

## Low Country Boil with Peanuts: Interview with Michael Pemberton and Janice Walker

Shirley K Rose

Shirley Rose (SR): Several years ago the editorial board of *WPA: Writing Program Administration* decided to publish something that would feature the writing programs of the local hosts of the summer conference each year, so we've been calling these pieces "travelogues." These have given us a chance to take a close-up look at writing programs in their local contexts, which has been the focus of these pieces. Simply put, we want to understand your program's location, with "location" understood in various ways.

Let's start with a basic description of your writing programs at Georgia Southern University. Georgia Southern's Department of Writing and Linguistics is one of our field's oldest independent writing units with department status, and many of our WPA readers will be interested in knowing more about serving as a WPA in a free-standing department of writing. How do you think the independent department status shapes the configurations and workings of your writing programs?

Michael Pemberton (MP): The Department of Writing and Linguistics was established as a department in 1997, and like many such writing departments, it emerged from split in a traditional English department between literature faculty and writing-focused faculty. One of the benefits of being a free-standing department is that everybody in the department is very heavily invested in and has a fairly strong background in either linguistics or creative writing or writing studies...

Janice Walker (JW): Or...

MP: Or professional writing. I can't leave that area out. In some respects, what that means is that there are some arguments and justifications that we don't have to make at least within the department because we're all pretty much working from the same page. We have the same

kinds of understandings about the use of writing in terms of knowledge production, and we also have a pretty good understanding of the kinds of work that other faculty members do and why it's valid and what justifies it in terms of the larger disciplinary community. So I wouldn't say that it completely streamlines things like curriculum development and program management, but it means that we don't have to face the same kinds of resistance that we might face in a more traditional English Department.

SR: So, there's less friction, to use that metaphor of resistance...

JW: Yes, one of the important things, as Michael has touched on, is that everyone acknowledges the incredible amount of work that goes into teaching writing, the need for smaller class sizes. We recognize the kinds of scholarship that are valued. You know, it is not high theory and lit crit, and it is not about teaching lit. It is about teaching writing. Now, that said, with the four areas that we have within the Department of Writing, we still have much discussion about how each area fulfills its functions within the writing department, which has been a learning experience and a definite challenge useful for all involved. And I think our students benefit as much, if not more so, from those discussions.

SR: How long has each of you been at Georgia Southern? Were you there the start, or from before the time the new department was established?

JW: Michael and I both started at the same time—by accident, we didn't know each other prior—in 1999. They were already a stand-alone writing department.

MP: The question that you asked, Shirley, focused on what it's like to serve as a WPA in a free-standing department of writing, and that actually touches on kind of a tricky issue for us in terms of the configuration of the university itself. The state university system of Georgia has a top-down administrative culture, and that has occasionally caused problems when we have tried to create a typical writing programs administrator position that would entail training of first-year faculty, leading ongoing professional development and curriculum development within the first-year writing program, having the power to hire people into the program, to fire them as necessary, and to conduct evaluation and reviews of faculty who teach in the first-year writing program. But administratively at Georgia Southern, and again this is something that is endemic to the whole state university system of Georgia, faculty hiring or firing or evaluation cannot take place at a level below that of the department chair. We do have a person in our department who is responsible for overseeing the first-year writing

program and working in conjunction with the chair to supervise and oversee the faculty who teach in that program, but it's not an official WPA position and that is mostly the result of an administrative dictum.

JW: In addition we have area coordinators for each of the four areas represented in our department who work with developing curriculum, recommending scheduling, chairing search committees, so they have some WPA duties, but they're not WPAs either. So, we have five different people who work with the chair to accomplish what a single WPA is often responsible for doing.

SR: Do you have majors in each of those areas? tracks? or emphases?

MP: Yes, the degree program has changed just over the course of the last two or three years. When the original proposal for the major in writing and linguistics was accepted by the state university system, which was in 2004 if I remember correctly...

JW: I think so...

MP: There were four concentrations within the major and they represented each of the four tracks that we've talked about. Each one of the areas had a separate course of study with very specific courses that had to be taken and completed in order to complete the concentration and to get the degree. About two years ago, it became clear that that design was not working out and we changed the curriculum so that now students can choose their own path through the major. There are no longer specific concentrations in the degree program. There is only a general degree in writing and linguistics, although students may choose to specialize in one of the four areas as they work through the degree program.

JW: What we did retain, what we had in the original bachelor's degree curriculum and what we still have, is what we call the "common body of knowledge," which is required of all our majors in writing and linguistics. Now, they take a course, a foundation course in each of those four areas. So they do get introduced to all four and then they can choose among other courses and they can mix and match among areas. Or, as Michael said, they can choose to focus in a specific area.

SR: Do you have a sense of how many choose to do something fairly broad throughout the whole major versus how many do something pretty specialized then?

MP: I would guess that a quarter of our students go broad. One of the most popular areas in our department is creative writing, so the students who self identify as creative writers will take a larger proportion of their courses in the degree program in that area. We have a some-

what smaller group of people who are specializing in professional/technical writing. I would say that's probably the second largest group of students in the department, followed by writing studies and then linguistics.

JW: In addition to the major, we have the minors in writing, which attract quite a few students in writing studies especially from the College of Education. People who want to be teachers, or who are teachers, are taking courses. In my area, technical writing, we attract from several different colleges. We have an online Bachelor of General Studies program, which offers a concentration in writing. And then we have a second discipline required of information technology students that we offer in technical writing. So it gets very complex.

SR: Sounds like it. Georgia Southern is, I was very interested to read, one of the most popular universities in the country if you look at it in terms of the number of admitted students who actually go ahead and enroll or what's called the "yield." It is in the company of institutions like Yale—it was tied with Yale at seventh place in terms of popularity. How do you account for the university's popularity with college-bound students and how does that popularity manifest itself when you see the students in your writing classes? That is, the fact that this is the place they want to be?

MP: I think there are a variety of reasons. For one, Georgia Southern is a reasonably priced alternative to places like Georgia Tech and the University of Georgia, but still a place where students can get a high quality education. The demographics at Georgia Southern tend to fall into largely two categories. We get a lot of students from Metro Atlanta because students have the sense that it is relatively close to home, but is a safer and more inviting environment than Atlanta. The university also has a very strong teaching mission, something that emerges in part from its institutional history, and I think that its focus on student retention and student success is very, very attractive as well. The standards for admission at the university have also gone up over the years.

JW: Substantially.

MP: It also has to be said that Georgia Southern has very, very strong academic programs in a wide variety of areas. We are especially renowned for our College of Education, for our nursing program, for engineering, for our College of Business Administration, biology, public health. We would like to think that in fact the Department of Writing and Linguistics is making a fairly strong contribution to GSU's attracting new students as well.

- JW: When we first got here, we were nowhere near seventh on that list. We were the college that students went to when they couldn't get in to one of the flagship universities. But then we started raising the admission standards, and it had an opposite effect of what many people had envisioned. It started attracting more students to come to Georgia Southern and now, Georgia Southern is a first choice university for so many of our students. And, I do want to add that Georgia has the Hope Scholarship, which means that students who graduate from a Georgia high school with a B+ average, as long as they can maintain their grades, get pretty much free tuition at Georgia colleges.
- SR: That's a great testimony to Georgia's commitment to higher education for its citizens.
- JW: Of course the scholarship doesn't pay for all of their living expenses, etc. But it does pay tuition and at least part of their books and supplies. They have to maintain their grade point average to keep that, but it does keep many Georgia students in Georgia colleges, and now as one of the first choice colleges, our population has grown. We've got over 20,000 students this year.
- MP: Yes, that's right. Shirley, I want to go back just really briefly to finish the answer to the question you asked a little bit earlier. I said that one group of students at Georgia Southern came from Metro Atlanta, but the other major demographic is students from the greater South Georgia area. GSU is the largest academic institution in southern Georgia, and ever since the university began, it has been a place for students in the region to go for postsecondary instruction. We also attract students from all fifty states, and a significant number of international students enroll here too.
- SR: Are the international students predominantly from any particular region or countries?
- MP: There are a number from China and Korea, from Saudi Arabia, from West Africa, from Honduras. Relatively few from Europe interestingly enough, but many from South America. I think that those are probably the parts of the world where we tend to draw most of our students.
- SR: What attracts these international students to GSU? Does the university have strong programs in disciplines that are highly relevant to their home countries?
- MP: Many of our faculty work in international contexts, both as a part of their research and as professional consultants, so the contacts they make with faculty in other institutions probably has something to do with it. We have a strong international studies focus that filters into many parts of the curriculum, and the university has long been

recruiting international students through outreach efforts, exchange programs, and collaborative research projects. But beyond that, the region itself is a safe, attractive place for international students to come, and they appreciate the opportunity to get much of their instruction from professors rather than teaching assistants in lower division courses especially. In fact, I think that our first-year writing program makes a substantial contribution in that regard. For a great many years, every member of our tenure track and tenured faculty taught in the first-year writing program, so that emphasized to students, I think, the high value that members of our department, including senior faculty, placed on first-year writing in the curriculum.

SR: Let's talk some more about Georgia Southern, the university, as a whole. I know it's dangerous to always think that the writing program is separate.

JW: It's not.

SR: Everything that happens in your program is influenced by the bigger institutional picture. Let's go back to talking about the institution as a whole, and its history. I read that it began as an agricultural and mechanical engineering school in the early twentieth century, and then it became a Normal School for training teachers, and then eventually evolved into a comprehensive university with a Carnegie Foundation classification as a doctoral research university. I was surprised to read about that because it must be fairly unusual to have started out as agricultural and mechanical in focus, which I associate with the Land Grants, and then to become a Normal School, which is a very different direction in terms of institutional development. I think it must be fairly rare to have both those missions in an institution's history, so tell me about that.

MP: Georgia Southern from my perspective, and again I've only been here thirteen years and I haven't extensively studied the history, but my sense of things is that over time, the university has been primarily affected by two things. One is its desire to be responsive to the immediate needs of the community, the environment, and the area. One of the reasons it changed to a teacher's college back in its early history was because there was an urgent need for more teachers in this part of the country, and it stepped in and started fulfilling that mission. But the other part of it is that sometimes the direction that the university takes is influenced by the person who is in charge. The president will come in with a particular vision or mission or set of programs that

he, and I say he with an awareness of gender issues because there has always been a male president here at Georgia Southern...

JW: So far...

MP: So far. He will steer the university in a particular direction. I referred earlier to the state university system of Georgia being very top down. One of the most clear and obvious examples of that policy is that when the president takes office, he says "This is what we're going to be doing and what we're going to be focusing on," and by God that's the direction the university goes come hell or high water.

JW: Which is how we ended up being a doctoral research university. I would say that had a lot to do with Bruce Grube, who was our president who began when Michael and I both began thirteen years ago, and he very much wanted us to move in that direction and we did. But that said, our history is a response, as Michael said, to the needs of this particular region of the country. We're talking about rural South Georgia. Definitely a need for teachers, many of whom didn't want to go away from home or couldn't go in order to study. Same for the mechanical engineering and the agricultural base. Southern Georgia is very much an agricultural area and you can still see that very much reflected in many of the programs that we offer here. Our engineering college has really grown in popularity recently. We offer a major in construction management for instance that I'm very familiar with because those students are all required to take our technical communications class. These are students who are primarily from this area and they intend to remain in this area. We have students with strong agricultural ties, and cultural ties obviously, to this area.

SR: What other connections do you observe between the area's history and culture and your own writing programs?

JW: One response to the area and its history is linguistics professor Thomas Klein's work with the Gullah Geechee populations on the Sea Islands—St. Simons Island. It is kind of a Creole population. [For information about the Gullah and Geechee culture, which retains ethnic traditions linked to West African slaves who worked on rice, indigo, and cotton plantation on the Sea Islands after 1750, when antislavery laws in Georgia colony ended, see the "Geechee and Gullah Culture" entry in the New Georgia Encyclopedia online at <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org>] Outside of our department, of course, there have been archeological digs that have unearthed some incredible finds from the Civil War era.

MP: One other way that the university demonstrates its responsiveness to local and regional needs is a consequence of its being on what's called

Georgia's High Tech Corridor. About five years ago or so, Georgia Southern created a brand new college to respond to the need for skilled, highly trained information technology specialists in this part of the country, so we now have a new College of Engineering and Information Technology.

JW: And you've got the Savannah River Plant [Savannah River Site, a nuclear reservation operated by the United State Department of Energy], and the Savannah Port Authority [Industrial Park] attracting greater industry to the area. And we are located on the I-16 corridor between Macon and Savannah and not that far out of Atlanta. It's a wonderful part of the country to be offering education for people to work in these very high tech industries. Gulf Aerospace is another one of the large employers in the area. So in response to those needs you see our programs growing in popularity.

SR: I can see how over time the institution defines what it's going to do in terms of what the community and regional needs are.

JW: Although it began with a very agrarian focus, as industry has been attracted to the area, the university has changed in response to those needs. Even though the agrarianism is still there, there is so much more.

SR: Are there ways that you see that the writing programs are shaped by that history and by that characteristic responsiveness? You mentioned who is in your classes, but other than that, is there some signature feature of one or more of your writing programs?

MP: Like other writing departments across the country, we offer a number "service courses" that meet the curricular needs of a variety of departments in other parts of the campus. We teach several courses that are required or elective courses for students in the College of Education, such as "Linguistics and Grammar for Teachers" and "Teaching Writing." We are also the home of the Georgia Southern Writing Project, so we work with a lot of the students and teachers in the area who are involved in that. As Janice has mentioned, many of the professional and technical writing courses that we offer are either required or strongly encouraged of majors in places like business administration, engineering, and some of the sciences as well.

JW: And the College of Education and ROTC require at least "Writing in the Workplace" if not others.

MP: So much of the curriculum that we have developed, both within and outside our major, has strong connections to our institutional history, our institutional mission, and our desire to respond to regional needs.

JW: And I want to add that Michael, as Director of the University Writing Center, works with students from all of the colleges, all of the disciplines who come to the Writing Center. He has to meet the needs of such a diverse population here, and the Writing Center has grown in response to all of the parts of the university. He has changed it substantially, and in many ways, I think it is a model for schools such as this.

MP: Oh, you're so generous.

JW: Well, you know, I did tell the truth.

SR: Is the Writing Center part of the department's structure?

MP: Not really. The Director is in the department. I'm a professor in the Department of Writing and Linguistics, and I have some reassigned time to serve as the Director of the Writing Center. But the funds for the Writing Center itself have traditionally come from the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences. Its funding line was just recently either absolutely shifted to the university or been given a much more stable budget line within the college. Sometimes it is hard to tease these things out.

SR & JW: Yes.

MP: But the Writing Center itself was always funded beyond the department level.

SR: Who staffs your writing center?

MP: Over time, primarily due to budgetary pressures, it shifted from full time tenure track faculty in the writing center to full time temporary faculty in the writing center, to what it is now, which is undergraduate peer tutors and a couple of graduate students in the writing center. In 2006 I published a chapter in *The Writing Center Director's Resource Book* that talks about some of the challenges I faced working with full-time faculty in the writing center.

SR: You've already talked a bit about the Department of Writing and Linguistics—is there more you'd want to tell our readers about the history of the department? What's the story of its origins and development? Why was Georgia Southern one of the few places where this has happened?

MP: The Writing and Linguistics Department emerged from a philosophical split between literature and writing faculty in a traditional English department. Our knowledge of exactly what happened is mostly anecdotal because Janice and I were hired after the separation took place, but the story we've heard is not an unfamiliar one. Writing faculty were agitating for an increased emphasis on writing in the English curriculum; literature faculty saw writing courses as service

work with little relevance or scholarly value and saw their colleagues' push for change as threatening. Why was a separate writing department created? Probably because our dean at the time saw that as the simplest way to resolve the department's internal conflict. It was the top-down model I talked about earlier, in action. When the split was made official and formal, the Literature and Philosophy department kept faculty members with a literary focus who were already tenured or in tenure line positions. Everyone else was put into the new Department of Writing and Linguistics even though some of them had no training and little interest in rhetoric and composition.

JW: Let me just interject here that many of these people were hired in tenure track positions but without terminal degrees. At the same time, the new president that year said "That will not happen any more... You can have tenure because you're grandfathered in, but now you can't get promoted without a terminal degree, and we will no longer higher people in tenure lines without terminal degrees." That caused a lot of uneasiness. In addition, many people came out of Learning Support, with the same problems regarding terminal degrees. We had this internal conflict as it were.

MP: Yes, almost immediately after the split took place, the department hired two new faculty who had degrees in rhetoric and writing studies. The two of them quickly became identified as agitators in the department because they were trying to move faculty toward best practices in the field with a strong emphasis on theory and research. That was met with a lot of resistance from members of the faculty who, as we said earlier, were not trained in field and felt displaced in the department already. Our department chair eventually called in conflict resolution advisers to help us deal with our internal conflicts and low morale. We laugh about it now, but over time, a lot of those frictions, differences, and fractures began to subside. Several of the most vocally resistant faculty left or retired, and that eased the tensions considerably. We've continued to hire new faculty from reputable programs in rhetoric and composition and linguistics and other areas that have helped to transform the department and its goals.

JW: In addition to those existing faculty who left, some faculty went back and got PhDs in field. Tim Giles was one of them. He earned a PhD in scientific and technical communication.

MP: In fact, at one point there were six faculty members who were all enrolled in the IUP rhetoric and comp grad program.

JW: ...in summer...

MP: ...yeah, so they would go there during the summer and do their course work in residence, and then they would work on their degrees while teaching here throughout the rest of the year, and I think most of them ended up getting their PhDs in rhetoric and composition as a result.

SR: That's a good outcome.

JW: It benefits the department in many ways because these were people who had a long history at Georgia Southern and with the area; and now, with the terminal degrees in the field, they have made substantial contributions. Angela Crow, Peggy O'Neil, and our then chair Larry Burton were co-editors of the book *A Field of Dreams* published in 2002 by Utah State University Press that talked about independent writing programs including ours.

SR: People would be interested in knowing where they can go read more about this.

MP: There is a chapter in *Field of Dreams* that was written by Eleanor Agnew and Phyllis Dallas that talks about bringing in the conflict resolution team, the reasons why that was necessary, and what happened as a result.

SR: I noticed that the admissions office markets the university as "large scale, small feel." That's a nice turn of phrase: "large scale, small feel." Do you think that's an accurate characterization of the students' experiences in writing programs as well?

JW: I think it was at one time. In all of our writing classes, we have managed to keep caps relatively low, and that does help to keep the small feel in that students and professors or instructors can get to know each other, can work together closely, so in that respect, yes. But for the university as a whole, that's not as true as it once was. They do encourage faculty to participate in community-building programs like move-in day and discussions with professors, but obviously outside of our department, there is a push with budget crises that we've been facing for larger and larger classes. We've managed to keep our writing intensive classes still relatively small, which has been a good thing, but they're not as small as MLA would argue for. [Note: See the "Final Report of the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Teaching" and the "ADE Guidelines for Class Size and Workload for College and University Teachers of English: A Statement of Policy."]

MP: One of the things that's proven to be a tremendous benefit to the department is that we have a required technological literacy component, which means that all of our first-year writing courses have to spend at least a portion of their class time in a computer lab and all

of the computer labs are maxed out at twenty-four seats, so that has presented us with a very compelling argument against any initiatives to increase the size of our writing courses beyond that. We also identified “writing intensive” and “non-writing intensive” courses in our curriculum. The writing intensive courses are capped at eighteen students, and the non-writing intensive courses, are capped at thirty. We certainly have our students say that one of the few courses that they take in their university experience that allows them to really get to know their instructor as a person is first-year writing. That contributes to GSU’s “small feel” because these students very often feel that they can come back and meet with and talk with their first-year writing teachers years after they have taken the course with them.

JW: I do think, however, that the “large scale, small feel” campaign is something that our school is going to have to rethink. To sell it as “small feel” as it is, outside of our department, is just not necessarily true any more. If they want to keep that small feel, they need to consider how responses to the budget crises have changed that. I hear complaints from students about the auditorium-sized classes that outside of our department are the norm now, even in literature. Students’ dissatisfaction with class size is an issue that university administrators may really need to consider. If they’re going to market it as “small feel,” they really need to reflect on whether their responses to budget cuts undermine that marketing strategy.

SR: Let’s talk about the university’s mission, then. The following quotation is an excerpt from the mission statement:

Central to the university’s mission is the faculty’s dedication to excellence in teaching and the development of a fertile learning environment exemplified by free exchange of ideas, high academic expectations, and individual responsibility for academic achievement. Georgia Southern faculty are teacher-scholars whose primary responsibility is the creation of learning experiences of the highest quality informed by scholarly practice, research, and creative activities. (University Mission Statement [[academics.georgiasouthern.edu/provost/about/mission](http://academics.georgiasouthern.edu/provost/about/mission)])

It’s interesting that the learning environment is described as “fertile”—that seems to be a reference to the institution’s role in the region’s predominantly agrarian past. How do you see your writing program’s teachers carrying out that teacher-scholar role in creating the learning environment?

- MP: The university's desire to become a more research-focused institution is at least partly aligned with [Ernest] Boyer's model of the teacher-scholar. It wants to get NSF grants and foundation grants and corporate dollars of course, because higher ed in Georgia has taken huge financial hits recently, but it strongly values the scholarship of teaching and learning. The university's teaching mission guides much of what it does, and that impacts every college and every department; so there are a lot of people in the department, myself and Janice included, who see their classrooms as sites of potential research and activity. They are encouraged to develop new curricula, to design new courses, and to talk about or write about their experiences.
- JW: It is a balancing act. Traditionally, GSU has been considered a teaching first institution, but with the move to being a doctoral research university, there has been, as Michael said, for tenure and promotion purposes, a lot more emphasis on scholarship. But I hope we're also recognizing, in our field anyway, that much of the scholarship that we're doing directly impacts our students and our classrooms. The teacher-scholar model really can be quite effective in our classrooms.
- SR: It's very well fitted to what we do as writing scholars. It has been interesting to see how your institution, with the two of you providing much of the leadership, has sponsored several conferences in Savannah that writing program administrators would be and have been interested in. Besides our upcoming 2013 WPA Conference, you hosted the 2012 Writing Across the Curriculum Conference and you fairly regularly, it seems, do the Student Success in Writing Conference.
- JW: Every year.
- SR: And then there's the Georgia International Conference on Information Literacy.
- JW: That's every year, and our tenth anniversary is coming up in August 2013. I started the conference not long after I came here because I had interest in working, teaching research, and, obviously, information literacy. It has very much grown in numbers and popularity.
- SR: What effect have the conferences had on your writing programs?
- JW: The Georgia International Conference on Information Literacy came out of a disagreement I was having with a librarian who kept saying, "Oh no, we shouldn't let students use the Internet." And I knew that was not right. We wanted to build and promote this conference across the curriculum, so it is not just our department per se that does that. It involves the Dean of the Library and a representative from library faculty, and from the College of Education. Recently, we brought someone in from Information Technology as well as two people from other

institutions on the steering committee. We have all of these disciplines on a committee that works together to make that conference happen. We have a wonderful Continuing Ed division that does much of the nitty-gritty part that has to be done to make the conference successful.

MP: We had volunteers from the department at the IWAC conference who performed some of the hosting duties, and several of our colleagues presented at the conference. A nice article was written about it in the university's alumni publication, so it helped to raise the profile of the department university wide, and, that ultimately helped the department a great deal.

JW: Also because it was a writing across the curriculum conference, we were able to promote the concepts that were being discussed within our department, within the college, and within the university. You know, "Look at all these people who are interested in this area and the wonderful work they're doing." You bring back so many new ideas and reinvigorate much of what we do. With the WPA Conference I'm expecting more of that here as well. We've read in the scholarship that many institutions have a difficult time with writing studies being recognized as a discipline. We've only been around for sixty years as a real discipline, and bringing these conferences here and sharing this important work shows that, yes, writing studies is a serious discipline like all of the other disciplines in the university. It helps to concretize those kinds of arguments I think.

SR: I've thought about how hosting a conference brings the attention of your peers, your professional peers and disciplinary peers, to your institution and your program, but it hadn't really struck me that your own campus notices, too. That's a valuable outcome.

SR: I have a location related metaphor for the writing program I direct here at ASU. My metaphor is the ocotillo. It is a succulent that can live in the desert climate even at extremes of heat and aridity that we experience. But with sufficient water, it develops these thousands of tiny leaves and blossoms into something that is quite stunning. An ocotillo in bloom is brilliant and beautiful. It can survive without the water, but it's awesome when it has water. What location related metaphor or analogy would you suggest for your writing programs at Georgia Southern that could help us to understand them better?

JW: Michael and I have two different metaphors. I'll let him lead.

MP: Ok, I just couldn't resist this one even though it's such a cliché. I'm going to talk about our writing program or maybe more specifically the way in which our program views students as a peanut. Georgia is one of the nation's biggest peanut producers and as you probably

know, Jimmy Carter was a peanut farmer. I would say that we plant our students with care. We employ the best, most scientific practices that we can in order to help them grow. We expose them to a warm, fertile climate where it is possible for them to flower, but in keeping with the peanut metaphor, also to grow and develop beneath the surface in places we can't easily see. When their final ideas are harvested, what we find when we pull them out is something that's new and original and exciting. And something that possibly has never been seen before.

SR: That's great!

JW: I have a different one. This area is known as the "low country," which includes South Carolina, coastal Georgia, and here. A very popular dish here is my metaphor—the "low country boil" where they throw in corn on the cob, potatoes, shrimp and sausage. Whatever you can get. And they throw it all in a big pot and bring it to a boil. I think that we are low country boil. We have the students come from various demographics. As Michael said earlier, we've got almost half from the Atlanta metropolitan area and many from the local area. And then we have students from all over the world thrown in the pot. Ditto with faculty who come with a broad spectrum of expertise, background, areas that they're from. We have departmental differences with creative writing, linguistics, writing studies, and professional and technical writing. Throw all of this in a pot and bring it to a boil...and that leads to external mediation. No, more seriously, let it simmer for a while and it is a delicious dish. It becomes something greater than the sum of its parts.

SR: Thank you both for both of those vivid and memorable metaphors. Our summer conference isn't going to be held there on your campus, but is going to be in Savannah at the Coastal Georgia Center. So I wanted to talk a little bit about Savannah. If conference goers have extra time, what Savannah sights or experiences might be especially interesting for WPAs?

JW: Oh there's so much. The area we're going to be in in Savannah is the historic district, and you can't walk three steps without something of interest. Obviously, Savannah College of Art and Design, The Telfair Museum of Art, and River Street, which we'll be near. Clubs of all types. Restaurants like the Lady and Sons if they want Paula Dean's Southern cooking. But beyond that, Tybee Island is a beach resort that's right off the coast. The Savannah Sand Gnats will be in town if you want baseball games. But there are also historic areas outside of the historic district. There are some sites going all the way back to

the early eighteenth Century, the time of [the original founder James General James Edward] Oglethorpe, that can be visited. [For more information about the charter King George II of England granted to Oglethorpe and twenty other men to establish a slave-free colony see “Slavery in Colonial Georgia” in the New Georgia Encyclopedia online <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org>. Information about the settlement design Oglethorpe introduced for the City of Savannah, which continues to be an exemplar of urban planning, see “Savannah City Plan” in the New Georgia Encyclopedia online.] And, if people have extra time and want to travel to the Barrier Islands, where we talked about the Gullah Geechee cultures and all, I would highly recommend that. It’s a stone’s throw to Hilton Head, South Carolina. It’s just so rich in a variety of things to do that it’s incredible.

MP: I think the only two things that I would add to Janice’s list are that downtown Savannah is a very well laid out city in terms of urban planning, and there is a whole set of small parks or squares sometimes called the “Jewels of Savannah,” that are spaced at regular intersections in the downtown area so that it is possible to walk from small park to small park to small park and see different kinds of plants, statues, and historical architecture. The opening scene of the movie *Forrest Gump*, where Forrest is sitting on a park bench waiting for a bus to come, was filmed in one of these squares. If there are golfers, they should bring their golf clubs because there are many golf courses in the nearby areas.

JW: But be prepared for heat.

MP: It will be very hot. No doubt about that. But Savannah is also a very lovely walking community. It is not so huge a city near the rivers that you can’t walk for quite awhile in shaded lanes and see a lot of interesting stores, shops, architecture, historical artifacts and small museums. It’s a nice place to visit.

SR: I’m sure that *WPA* readers will be glad to get that advice. I’ll ask one last question. The Georgia Southern campus in Statesboro is just an hour’s drive or so from downtown Savannah where the conference is going to be so if I wanted to take a short trip to your campus in order to understand the institution’s location within the region and understand your writing programs and how they reflect the institutional location, what places on campus other than the Writing and Linguistics Department offices and classrooms should I visit and why?

MP: There are a number of show pieces that the university promotes. Those would include the Center for Wildlife Education, the Raptor Center, which is a small conservatory that has eagles and owls and falcons on

display along with regular programs and educational offerings for the community and students. There's also a small museum on campus called the Georgia Southern Museum with exhibits about the history of the local community as well as the state. We have a newly reconstructed and fabulous library that is very technologically focused and very modern. It is a tremendous resource for the students. You can't get away without seeing the football field because football is a big thing at this university. We are making a big push to move up a division.

JW: Along with a newly-erected statue of Erik Russell...

MP: ...who was the legendary former football coach here at Georgia Southern.

JW: The Garden of the Coastal Plain, the botanical gardens, is lovely. It offers educational programs as well but they're nice to just walk through and get a sense of the flora and fauna of the area. They are beautifully done. Our campus is very much a very walking campus. It is a beautiful campus. If you drive in through the main entrance you come to Sweetheart Circle, with the original old buildings from way back when this school first began, and that currently house administrative offices. There is a brick walking path that goes through the entire campus, and students and faculty are encouraged to walk. I think it is a beautiful, beautiful campus to look at. [See images at this URL: <http://www.georgiasouthern.edu/traditions/sweetheart.php>] Absolutely gorgeous. And we should have lots of flowers blooming that time of year.

MP: It's called the Sweetheart Circle because the drive is more heart-shaped than circular and this area of campus is where all of the young sweethearts were supposed to come and hang out and spoon.

JW: Back in the day.

SR: I read about Sweetheart Circle and about the "Pedestrium" walkway in an online publication produced for the GSU admissions office titled "What Can Our Campus Tell You About Georgia Southern University?" I was struck by how the Sweetheart Circle is used to illustrate tradition while the Pedestrium walkway, lined with young live oak trees, is used to illustrate opportunities for innovative interdisciplinary work because it connects the various campus buildings and the areas of study they represent. Also, thanks for the mentions of the design of the City of Savannah and the gardens there and on your campus. I suspect that many WPAs are at heart urban planners and landscape architects and they will want to see many of the places you've suggested. Is there anything else that you must tell me about the place

of Georgia Southern's writing programs in their institutional and regional context?

MP: Some of the change that is happening right now, in part motivated by our current president's agenda, is the strong push to expand online instruction. Our department has become heavily involved in that, especially recently. Janice was talking about the online courses that are offered in professional/technical writing. We are on the verge of adopting and establishing online graduate certificate programs in TESOL and professional and technical writing as well.

JW: More online instruction really does seem to be one of the directions that the university and our department are going to push and move into over the course of the next several years.

MP: Also, Georgia Southern has a campus population of about 20 to 22% African American students so it is a very diverse campus.

JW: Very much so. There's an exciting potential at Georgia Southern. We've seen such growth and change in the thirteen years Michael and I have been here, but in the next thirteen I think we're going to see a lot more, since we are now a first choice university, a doctoral research university. We're going to continue to see change, and growth, hopefully in incredible directions with the department and the university.

SR: Thank you both. I enjoyed talking with you about the place of your writing programs at Georgia Southern University and I'm looking forward to seeing you in Savannah this July.

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