

Chapter 16

Writing My Way Back Home: Reflections of a Rural Southern Educator

Adam Wade Jordan
College of Charleston, USA

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author candidly outlines his pathway through higher education. At present, he is an associate professor of special education at the College of Charleston. He's been fortunate to teach in many places and settings, from alternative high school to the university. The purpose of this chapter is to, frankly, write a chapter he wishes he could have read at 20 years old. Too often we tell the story of higher education as being one requiring specific decisions and targeted accomplishments. In reality, there is no one "path" to higher education, if that is what someone wants to pursue. His hope with this chapter provides an honest, unorthodox voice that helps support any fellow academics from the working-poor class, the rural South, or any other marginalized space. Hopefully, as we offer more diverse stories, we can demystify what it means to be a teacher, to be an academic, in a space that has long excluded many.

INTRODUCTION

If I had to take a good guess on the question I've been asked most during my academic career, it's an easy guess: "Where are you from, *exactly*?" This question usually comes immediately after I speak in a "professional" space for the first time. The rural Southern accent with a hint of the Southern Appalachians that drawls unintentionally yet unstoppably out of my mouth is not the sound many folks are accustomed to hearing in academic spaces. It is that last word which offers emphasis to their question, "*exactly*," that lets me know the question is a bit loaded. The question is not where I'm from, but rather, how I got here.

My answer to their stated-question varies based on my social energy tank, my perception of their intent, and how long I want to extend the conversation. I may say "north Georgia" if I'm feeling honest but guarded. My answer is "a little ways northeast of Athens, GA," if my intent is to immediately end the conversation. If I'm feeling particularly socially energized, which is rare, I'll respond frankly with "a little place you won't find on a map that the locals call Coonrod, GA, named after its historical competition once held at a now-gone community store which rewarded the person who could bring the

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largest raccoon baculum during hunting season.” Now that answer, it either opens up a long conversation or hushes folks right up. When folks hush right up, I like to imagine their faces later that day as Google gives them the answer to, “What is a raccoon baculum?”

The truth is, I sometimes don’t know how I got here either. I am an associate professor of special education at the College of Charleston in Charleston, SC. Prior to that I was an assistant professor at the University of North Georgia, and before that, an alternative middle and high school teacher in Siler City, NC. The honest-to-goodness truth is, I never intended for any of those things to occur. For much of my life, pathways to college were for those with means, and means we had not. I am a second-generation high school graduate and first-generation college student from the rural north Georgia foothills. My father, a welder and the first in his family to graduate high school, and my mother, a grocery store employee with a GED, traded their health and labor to keep our family fed in the working-poor class of the rural South. Saving for college was not an option.

In the early 1990s, though, something changed in Georgia. Governor Zell Miller spearheaded a program known as the HOPE Scholarship, or HOPE, for short. Essentially, the scholarship paid the tuition and fees to a state school for any Georgia high school graduate with a 3.0 grade point average. The scholarship continued to pay as long as a 3.0 GPA was maintained. All of a sudden, poor folks from all over the state had a path where before there was none. With HOPE, I became the first in my family to ever have the opportunity to attend college, so I did.

My undergraduate degree is from the University of Georgia. At UGA I learned many things, one of which was that despite being from north Georgia, I wasn’t the “norm.” My rural high school hadn’t offered tons of advanced placement classes for me to transfer in, I didn’t know much about stereotypical college life or how to rush a fraternity, and still my accent elicited that same question I get today, “Where are you from, *exactly*?” I learned I was “rural.” I learned I was “Appalachian.” I learned I was “first gen.” I never assumed myself any of those things, but in college, it seemed important that folks fit in some sort of boxes, or at least this was the messaging I received.

When it came time to select a major, I was equally lost. I knew a few things, though. First, I genuinely enjoyed working with people. Second, I loved to learn new things. Third, and while this may sound strange, in my community teachers had very valuable positions, in my eyes. They were some of the only folks I knew as a kid who had cars with air conditioning. We never had a car with air conditioning. Their job seemed secure and they seemed to be able to provide for their families. Teaching just seemed to make sense, so I majored in secondary social science education and graduated with a teaching certificate in social studies for grades 6-12 and mathematics grades 4-9.

After graduation, I attended a job fair at the University of Georgia. At this job fair I spoke to Chatham County Schools. To a Georgia native, I knew that meant Savannah, which meant the beach. Living and teaching at the beach sounded a bit magical, so I gave it my best. At this job fair I was asked a couple of questions. First, I was asked about my certification. Second, I was asked how I felt about alternative education and how I felt about working with children who may have emotional and behavioral disorders as well as learning disabilities. I’d had an Intro to Special Education course and thought to myself, “How hard can it be?” (Spoiler: It is really, really hard.) As long as they were offering health insurance, I was interested, so I told them I would love that opportunity. Next thing I knew, I had paperwork in hand with formal interviews scheduled. It was at that moment I realized that there is more than one Chatham County in the United States. I’d accidentally accepted interviews in Chatham County, North Carolina. Too embarrassed to back out, I went along with it. It was the best mistake I’ve ever made.

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