

Letter from America Summer 2008

This past academic year, my second at Eastern Kentucky University, the struggle was to get funding for the new MFA program I'd been hired to launch. We'd had a total change of management since the year before – new department chair, new dean, new provost, new president – and suddenly the MFA program was on the radar. I received a promise of three years of funding, and the first installment came through just before Christmas.

This didn't leave much time to launch the program before the year was out, and so a partnership I had been negotiating with the University of New Orleans became even more crucial. Our students would attend their residency in Mexico, an event that had already been planned for six months, and we would pay UNO out of our new budget. I won't go into all of the details, but there were many.

In the meantime, I was also thinking about my own future. I had never seen Kentucky as my long-term home, not even when I first accepted the job. It was just a matter of where and when I would go. Quite unexpectedly, my book, a collection of short stories, won a contest and was due to be published before the end of the academic year. This development, along with my parents' health issues, made me feel as though this year was perhaps a good time to apply for some jobs. I decided I would apply only for jobs in the Washington/Baltimore area, where I grew up. It's notoriously difficult to pick where you live in this profession, and there are often a hundred or more applicants for each position. So I was delighted to land a job at Goucher College, a small private liberal arts institution in Baltimore.

Between teaching my classes, getting the MFA program up and going, and preparing to move, I had little time to reflect on the impending changes. But now that the academic year has ended, I find myself thinking about the kind of transition this is. It showcases the incredible variety within American institutions. Eastern Kentucky University is what's known as a "regional comprehensive" institution, meaning its mission is to serve the population who live in that particular area. The eastern parts of Kentucky are in the Appalachian Mountains, a unique area culturally. There is incredible poverty. People really do drink moonshine, and they value extended family in a way that could be called "clannish." Certainly, ECU services other populations, such as suburban Cincinnati, Ohio, but its character is decidedly shaped by the Eastern Kentuckians. I had many students who came from towns where the men worked in coal mines. Most of the students worked, sometimes full time, to finance their educations, and many went home on the weekends to work, to help out with the family business, or to commune with family. I found them to be genuine, warm, humble, and open to learning. They often expressed gratitude for the attention I gave them. I learned a lot from the stories they wrote – tales of characters hooked on home-made or over-the-counter drugs, for example, which is a big problem in Eastern Kentucky. I took thirty ECU students to New York for the AWP conference back in February, and I know that the trip opened psychological doors for some of them – doors they had perhaps not even known were there. One of my favorite moments of the trip came at the end of the bus ride. They had been chatting

excitedly for about thirteen hours, but when the New York skyline came into view, they went completely silent and I could hear only the sound of their gasps.

Goucher College, on the other hand, is a private, liberal arts institution in a big city. In the US, a “college” is a university that mainly serves undergraduates, though there are sometimes some small post-graduate programs, as there are at Goucher. US colleges are usually small and usually private, which means that the tuition is high. At Goucher, the tuition is \$30,000 a year. By contrast, the tuition at ECU is less than \$6,000 a year. I can probably expect the students to drive much nicer cars than mine. I can expect that they have traveled, many of them overseas. Sometimes I hear horror stories from colleagues at liberal arts institutions about wealthy students who are rude and demanding. Even if the students aren’t like that, though, I can expect to teach the “haves” – people who are statistically more likely to become leaders than the students at ECU, many of whom will go back to their hometowns after graduation to work as teachers or nurses or for the family business. (As I pointed out in an earlier column, we in the US teach many students who aren’t English or Creative Writing majors). So I guess I need to adjust my perceptions of my own role in students’ lives. I’m not going to be working with people who have the same disadvantages, which has made me worry that I may not have the chance to make a real difference. But perhaps there’s another way to look at this. Maybe I’ll be able to influence people who will be in the position to make positive changes in this country. I do think English and Creative Writing have the potential to enhance students’ abilities to empathize with others. And Goucher appears to provide wonderful support for Creative Writing, better than anyplace else I’ve worked. There’s an endowed center for Creative Writing, which brings in writers-in-residence and provides grants for students to work on specific creative projects. Another perk is that the college requires all students to study abroad, and my hope is that the next time I write this column, not only will I have made the transition into the new job with grace, but I will also have some brilliant plans for trans-Atlantic exchange. Watch this space.

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