

A Long Career

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Over the course of my forty plus years as a college level English instructor, I have had the good fortune to experience opportunities to teach both with the UMUC European Division and with a number of universities and colleges stateside. Over that long career, I have come to understand that there are a number of both similarities and differences between these two types of programs. In reading over many of the memoirs written by UMUC colleagues, I have come to understand that perhaps it is time to write a memoir detailing those experiences from my personal perspective. I wish to emphasize that what I present here is based strictly on my own experiences. My reading has shown me that a number of UMUC colleagues began their careers stateside and then later seized the opportunity for coupling travel abroad with teaching for U of Maryland overseas. In my case, I actually began by doing volunteer teaching at the University of Asmara in Ethiopia for three terms while serving in the US Army and was then fortunate to use that as a springboard into securing a position with UMUC, which then itself provided me with the experience and the super resume to land positions at several stateside schools. With that understanding as a background, let me then present a series of similarities and differences that existed between those various programs.

To begin with, one might think that an obvious difference would involve the amount of travel done while teaching with UMUC whereas stateside teaching would be more fixed and centralized. However, my own experiences did not bear that out. Travel is a fact of life for Marylanders; it comes with the territory. Anyone who has ever taught in the European Division is familiar with the dreaded “splits” when being stationed in Germany. My very first such opportunity involved living in the BOQ at Pirmasens Army Base and commuting two nights a week to Sembach AFB in Terms I and II of 1971. That was followed by being sent down to Adana AFB in southeastern Turkey for Terms III and IV. Then, thanks to Dr. Robert Speckhard, I was sent down to Kagnew Station in Asmara, Ethiopia, for Term V. That is three continents in one academic year! I also went on to repeat that experience of going from Bad Kreuznach with a split to Baumholder in Germany, down to Karamursel, Turkey, and then back to Kagnew Station in another single academic year! But boy did that look good on my CV when it came time to seek a position with the University of Wisconsin Platteville later. Yet, while teaching for four years there, I was living in Madison, Wisconsin, and therefore commuting one hundred-and-thirty-miles roundtrip each day. Even when I moved on next to the UW Whitewater for two years, my daily roundtrip commute was eighty-six miles. My final stateside position was at Clinton Community College in Clinton, Iowa. I kept my Madison residence but then found an apartment close to my job and only commuted the one hundred and twenty-five miles one way on the weekends. Still in all, I never stopped being a road warrior in my whole long career as an English teacher. So, bottom line, there was a difference of staying at one base for only a couple

of months as a UMUC teacher as opposed to being at one school stateside for many years at a stretch. But travel was still part of the equation; I went where the job was as a fact of life.

To move on, one major difference involved the students at both ends of this spectrum. While I taught for UMUC, my students were almost exclusively male and were almost one hundred percent military. In my stateside positions, I had an almost fifty percent mix of male and female students. That factor also made for an unusual difference in the types of writing that I received for evaluation. During my UMUC tenure of seven years, the subjects of compositions were often related to the jobs of my military students. When I requested comparison/contrast essays, I read lots of student writings about their various military supervisors. If I requested essays using process analysis, I found out more about how to drive a tank or how to operate a grenade launcher than I ever wanted to know. Of course, my stateside students would write comparison/contrast essays on their parents, their siblings, or their other teachers. For process analysis, I might read about how to bake a cake, how to change a diaper, or how to tap a beer keg. I also discovered that there were great differences between the motivation levels of students under both sets of circumstances. I was quite fortunate to begin my long career with military students who were very highly motivated. Anyone who was both a full-time soldier or seaman and who then chose to use his free time in the evenings to take university level courses instead of spending his nights in the clubs or downtown bars had to be committed to his education. Of course, given that Uncle Sam was paying ninety percent of the tuition costs as long as one succeeded in the course but then had to pay the full amount back if one failed, could also have been a strong motivator. Whereas my stateside students quite often had to be motivated by their teacher. One constant attitude was, "Why do I have to take an English class?" The answer, "Because the curriculum says so," was not always very satisfactory. Not to say that I did not have motivated students in my stateside classes, but there were always a few students in any given group who needed prompting. One positive aspect of my time at Clinton Community College was that a number of my courses were job related. Students in engineering and drafting programs needed training in technical writing. I also had large numbers of women in the school nursing program whose curriculum dictated that they take writing courses. For these groups, motivation was never a problem. Further, the community college had a GED program for adults who had not completed their high school education. For them, transitioning right into college courses and realizing that this was a last chance at education provided ample motivation.

One other major difference that I encountered between the two opposed programs was that with UMUC, I was fortunate to be in a position as an army GI at Kagnev Station and having the support of the Education Center Director there named Frances Sullinger who recommended that I apply for teaching when she became acquainted with my situation while I was taking Maryland courses and also volunteer teaching at the University of Asmara. I applied and was accepted into what became my seven years on the UMUC circuit from 1968-1975. When I returned stateside with a small family in tow and began my post graduate work at the University of Wisconsin, I soon found that getting back into the teaching harness was an absolute necessity

in order to pay for the costs of raising that family and paying for my tuition. While under the umbrella of UMUC, my costs for housing, medical benefits, utilities and even food were well covered by my having access to military bases and their attendant privileges. Back home in Madison, all of those costs for both myself and my family had to be covered by first the GI Bill funds; but then when those began to be insufficient, it was back to finding a teaching position. I went to the jobs office at the University of Wisconsin and found an opening at UW Platteville. When I applied, I then had to be formally interviewed by a committee. It was then that my UMUC experience saved the day. That one section on my resume became the part most asked about when I was being grilled. No one on that committee had ever met someone with that kind of background. When it came to their asking if I was willing to commute for this position, the stories that I could pull out of my proverbial hat clearly did the trick. When I had to move on from there to the UW Whitewater, my solid record at Platteville paid its dividends. When I next moved on to the community college in Iowa, in addition to my stellar record and my performance before their committee, I was asked to write an essay in the school library about how I felt that I was prepared to teach the adult students at that school. Again, my wide background with UMUC and military personnel in that program secured me the one position out of close to one hundred applicants! I can never thank Dr. Joe Arden and Dr. Robert Speckhard enough for what kind of a start they provided for my long career.

Next, I would like to consider the overall differences in the situations between teaching for the U of Maryland European Division and that of teaching in several stateside positions. When I taught overseas, I soon discovered that I was the English department at any campus in Europe, Asia and Africa. If any problems arose, I had to solve them on my own. To find colleagues, I had to seek them out at nearby bases, which was only possible in Germany for me. Whereas when I taught for both UW Platteville and UW Whitewater, I had a whole corridor of fellow English teachers with whom I could commiserate whenever problems arose. Even at Clinton Community College, I had a couple of full time and a few adjunct part-time English faculty to whom I could bring uncomfortable problems. One such “problem” was always that of plagiarism. With UMUC in the 1960’s and 1970’s, students did not have access to the Internet as it was not available back then. In my stateside years, that situation arose more frequently with students who had learned to cut and paste in their high school years and simply felt that they could continue in that practice in college. I very soon disabused them of that belief. One means to do so was through school committees. During my UMUC years, there were no committee responsibilities that came with the position. However, in my stateside years, I was required to serve on a number of them, including an Academic Discipline Committee, in which in one case, I actually had to testify against one of my own students whose parents insisted that their darling daughter could not possibly have plagiarized on her research paper. Needless to say, I won that case. Another committee that I served on which had serious consequential powers was the Scholarship Committee. My letters of recommendation helped to win monies for good students; my long memory did at times come into play to punish some less good ones.

Finally, there was the difference between controls being placed on teaching while with UMUC versus relative freedom available during my stateside career. While teaching for U of Maryland, I handled mainly composition courses with only a few opportunities to teach literature. During my stateside years, I taught those courses as well, but added humanities, film study, creative writing, technical writing and even courses connected to travel abroad programs. So the level of freedom was much more open, although I did have to appreciate being in a more controlled environment when I began my career. That meant that course content was dictated by Dr. Speckhard, even to the point of choosing the textbooks that I could use for my classes. Before I could receive payment for teaching during my UMUC years, I not only had to finish the class, but I also had to ship all of my final student writings back up to Heidelberg to be reviewed by someone there before a check was issued to me. During my stateside years, none of that was required. I chose my own textbooks, I did not have to submit my student essays to anyone else to review, and my salary was paid regularly, either monthly or biweekly depending on the institution. I cannot vouch for the extent to which those controls were placed on other UMUC teachers in other disciplines; I only know the circumstances that held true in my situation. I have no regrets in either case. When I began with teaching in the European Division, those were the rules, and I just had to abide by them. It was only later that my background and experience bought for me the more open freedoms of teaching in Wisconsin and Iowa.

In closing, I would like to suggest that all of those teachers who were fortunate enough to have long careers consisting of the UMUC experience and that of teaching in various stateside institutions, and who stayed in the teaching profession for their whole working lives, are to be applauded. The excitement of changing locations every few months with both the European and Asian Divisions was something to treasure and it provided experiences unmatched elsewhere in almost any other profession. One never knew what new adventures awaited him or her with each move within that vast circuit of bases throughout Europe, Asia and Africa. For me, having had that opportunity while I was relatively young was a blessing beyond belief. It set me up for being able for over thirty years in my stateside position to shepherd students in travel abroad programs because I felt comfortable in those foreign environments due to my seven years making the rounds on the ground for UMUC. My stateside career of over thirty years was perhaps more stable, but being a parent with responsibilities made that situation necessary. Even though Dr. Joe Arden offered me a position with the Asian Division in 1996 when I attended the 50th Anniversary of the Maryland Overseas program in College Park, I had to resist the temptation and come back to Wisconsin to a family and a full-time position that I had already secured. But I must end by saying that the dream of going back to UMUC did remain a fantasy of mine for many years thereafter. That I was even remembered after being away from UMUC for over twenty years was enough to resurrect all of the wonderful and exciting flashbacks to the early years of my long career. "Thanks, for the memories," Dr. Bob and Dr. Joe.