

## CHAPTER 1.

# A TALE OF TWO SCHOOLS

“A rubric is the record of negotiated compromises, the lingering detritus of struggles for dominance by purists and poets and pragmatists.”

- Griffin, 2010

This book is and is *not* about the national VALUE (Valid Assessment for Learning in Undergraduate Education) rubric for Written Communication designed by the American Association of College and Universities (AAC&U). While I do analyze the VALUE movement, I take this national rubric as a sort of ur-text—an entry point into assessment practice between 2016-2018. In particular, this book captures a moment in time at two specific universities, contextualizing their practice within national assessment trends. Using institutional ethnography (as defined in Chapter 3), I uncover the negotiations and compromises underlying the “adapted” VALUE rubrics used at these two institutions.

Institutional ethnography (IE) as a methodology is well suited to connect individual experiences to larger institutional trends. IE examines “key processes” that “transform the local and particular into generalized forms” that are recognized across institutions (Smith, 2005, p. 186). In writing studies, we might call these “generalized forms” *genres*. Here, I follow Amy Devitt’s (2004) approach to studying genre as “actual practice” (p. 68). Genres are never neutral tools or static formulas. They are repeatedly activated by human interaction and discourse. They are created by and create our “social reality” (Barwarshi, 2000, p. 349). This book is not about *best* practice in using rubrics. Rather, it is about the ways that faculty and administrators at two small institutions engage in the *actual* practice of adapting and using rubrics and how those rubrics create and reflect the social realities in which they work.

The rubric is a genre that can tell a story about pedagogy that is both local and extra-local. It is a document that represents both material conditions of local contexts and external power structures. This book attempts to tell that story, focusing on two small institutions I call Oak University and St. Rita’s College. In this book, I attempt to portray the standpoints of faculty at Oak and St. Rita’s, but I acknowledge that this portrayal is never neutral. I am affected by my own experiences and opinions as a writing program administrator, a researcher in writing studies, and a White woman teaching at a predominantly White institution (PWI). These experiences followed me as I visited the campuses of Oak and St. Rita’s and are a part of the lens through which I received the stories told

to me by my interviewees. As a researcher, I cannot separate myself from my embodied experiences visiting these campuses. In turn, this research has had a profound effect on how I approach my own relationship to my own institution and my assessment work. I cannot, ultimately, separate myself from these stories.

This introduction presents vignettes that weave together my own experiences on these campuses with the stories told to me by participants. These stories are meant to ground the reader in these two local contexts and serve as a reference point to put the data presented throughout this book in context. Each vignette has been vetted by my main informant as representative of their experiences working for this university. These stories are meant to frame the analysis that is to come. Future chapters also incorporate more perspectives from other participants to form a more complete picture of work in assessment and writing at each institution. Appendix A provides a description of all participants mentioned in the book for easy reference. For now, I invite you to read these stories as a way to become familiar with these two institutional contexts, which may vary from your own and from those typically presented in writing studies research.

## **OAK UNIVERSITY: “GOOD FEELINGS”**

Oak University stands atop a hill overlooking an adorable small town that has the feel of New England despite being in the Midwest. The main street of the town is lined with brown placards marking historic brick and columned buildings while people eat ice cream on park benches in front of a custard shop and interact by introducing their dogs. Here, I have my choice of historic inns and bed and breakfasts at which to stay. The historic inn I choose is a beautiful stone building from 1924, and as I walk through thick ornate wood doors, I am directed to a small desk to check in with a staff member as if I am entering their private office. She nicely prints the Institutional Review Board (IRB) consent forms that I forgot for free. An ornate stairwell takes me past beveled windows to a comfortable room: one of those with the fancy waffle-pattern cotton bathrobes to wear. The inn also sports an award-winning restaurant where I dine comfortably on risotto and *creme brûlée*. Although my first visit to Oak was brief—I met with the chair of the writing committee, attended a writing committee meeting, and scheduled additional interviews for a later date—it felt like a bit of a vacation.

Oak itself matches the town to a tee. Located at the top of a winding drive up the hillside, Oak feels central to, if above, the town (see Figure 1.1). Its open green spaces and historic stone buildings overlook the rolling hills adorned with fall oranges and yellows. The writing committee meets in a spacious room with a conference table and interior glass windows in a building that houses many such

meeting rooms. The atmosphere is friendly and laid back: faculty wear jeans, talk about their days, tease one another, and congratulate one another on their successes.



*Figure 1.1: The view from the top of the hill at Oak University. Original photograph.*

My second visit is one week after President Trump's election, and the effects are palpable. The sidewalks around campus represent the feeling of the nation. Messages of support, love, and fear are written everywhere. The occasional Trump supporter comments are sprinkled in among the mix, written and rewritten. "This country is not his," one reads, with the "not" crossed out and the "is" underlined. Dialogs in chalk: "Love Trumps Hate" crossed out, then a question written by it: "Why did you cross this out? Does love offend you?" (see Figure 1.2).

I can't help but think that this writing represents the campus just as much as any artifacts collected and evaluated by the AAC&U VALUE rubric. Oak is a place of "good feelings," as one interviewee tells me, a place where everyone outwardly gets along, and yet, like the two sides of the political spectrum represented in chalk, not everyone feels included or agrees. It is in this context in 2016 that I first met Kristen, my main informant at Oak, and her colleagues on the writing committee.



*Figure 1.2: Chalk writing at Oak after the 2016 Trump election. Original photograph.*

## KRISTEN AND THE NEW WRITING PROGRAM

Everyone likes Kristen. She's a dynamic and thoughtful person who runs a committee meeting well. A history professor by training, she is now the director of the writing program at Oak.

Actually, she's not.

She's the chair of the writing committee. But having become more familiar with the discipline of writing studies and, understanding what a writing program administrator (WPA) does, Kristen knows that what she does should carry the title of director. She told the provost this when she took the position, and although it hasn't been written down anywhere official, Kristen identifies herself as the director and others do, too.

When Kristen first started teaching at this small liberal arts college in 2008, there were a handful of disconnected first-year seminars courses. At this time, Ben, a computer scientist, was in charge of these courses as a part of his position as the dean of first-year students. The writing courses had not been evaluated in over 20 years, and Ben decided it was high time to work on them. He began with a task force to build a new first-year writing program. They began by defining



the goals for the program and worked to add “meat to the goals” in terms of the actual courses and operation of the program. Ben recalls doing a lot of reading about teaching writing and even attending a WPA conference as he took the lead on forming the new writing program. Barbara, the writing center director, played a key role in helping those in different disciplines learn about best practices in teaching writing. Kristen joined in and fondly remembers the semester when six faculty members sat around designing the new program.

Around the same time that the writing program was being formed, the university signed on as one of a group of small liberal arts schools in a consortium with the AAC&U to use the new VALUE rubrics. In their 2010 accreditation review, Oak was criticized for not assessing their general education core curriculum. Philip, the associate provost, talked to his colleagues at other schools and was intrigued by the popular turn toward using the VALUE rubrics. He was on board with the push away from testing (Oak previously used the CLA+ test) and was eager for more nuanced assessment data. Philip funded multiple faculty members, including Kristen and Ben from the writing committee, to go to a training session on the rubrics led by the AAC&U and then VALUE Executive Director Terry Rhodes.

However, after a few years of working with the AAC&U rubrics, Philip was disappointed at low rates of inter-rater reliability and the push toward the use of the rubrics to compare institutions rather than gather meaningful local data. He doesn’t need “busy work,” he says. But the grant money is good, really good. So, he continues to work with the assessment coordinator on campus to gather student artifacts for the AAC&U’s national scoring and testing. However, he backs off on being involved in how the writing program chooses to assess their program. He doesn’t want to interfere with the legitimacy or agency of the new program, and he doesn’t have enough confidence that the VALUE rubrics are worth it.

By 2014, the new writing program is officially underway with Ben as the “director.” Kristen takes her sabbatical but knows she’s slated to take over the program when she returns. She remembers that when they were first forming the program, she was relieved that the assessment piece would be saved for “someone else.” But now that it turns out it’s her, she dives in, full of enthusiasm to make it the best assessment she can. She works from a rubric that Ben drafted, and at the writing committee meeting I joined in Fall 2016, Kristen presented her revised version of Ben’s rubric and handed out an artifact. Although she remembers her AAC&U training as “overwhelming,” she wants to replicate the experience she had of being thrown into assessment in order to jumpstart the conversation with the committee. Having never done any kind of assessment outside her own classroom, the AAC&U training was essential to Kristen’s understanding of assessment and rubrics. Through the process of our interview, Kristen realizes that there is very little left of the AAC&U Written Communi-

cation rubric in the rubric she ultimately uses for the first writing assessment in Summer 2018, and yet, the original rubric was so foundational to her thinking about assessment that she sees the Oak writing program rubric as adapted from the VALUE rubric.

Although Kristen was frustrated that the university did not hire an expert in composition to direct the program, she is grateful that her colleague and friend Barbara shares her knowledge of the field. Kristen is what we might call a “convert” to writing studies, and she is adamant about spreading the word of writing across campus. For those that won’t accept the program and don’t want to adopt best practices, she says she’ll “wait them out,” and when they retire, she’ll come knocking on the door of their replacement to let them know about writing at Oak.

Meanwhile, Barbara resents that the writing center director is not more directly involved with the writing committee and worries that the syllabi for the new courses are actually just regurgitated versions of what was done before the new writing program ever existed. But Oak, she explained, is a small, collegial school, a place where you pick your battles carefully.

## **ST. RITA’S COLLEGE: “THE SHAMBLES OF COLLEGIALITY”**

The contrast in the embodied experience between Oak and St. Rita’s was immediately apparent as I drove the very next day into the small factory town(s)—one runs into the next—surrounding St. Rita’s College. The exit for St. Rita’s is in the region where I’ve often heard others joke about how you don’t even get off the highway for gas, a joke that further separates the populations living here from the “average” American.

The street signs point to factory entrances, and if you miss a turn, you have to drive miles until the next street breaks up the industrial landscape. My hotel is also a casino, filled with sterile, uninspiring halls of slot-machines. Checking in, I hear about a fellow customer’s plans for her birthday celebration here, and I’m reminded that while this isn’t my idea of a vacation, it is for some. There are restaurants in this establishment as well, mostly sports bars with pub food.

This is a town that houses a college, not a college town.

St. Rita’s occupies a single, old British Petroleum Company (BP) executive building. A large metal cross greets you as you pull into the parking lot reminding you of the Catholic orientation of the institution. I’m personally reminded that this school is similar to, yet even smaller than, the Catholic high school I attended. Maybe that’s why it seems nostalgic to me. The halls lack lockers, but otherwise it reminds me of high school. The science floor is painted in a bright forest green with a design reminiscent of a Rainforest Cafe (Figure 1.3). The cafeteria is a single room with vending machines and other limited offerings.



*Figure 1.3: The Science Floor at St. Rita's. Original photograph.*

While waiting for an interview, my main informant, Dwayne, shows me the secret seventh floor of the building. The elevator doesn't go there, but the right key takes you up a stairwell to an abandoned floor filled with artifacts of institutional history. An old secretary desk still dons 1970s carpet samples in bright orange and fire engine red. There's a small set of windows with a view of the nearby city, but Dwayne tells me with a grin: "that's not what the BP executives wanted to see."

As we turn the corner, the room leads to a 1970s shag carpet bar surrounded by glass windows and doors that lead out to a balcony that opens up on what the faculty refer to as the "Empire": the miles and miles of factories (Figure 1.4). You can almost imagine old White men smoking their cigars, drinking their whiskey and admiring their wealth. Wealth that comes on the backs of the working-class citizens that St. Rita's now serves.

Here, standing in this top floor, I feel I have a far richer understanding of St. Rita's than their rubrics could ever give me. Everything about this floor feels symbolic. There are good faculty members here, but they are overshadowed by the detritus of a failing system and what Dwayne calls "the shambles of collegiality." I only visit St. Rita's once, but that embodied experience lingers as I continue to interview Dwayne for the next two years, hearing more about his frustrations and sometimes his small bits of hope at making change in this institution that seems forever stuck in a bygone era.



*Figure 1.4: Shag carpet bar overlooking “the Empire.” Original photograph.*

## DWAYNE AND NEW GOALS FOR GENERAL EDUCATION

Dwayne is tired. Burnt-out to be specific. He’s worked at St. Rita’s College for 10 years trying to improve writing instruction, general education, and assessment, and he’s mentally and emotionally exhausted. Dwayne is a creative writer, but his graduate school experience gave him a strong composition background with some well-known members of the field. He even did some WPA work at his previous institution. When he was hired at St. Rita’s he thought the school cared about that background in composition, but he found that few actually do. At first, he worked closely with a composition colleague, Jessica, but she didn’t fare well in the hostile environment at St. Rita’s and quickly moved on. She’s still a light he draws on but an external one.

Only three months into his job at St. Rita’s, the dean decided that junior faculty should revise general education, and Dwayne quickly became involved. “Hungry” for nationally recognized practice, Dwayne turned to the VALUE rubrics. He liked the way that they represented higher education, its goals, and its values. Dwayne and his colleagues decided that the general education curriculum should be structured around the VALUE rubrics with a clear sequence



of courses that teach the skills represented in the rubrics. The plan was quickly approved. But as Dwayne lamented, he didn't know at the time that "some institutions kill ideas by approving them." The rubrics became a part of a handbook. They were on paper. Dwayne wrote an optimistic piece for the AAC&U about their use at his very small Catholic college that the AAC&U ate up as proof of their success. For Dwayne, the piece secured his tenure bid.

But real life at St. Rita's was much different than it looked on paper.

St. Rita's is an open-access school designed with a mission to bring credentials to improve the lives of factory workers in the surrounding community. The population of students has changed over the years from the factory workers themselves to their children, many first-generation, working-class students—some White, some Latinx, some Black. Dr. Z (as Dwayne and others refer to him) is a long-standing English professor and chair of the humanities, and he jokes (?) that St. Rita's is now where parents send their troubled teens for discipline in the form of education. It's a school where it is easy to get admitted but hard to graduate. By Dwayne's complex calculations, that graduation rate is an appalling 25 percent. This number is lower than that officially reported by IPEDs, but Dwayne believes it is more accurate. He attributes this problem, in part, to the overburdensome general education curriculum and many hidden, remedial requirements.

Writing at St. Rita's consists of a two-course sequence, but many students must pass remedial courses before even moving on to the "regular" sequence. These "kids," as everyone I talked to at St. Rita's calls them, just can't get up to speed quickly enough. Their writing curriculum is based on knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, and they sit at computers using grammar drill programs until they can pass at a high enough rate to take the first regular composition course. Dwayne would like writing instruction to be more rhetorically based. But Dr. Z believes these students are not ready for rhetoric and even seems to believe that rhetoric as a whole is a scam perpetrated by academics like Dwayne and Jessica.

Jessica attempted to introduce the Council of Writing Program Administrator (CWPA) Outcomes at St. Rita's, but Dr. Z would have none of it. Dwayne recalled that he would have taken "anything that worked" but that Jessica really wanted to use the CWPA outcomes, which so enraged Dr. Z that he said he wanted to fight Dwayne. To this day, no one really knows if this threat was meant to be metaphorical or not. The experience still haunts Dwayne, who recalled, "I mean, he may have, you know, he may have been kidding, right? But no one thought he was kidding."

The compromise was a portfolio to be scored at the end of the first composition course. To appease Dr. Z, that portfolio included a timed five-paragraph

essay. Each portfolio is scored on a rubric by a faculty member who was not that student's direct instructor. The rubric includes two separate categories for grammar and style. After looking at the results, Dwayne reported that students who fail on one of these rubric categories almost always fail on the other. And yet, the categories not only remain, they also seep into the discussion of writing in the general education committee, a committee that Dr. Z is on as a part of his role as humanities department chair.

After Jessica left St. Rita's, Dwayne shifted his focus to the general education curriculum as a whole over the first-year writing portfolio. While general education was previously bookended by standardized testing (the CAP test), Dwayne again looks to the AAC&U for alternatives. In particular, he attended a state conference held by both the AAC&U and the Lumina Foundation around the time the Degree Qualification Profile (DQP) was released in 2014. At this conference, he learned about signature assignments that are incorporated across courses in order to evaluate student proficiency over time. He sees this as the sort of scaffolded approach that could really benefit St. Rita's students. Although the AAC&U's notion of a signature assignment often involves "real world" application, Dwayne tests the bounds of his institution only as far as he thinks they will stretch. The CAP test is replaced by a series of timed five-paragraph essays—a sophomore and junior essay now build on the freshman requirement and are scored by the same rubric that Dr. Z had already approved for the freshman writing portfolio. Other assessments are based more directly on the VALUE rubrics, such as oral communication, but the testing philosophy remains. In fact, the dry run of the oral communication assessment involved students presenting in front of a faculty panel decked out in regalia as some sort of "fun" ceremonial rite of passage. As this proved time-consuming and difficult to schedule, the presentations are now recorded to be viewed and assessed later.

This overall approach to assessment with timed writing and recorded presentations is well-liked by St. Rita's financial supporters, including a well-known grant provider and pharmaceutical company in the state. And Dr. Z seems to accept it. It also helps satisfy accreditors who were concerned that assessment only bookended the general education curriculum with no assessment in the middle. Again, the plan is approved, but it doesn't solve the underlying structural issues. Students still take up to 74 hours of core classes because of remedial course work, and they often have to retake the writing tests and courses to move forward.

But Dwayne is persistent. When I met him in 2016, Dwayne was again returning to the idea of using the VALUE rubrics to guide general education along with some new colleagues in English (Jeremy) and math (Andrea). This renewed drive was made possible in part by a change to the way that general education committee operated, and in part by a state-wide push to limit credit hours in

general education. General education committee meetings at St. Rita's used to be led by a chair but open and attended by mostly English and humanities faculty. Jeremy and Andrea first sought out a more representative committee, including voting members from different disciplines. This group, albeit with varied individual understandings of the work, sought to pare down the number of core credits from an official 54 credits to 38, using the VALUE rubrics to guide new general education outcomes and curricula mapping to see which outcomes would be addressed in which courses. It was during this process that I attended a general education meeting in Fall 2016 where writing outcomes based on the VALUE rubric were being discussed. In this case, the outcomes proved to be accepted with little hassle, although St. Rita's added one for grammar and style that came from the first-year writing rubric rather than the VALUE rubric.

But things quickly went downhill after that meeting. When reading outcomes came up, Dr. Z declared that all courses should require three hard-copy books. The scientists in the room attempted to explain that they taught current journal articles in their fields rather than classic books, but Dr. Z called them "fucking ignoramuses" and stormed out of the room. Not only did he resign from the committee, but he also was asked to step down as department chair. Dwayne, being the only other tenured member of the small department, stepped into the role. While general education went forward, Dwayne struggled with supporting his non-tenured English colleagues—in one case discovering and dealing with a case of academic fraud and in another case attempting to further the career of a female colleague, Heather, who he felt had great promise but who was not taken seriously by Dr. Z. Meanwhile, St. Rita's sister institution closed permanently causing increased anxiety about the financial feasibility of their own small school. In fact, some of Dwayne's colleagues in other areas were assigned to teach speech communication courses because they could not fill enough classes in their own disciplines.

Despite these challenges, Dwayne succeeded in making changes to writing at the level of general education, moving the second semester first-year composition course to the second year. At the time of our final interview in April 2018, Dwayne and Heather were teaching the first sections of this course—which in practice was the same as the original second-semester class but taught at a level where Dwayne feels students are able to better learn the information. The new course is also the first of a two-part general education capstone, followed by a theology capstone fitting of the Catholic college context. Heather and Dwayne were set to use a new rubric to evaluate student work in this course, one that more closely fits with the AAC&U's VALUE rubric and supports a more rhetorically based curriculum. Rather than a five-paragraph essay, this assignment asked students to adapt an academic essay for a public audience.

Although he was burnt out when I talked to him in 2018, Dwayne was excited by these changes. He also had in mind a metacognitive assignment for his students to help them assess their own progress and reflect on where they stand in relation to the rubric. But years of bullying and institutional challenges wore on Dwayne, and he sent out applications for new positions. He ended his employment with St. Rita's that spring, and while I attempted to follow up several times with Heather, the project stalled, perhaps a sign of her own lack of status in the department and the institutional difficulties therein.

Meanwhile, the official graduation rate for Black students at St. Rita's remains an alarming 14 percent (IPEDS).

## **THE ROLE OF NARRATIVE IN RESEARCH**

Ethnographies produce a type of knowledge grounded in experiences and stories. But those stories are not just those of the researcher and her participants. Research, like pedagogy, is a negotiation: between researcher and participants as well as between author and reader. The stories belonging to the reader and the connection made by the reader are the key to generalization of this type of research (Newkirk, 1992, p. 130). While the research itself may lead to change, the responsibility for that change lies not only with the researcher, but with those who read and are affected by the research (Talbot, 2020, p. 695). Therefore, I invite you to read this book with empathy and a sense of your own positionality. Where are you in these stories? Who are you? How does your own institutional positioning affect you and your relationship to writing and assessment? And how can you, in turn, affect change within your institution? I invite you to read this book not as an outside observer of others' lives but as an active participant in the creation of knowledge that expands beyond any one story.