours each of the other four days). The fact that I was not on campus every day Monday through Friday caused considerable consternation among some of my colleagues and was even cited in my Annual Performance Review with the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs as a problem area.

[8] I'm reminded of a quip I once overheard at a faculty meeting: "Whenever administrators start talking about 'shared governance,' you know there's no such thing." This fairly describes the situation at Cottey College. One of the first orientation sessions I attended as a new faculty member was ostensibly on the topic of shared governance, which in practice was really about keeping faculty occupied with committees that essentially functioned in an advisory capacity to senior administration. The abundance of faculty who have reported similar experiences at other schools in online forums, discussion boards, and wikis suggests that this is a growing issue at institutions of all shapes and sizes.

[9] For more on the Twittersphere-ascendant genre of academic "QuitLit" (i.e., cathartic, first-person articles, blogs, and columns on leaving or quitting academia, typically told from the point of view of a tenured or all-but-tenured member of the professoriate), see Dunn (2013, December 12) and Lopez y Royo (2013, August 22).

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