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"Eve Did No Wrong": Effective Literacy at a Public College for Women

In this article, I test claims made about rhetorical education for women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by examining Florida State College for Women (FSCW), one of eight public women's colleges in the South. I recover the voices of instructors and students by looking both at the interweaving strands of literature, journalism, and speech instruction in the English curriculum and how students publicly represented themselves through writing. I argue that the rhetorical environment at FSCW created a robust climate of expression for students that complicates our understanding of the development of women's education in speaking and writing.

Higher education for women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been long criticized by scholars for creating gendered rhetorical spaces that limited women's opportunities for self-expression, both written and oral, and circumscribed their participation in public discourse (Connors; Johnson; Smith-Rosenberg; Wagner). Even in elite, private, northern liberal arts colleges for women, administrators and faculty members at times subjected women to a rigid current-traditional rhetoric, disparaged student writing, and discouraged women's public speaking and political participation (Campbell, "Controlling," "Freshman," "Real"; Conway; Simmons). Recently, scholars have

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begun to complicate such histories by examining a broader range of institutions, taking into account local regional and institutional circumstances as they speak to larger national trends, and recognizing pedagogical practices as dialogic rather than monologic. Jane Greer and Susan Kates have examined pioneering progressive educators such as Marion Wharton and Hallie Quinn Brown; Kathryn Fitzgerald and Beth Ann Rothermel have examined women's rhetorical education at coeducational normal colleges; Shirley Wilson Logan and Jacqueline Jones Royster have examined African American women's rhetorical education and activities; and Anne Ruggles Gere, Wendy B. Sharer, and others have examined how women used literacy in social and civic organizations. We still, however, lack a full accounting of the diversity of women's educational experiences in the era, particularly in the South, and particularly in state-supported institutions, where changing expectations of women's public and professional roles created new institutional contexts for emerging national trends.

In this article, I test claims made about the encouragement and discouragement of rhetorical skills in women's education by examining the rhetorical environment at an important and overlooked institutional context—a Southern public women's college. Florida State College for Women (FSCW), now Florida State University, was one of a chain of eight public colleges for white women founded in the South between 1884 and 1908.¹ All remain open, but as they became coeducational in the years following World War II, their important legacy of serving women was largely forgotten. As public institutions, these schools served as centers of women's education in their states and pivotal sites in debates over the goals of such education. As Southern institutions, they represent a distinct and often dismissed regional culture and history. Collectively, these schools, which educated perhaps 100,000 women before World War II, present one of the great lost stories of rhetorical education in American colleges. This story is vital to our understanding of how college women used writing to represent themselves and the world around them—and how they continue to do so today in our classrooms and beyond.

To recover the voices of instructors and students at FSCW, I examine the interweaving strands of literature, journalism, and speech instruction in the English curriculum as well as key moments in the history of the school through the lens of student experience. In particular, I consider how students publicly represented themselves through writing, taking into account Fitzgerald's reminder that student writing does not merely reproduce institutional ideology, but negotiates with, contributes to, and even counters it, allowing students to



“explore, extend, and sometimes circumscribe their own communal identities” (274). Throughout, I intentionally work from the ground up, allowing available archival sources to shape my inquiry rather than imposing an epistemological framework from above.

I argue that the rhetorical environment at FSCW created a robust climate of expression for students that complicates our understanding of the development of women’s education in speaking and writing. While the school had its share of current-traditional composition courses that focused on “correctness” in expression, it simultaneously promoted what James A. Berlin termed a social view of writing through the English department’s offerings in literature, journalism, speech, debate, and drama. To the extent that these classes reproduced bourgeois subjectivity, they also encouraged students’ self-confidence as writers and promoted writing in public forums. The school thus promoted what Catherine Hobbs has termed an “effective literacy,” one that “enables the user to act to effect change, in her own life and in society” (1). Moreover, as a Southern public women’s college, FSCW fostered approaches to pedagogy and women’s public roles that differed from that of private female and coeducational institutions elsewhere. In particular, I address criticism that the school—and, by extension, other women’s colleges—perpetuated a lingering antebellum atmosphere that imposed antiquated and reductive models of femininity on its students. As Linda K. Kerber has noted, women’s spheres were “socially constructed both *for* and *by* women” (18; emphasis in original), and Southern women have been particularly adept at negotiating their own definitions of femininity that resist easy classification. Certainly, many patriarchal and paternalistic features can be found in the founding, mission, and day-to-day administration of the school, and students’ dress, daily schedules, and off-campus activities were strictly regulated well into the 1930s. Despite the restrictions on campus life, students were able to create an effective rhetorical space through their campus writing, which commonly treated issues of public import and at times took positions counter to the reigning political orthodoxy within the state. They also engaged in direct challenges to campus authorities. By examining what students themselves said, rather than simply what has been said about them, a picture emerges of a campus that is much livelier and more responsive to changing social dynamics than has previously been credited.

An Integrated Curriculum

Few women’s colleges have likely had less inspiring births than FSCW. Prior to its inception, higher education in Florida had been largely coeducational; in



1905, in a cost-saving measure, the legislature essentially abolished the state's eight state-supported schools and replaced them with four: a school for the deaf, a coeducational black A&M college, a state university for white men, and a white women's college. Unlike in North Carolina and Texas, where popular movements had led to a women's school, few educational or political leaders in Florida seem to have given much thought to what women's higher education would mean in a new era. As long-serving Dean of the College William Dodd noted, "[t]hat young women should enjoy, in a college of their own, the same scholastic advantages as their brothers, was something new to many people, and beyond their comprehension. Certainly, many of the legislators . . . [thought] they were providing for the young women of Florida an institution of the old seminary or academy type" ("Florida State" 34). As such, the earliest iteration of the school's mission was conventionally Victorian, employing the language of domesticity for its ethos.

In her provocatively titled "Making Southern Belles in Progressive Era Florida: Gender in the Formal and Hidden Curriculum of the Florida Female College," Shira Birnbaum finds that "[e]ven as the [school] credentialed white women students for certain forms of participation in the modernizing Florida economy, its gender codes tied them to an older conservative Victorian model of docility, domesticity, race fear, and submissiveness to male authority" (219). But Birnbaum bases her argument largely on the legislative debates that led to the formation of the school and the earliest official statements of its purpose. While the legislature may have envisioned a school where the curriculum "mirror[ed] the ostensible tranquility and harmony of white middle-class Southern family life" (218–19), it ultimately had little hand in its development.

From the start, FSCW ambitiously promoted itself as a liberal arts college. In his catalogue copy for 1906–07, President Albert A. Murphree took pains to note that the college "is not a normal and industrial school, but is primarily a College of liberal arts," seeking to provide the state's women "the same opportunities for culture and for professional training that she offers her men" (10). It is likely that Murphree, who had hoped to be named president of the new state men's college, was motivated less by a desire to promote equal rights than misgivings of being associated with a mere women's school, but he helped set the tone that would establish the college's identity. Other capable administrators followed, particularly FSCW's second president, Edward Conradi, who served from 1909–41, and English chair and dean of the college William Dodd, who served from 1910–44. Conradi was adamant that faculty not simply be committed scholars but teachers with a "human touch" (*Teacher and Student*



3). Dodd, meanwhile, believed in hiring good teachers and getting out of their way. "I won't even tell you what kind of textbooks to use," he told twenty-six-year-old English instructor Sarah Herndon in 1928. "You're completely free" (qtd. in Herndon 2). Though neither Conradi nor Dodd were initially women's education advocates, both were shaped by their interaction with female students and faculty and became fierce defenders of the institution.

The college also benefited from its large percentage of women faculty members. By 1912, 56% of faculty were women; by 1932, they would constitute 82% (Handschin 56; Sellers 220). Among them were the popular, demanding, and outspoken Philosophy Chair Anna Forbes Liddell, who taught at the college from 1926–62 and lived long enough to fight for both suffrage and the Equal Rights Amendment. The presence of these professional women—nearly all initially unmarried and many graduates of prestigious Northern institutions—shaped campus culture. Said Daisy Flory, a 1937 graduate and later a professor of political science at the school from 1942–84, "One can hardly deny that many FSCW customs . . . might have had disastrous and narrowing effects but for the free and fiery spirit of Forbes Liddell and other strong and liberated women" (qtd. in Stern 50).

In the English department, a confluence of competing forces combined to shape instruction, reminding us that we cannot easily draw clean causal lines between ideology and pedagogy, fit instruction into neat epistemological categories, or rely solely on first-year composition courses for evidence of rhetorical instruction. The disciplinary fragmentation marked by the founding of the National Council of Teachers of English in 1911, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication in 1912, and the National Communication Association in 1914 was delayed at FSCW, where speech, debate, journalism, and drama courses remain linked to English through the 1930s. Students were thus exposed to a wide range of pedagogical approaches.

Under Chair William Dodd, writing instruction at the college combined a current-traditional emphasis on correctness with an early and long sustained turn to the social. Dodd took a broad view of the discipline, recognizing that composition had an important and historically central role as "the most valuable work the English Department is called upon to do" (*Some Objects* 11). While he accepted the Romantic view that literature was a product of genius and thus dependent on innate talent, he saw composition as a learnable skill, quoting with approval James Weber Linn's assertion in *Essentials of English Composition* that "the craft of writing can be learned by anyone, like carpentry or dancing" (qtd. in *Some Objects* 9). Dodd appears to have been influenced by Linn, who



considered himself fairly progressive on the teaching of grammar, allowing to pass uncorrected “even . . . split infinitives” (“What” 99); emphasized “thought, not phrasing, organization, not detail” (*Essentials* vi); and encouraged students to find “something to say” (3) by doing research. While Dodd could be blistering in his assessment of student skills, he also recognized that “a knowledge of grammar is . . . not so fundamental to successful work in college as the ability to read intelligently” (*Some Objects* 6–7). As early as 1914, he applauded the growing recognition by composition scholars that “clear expression” was not enough: “English Composition should do more than cultivate facile expression in the student; it should do its part toward enabling him to take his place in the world of men and women who are producing ideas” (*Some Objects* 9).

The 1928–29 catalogue demonstrates Dodd’s influence and the intertwining strands of instruction in the department. While first-year composition retains its current-traditional cast, “designed to secure correct and easy expression,” sophomore composition shows the influence of socially oriented rhetorics, with the writing and discussion of “familiar, informative, [and] critical” essays “dealing with various aspects of modern life” (114). Literature courses retain a belletristic focus, teaching students literary history and cultivating taste. Yet, as evidenced by essays published in the campus literary journal—which frequently served as a public venue for classroom assignments—students in these courses were encouraged to position themselves as critics, capable of passing judgment on established authors.

An important influence in the English department was Journalism head Earl Vance, who taught from 1928–74 and was for many years one of the school’s most widely published faculty members. Vance embodied what Berlin called the social turn in rhetoric; indeed, in *Rhetoric and Reality*, Berlin cited Vance’s 1937 description of his composition course, in which students were asked to interrogate the social conditions of their hometown, as the “most ambitious report of a course based on a rhetoric of public discourse” he had found (85). Vance embraced the notion of writing as a productive art, eschewing both universal principles and mere instrumental ends and calling for “as much training in rhetoric as can be crowded in” (“Training” 743). While he valued practical newspaper experience—for many years students set copy and produced the newspaper themselves at the offices of the *Tallahassee Democrat*—he also believed that it was not enough, if it were only to lead the student to unquestioningly accept and replicate the worst aspects of professional discourse. “If journalism is to justify its place in the curriculum of American colleges, it must be something more than a trade” (“Training” 742).



In a well-received 1945 *Virginia Quarterly Review* article, Vance condemned corporatized journalism and media consolidation for providing freedom of the press only to press owners and the business interests that supported them. He hoped that schools could serve as a check on this power by explicitly teaching as part of general education the “nature, operation, and effect of the press” as a social institution (“Freedom” 353). As such, he encouraged journalistic skepticism and critical thinking. Said student Mary Hunt, “[H]e made you think—he challenged you. . . . [I]f you were dogmatic about anything, saying ‘This is so!’ he’d say, ‘Why is it so? What makes you believe that?’ He made you think. You had to back up what you said” (6). Vance made use of peer review as well; Hunt recalled that “every feature [she] wrote was critiqued the following week” in class (3). Though Vance’s hopes for the power of journalism education to transform the business of journalism may have been over-optimistic, his explicit desire to make students critics of their own discourse practices—and discourse communities—foreshadows the instructional goals of many contemporary composition scholars.

Spoken English and drama courses at FSCW also offered students a chance to engage as rhetors. Dodd believed that “oral composition” was an important part of study in English, and the college’s tacit mission in training teachers ensured the popularity of such courses. Most early graduates became teachers, and as late as 1930, 57% of first-year students listed teaching as their first career choice (Andrews 8). Teachers not only had to be well read but also be able to lead reading and speak in public. Well into the 1940s, the “primary outlet” for speech majors at FSCW was teaching (Phifer 4), thus driving enrollment. Oratory, which at the school’s founding was required each year, developed from an initial elocution model to a comprehensive speech and communications program. By the 1920s, in addition to traditional offerings in diction and literary interpretation, the school offered a three-year sequence in public speaking, with an emphasis on argumentation and debate. Students studied “arguments, fallacies, sources, and drawing of briefs,” “psychology of audience behavior,” “applications of principles of persuasion and suggestion,” and “criticism of great orators” and participated in formal team debate (*Catalogue 1928-29* 117-18).

The development of speech and oratory at FSCW demonstrates the importance of looking beyond first-year composition courses for evidence of rhetorical instruction and calls attention to the important and little-examined role such instruction played at public women’s colleges, where the larger national decline in oratorical culture played out against a local emphasis on self-culture, literary interpretation, teacher training, and platform art. As at other public

women's colleges, "expression," as it was initially called, played a vital role that challenges our master narratives about the decline of oratory and oratorical instruction. Though sometimes linked with the rise of elocution and the decline of oratory, schools of expression found new energy as centers of progressive education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in particular two influential schools in Boston, Charles Emerson's School of Oratory (1880, now Emerson College) and Samuel Silas Curry's School of Expression (1879, now Curry College). Graduates from both these schools would play important roles in public women's colleges, where they sometimes comprised the bulk of the speech and oratory faculty.

Curry's approach combined elements of faculty psychology, transcendental philosophy, and Pestalozzian regard for the needs of the individual student to produce an almost mystic vision of the power of oratory to transform not merely the listener but the speaker. Curry was dismayed by what he saw as the reduction of elocution to mere mechanical tricks or formulaic modulations of the voice or gestures. True expression, he felt, came not from external manipulation, but from within; the more truly understood and deeply felt a passage to be spoken, the truer the expression. "Expression is the result not of physical but of psychic action at the moment of utterance" (*Province* xi).

Curry's goal was to provide students with confidence as speakers by unlocking the power inherent within themselves. He also tied oratory to civic discourse, believing that "[a] free people must be a race of speakers" (*Foundations* 3) and arguing that "[h]owever beautiful a method for the development of expression may seem, if it fails to develop public speakers, it must be fundamentally wrong" (*Province* 427). Curry's influence is in explicit evidence in FSCW's curriculum and catalogue copy, and a number of faculty studied at his institution, including FSCW's first expression director, Edith Moses, who saw the field as breaking away from being taught as a mere "imitative art" (*Catalogue 1905-06* 101); Mary Buford, who headed the department from the late 1920s until 1948 and oversaw significant expansion of the curriculum; and Buford's student and self-described "Curryite" Elizabeth Thomson, who taught from 1929-71 and introduced the school's first radio broadcast course. DuBois Elder, director of expression from 1912-20, was also influenced by Curry, using his textbooks in her courses and promoting expression as a way for students to study "their own processes of mind" (*Catalogue 1913-14* 115). Coeducation would largely erase this influence; upon Buford's retirement in 1948, a male chair was hired, and "his first move was to get rid of all the women from the



speech faculty," except for Thomson, who had tenure. After that, she "was the only female teacher for years" (Thomson 9).

Student Voices

The intertwining strands of instruction at FSCW meant that reading, writing, and speaking were all emphasized early on. During FSCW's first year, two literary societies were organized and membership was initially required. The clubs quickly joined together to found a literary journal, the *Talisman* (later the *Distaff*), publishing their first issue in April 1906. An important vehicle for student writing, the *Talisman* early on displays voices that are anything but submissive or restrained. Student fiction and poetry, perhaps, betray sentimental and Romantic sensibilities, but the criticism is confident and pointed: a November 1910 essay on Carlyle notes that he "missed the very sweetness of life because of his dyspeptic disposition" (14). In their essays, students display a wide range of cultural influences, both high and low. Alice Corbett's November 1906 meditation on the meaning of culture is pure Arnoldian idealism, quoting Browning, Epictetus, Lafcadio Hearn, and her own English professor, Samuel M. Tucker, on the importance of the "knowledge of the best things that have been said and done in the world" (9). Tucker, responding to the industrial education movement and what he regarded as an increasing emphasis on "money-making," believed that education should be not merely "grossly utilitarian" but should seek to elevate and refine the spirit (Tucker 133), and Corbett seems to have absorbed his influence: "[W]ealth," she writes, "can not purchase culture" (8–9). The same issue, meanwhile, features Irita Bradford's² "Confederate Romance," complete with the requisite loyal "servant" who warns her mistress of an impending Yankee attack on nearby troops. In response, the heroine, young Gladys, disguises herself as a man and rides to warn the soldiers. She gets captured by the Yankees; escapes with the help of the warden's wife, who takes "a great fancy" to her; and at last stumbles into the rebel camp to tend to the wounded, where she discovers her beau. Gladys even gets the triumphant hero's last line: "I found you, and now I am going to keep you always" (16). Though this story is somewhat conventional and melodramatic, betraying a naive and inaccurate understanding of antebellum life, its featuring of the young girl as the picaresque hero is an unexpected reversal.

Public issues also feature regularly, mirroring national debates about education, economics, and social policy. Sallie Shannon's November 1908 essay, "Some Prominent Defects in Public Education," is a rousing argument in favor



of universal education: “The school is for the community. It is as incomplete without the factory laborer’s son as it is without the preacher’s son” (4). Elizabeth Corbett’s May 1909 “Industrial Training as a Feature of Education” argues that “[t]he education that trains for work may be as truly liberal as an education which provides for the decent employment of leisure” (4). Such a sentiment would have likely been widely shared by her fellow students, the majority of whom came from modest economic circumstances. Another essay in that issue, Alice Soloman’s “The Little Drudges of Our Nation,” is an invective against child labor that argues not merely from a traditional woman’s sphere of morality but in instrumental market terms. The practice, she writes, hurts the economy as a whole. Child labor reduces the demand for adult labor, increasing poverty. Moreover, children who are forced to work are left mentally and physically unfit for any but the most menial jobs when they grow up, thus diminishing not only their individual purchasing power but reducing the overall demand for goods. “Child labor,” she declares, “is an economic evil” (14). And, quite bravely for the South in 1908—where, even a generation later, the New Deal would be attacked for interfering with states’ rights—Soloman argues that the problem must be dealt with federally, being too important to be handled “in piece-meal fashion” by the states. She even comes dangerously close to flirting with socialism: An unregulated free market, she writes, while “fascinating” in theory, in practice is “ruinous and impossible” (17–18). FSCW’s administration may have been closely monitoring student movement. Their voices, however, were another matter.

Negotiating Authority: The April Fool’s Revolt

One of the criticisms that has been made against women’s colleges is the restrictive rules regulating campus life—and, ostensibly, students’ minds. Indeed, FSCW had a mind-numbing array of regulations. In its earliest years, students could not leave campus without permission, were forbidden from dancing with men, and were expected to have their lights out in the dormitories as early as 10:00 p.m. Mail was “subject to inspection by the President” until 1926 (Smith 12) and smoking forbidden anywhere on campus until 1932 (Sellers 203). That year, Alban Stewart, a science faculty member, examined student regulations at other colleges. He found that at six comparable women’s schools³ with a total enrollment of 7,994 students, there had been only eight dismissals for misconduct the previous year, while at FSCW, with only 1,776 students, there had been eighteen, fifteen of them for “riding with men,” a minor or nonexistent infraction elsewhere (Sellers 224). As late as 1937, a visiting male student,



aghast at the rules, could complain in the campus newspaper, the *Florida Flambeau*, that the campus should stop “looking fearfully over a shoulder at the fast-dwindling group of Victorian parents and critics” and concern itself with preparing students for postcollege life (23 Apr. 1937 6).

In fairness to administration officials, in the earliest days of the college, when this experiment in women’s education seemed almost revolutionary to some, strict regulations on campus life were a selling point for the institution, helping to convince anxious parents that their daughters would be safe in Tallahassee and the legislature that there would be no scandals. Over time, campus rules were relaxed and renegotiated. As early as 1930, a student studying the early history of the college could complain about the “endless petty rules in 1915” (Diamond 27). But the presence of rules themselves tells us little of the minds of those ostensibly chafing under them. For example, through the 1930s the campus established an increasingly Byzantine system of penalties for cutting classes. But these rules were enacted because students were, in fact, cutting classes, apparently with some impunity. Eventually, the school gave up enforcing attendance as a matter of campus policy, in part because it found that it could not.

One of the most dramatic incidents of rule breaking occurred on April 1, 1920, when nearly the entire campus cut class and went into town. This apparently prompted threats by the administration to dissolve or curtail student government and, in response, a formal letter of apology, approved by the student body. Rather than expressing contriteness, however, the letter is notable for being largely unapologetic. The students ask the faculty to consider not their actions, but their underlying attitude. There was no intended insult or “prearranged plan”; rather,

[T]he idea of cutting first hour class seized several classes at once, and from this beginning, there spread . . . the idea of taking a half holiday. This in turn, spread to the desire to take the whole day off. . . . While it is true that we did cut classes, it was done in a spirit of fun, from an overflowing of good spirits, and our conduct up town was such that it could not reflect discredit on our college. . . . We can see the point of view of the faculty. . . . But since we feel that our attitude has been misunderstood, we ask that the faculty try to see the whole affair from our point of view. (Davis et al.)

Meanwhile, the lead signer of the letter, student body President Mary Wood Davis, wrote a personal letter to President Conradi. Her position, as she explains it, was much more complicated, since, as a student body leader, she was



obligated to express solidarity with the students. At the same time, recognizing her dual obligations, she tried to redirect the fun. She notes that some students were planning mischief that “would have put a black eye on the College,” and it was only by her exhortations and those of other student leaders “that these things were not done. Being one of them they listened to us.” Unfortunately, as she admits, some girls who would not have otherwise gone, seeing her and other leaders participating, went along themselves. “I am not trying to shift my responsibility . . . but I do want to make my position clear to you. I do not want you to think I heedlessly went into it. . . . If I have [brought dishonor to the college] I am sorrier than anyone will ever know. But I want you to understand . . . I have been absolutely sincere” (Davis).

What I find interesting in both of these letters is a desire for the students to be understood, for the faculty to understand their motivations and their actions, not simply as students or even young women, but as young people. They are not playing the gender card here. They are making no pretense of Southern Womanhood. And they are negotiating for authority. How they are seen in the eyes of the faculty matters to them, but they also want the faculty to meet them halfway.

Fighting Back: The Florida Purity League

In a 1939 speech, Edward Conradi declared that the 1920s and '30s would “doubtless go down in history as two of the craziest decades in American life” (“Humanities” 2). To those who lived through them, the century’s first two decades—which brought Freud, flight, Einstein, agitation for suffrage, World War I, the flu pandemic, and the social and economic changes that fostered the growth of public women’s colleges—must have seemed nearly as frenetic. For all of FSCW’s history, the world was very much with its students. The college’s early years saw yellow fever, campus fires, and overcrowding. During World War I, the campus rationed food and coal and required all students to take first aid. The social upheavals after the war brought jazz, bobbed hair, airplane rides, and a new collegiate youth culture. “[R]ah-rah,” wrote student Reba Engler in the January 1927 *Distaff*, “is the American counter-signal” (3). Through the 1920s, college matrons fought losing battles against rising hemlines, bare legs, gum chewing, short hair, and makeup. The Depression brought “an awful lot of potatoes and cabbage” (Thomson 6), forced some students to drop out, and brought others who might previously have gone to a more elite Northern women’s college (Herndon 5). The late '20s and '30s brought the writers of the



Harlem renaissance; for perhaps the first time, students considered the issue of African American civil rights as they studied the work of campus favorite Countee Cullen. Their writing became increasingly worldly and bold. Writing in the February–March 1927 *Distaff*, Keller Harris declared, “Eve did no wrong in taking her chance to get out of Eden. My only wonder is that she stayed there so long” (46).

Though the campus may have been a safe space for exploration, Tallahassee remained a conservative city in a conservative state. Shortly before moving there, William Dodd was told, “Tallahassee is the most backward place south of the Mason and Dixon lines, and all the best people in town are trying to keep it that way” (“Old Times” n. pag.). In 1921 at the beginnings of his anti-evolutionism campaign, William Jennings Bryan made Miami his home base, and two years later he helped encourage the legislature to pass a nonbinding resolution declaring it “improper and subversive” for any teacher in a public institution to teach atheism or agnosticism or to teach evolution “as true” (Larson 53). Through the first decades of the twentieth century, FSCW intermittently came under political attack for supposedly teaching everything from socialism to evolutionism to German culture to atheism to miscegenation.

Beginning in 1926, in what would become statewide news, an elder in the local Presbyterian church, L. A. Tatum, began campaigning against the school for its use of “objectionable” textbooks by authors such as Lawrence, Shaw, and Freud. Under the aegis of an organization called the Florida Purity League, Tatum and his supporters petitioned the Board of Control, the state Board of Education, the state legislature, and the governor; wrote newspaper editors and clergy; and widely distributed pamphlets denouncing Conradi and detailing their efforts to have the textbooks removed (Pichard and Tatum, *Supplement*; Tatum). Though Conradi publicly defended the college, he took Tatum’s threat seriously enough that he required his faculty members to report on whether they had taught any of the books in question. The faculty, naturally, were not pleased; Conradi’s files from 1926 and 1927 are filled with offended letters from instructors, responding that they had either never taught the works in question or, if they had done so, had taught them in their proper context. Rowena Longmire, who had taught English since 1906, noted that she offered *Sons and Lovers* and other naturalistic contemporary texts in “somewhat the same way that a professor of engineering submits several specimens of lawn-mowers or other pieces of machinery for his class to examine and to determine their merits or demerits.” Professor and Dean of the School of Education Nathaniel



M. Salley was even more blunt: “I take it for granted that I am dealing with sensible, intelligent young women. . . . I do not teach dogma in any of my classes.”

Conradi agreed to restrict access to some of the works in question, but Tatum would not be mollified, and he eventually overplayed his hand. Speaking against liberal professors was one thing; indeed, in Florida, it almost constituted a public sport. But disparaging the morals of the young women of the state was another matter. Conradi, who had initially balked when asked at his job interview whether he, as an Ohioan, “got along all right with southern children” (*Memoirs* 20), had obviously learned much in his years at Tallahassee. In an open letter answering Tatum’s increasingly strident charges, Conradi wrote that they were an insult to the faculty, the social directors, the Board of Control, the students and their families, and, of course, Southern womanhood:

Women . . . who would without protest accept such “propaganda” as the accusers say is made here, would not be representative women of our State and of the South. That a man who claims to be a southern gentleman should do such violence to the very finest traditions of the South by throwing such reflections upon the womanhood, and upon the Christian homes of our state from which our students come, seems to be beyond comprehension.” (Letter to C. J. King)

Even the Chamber of Commerce, which at times had had a somewhat tense relationship with the college, eventually spoke in support of it, artfully dismissing Tatum, who was neither a Florida nor Tallahassee native, as an “unwelcome stranger” (Pichard and Tatum, *Unwelcome*). Tatum finally ended his campaign and was last heard of inveighing against the North Carolina College for Women (Sellers 150).

But before that happened, the students got involved. Conradi did not actively encourage student protest—he had tried to maintain an official position of neutrality during the battle for suffrage, for example—but he *had* said in his letter that no true Southern women would accept such charges “without protest.” And protest they did. Things may have come to a head for students with Spanish Professor Edmund V. Gage. In two letters to Conradi dated May 9, 1928, he responds to the Purity League’s charge that he mocked Easter by pointing out that he merely explained the historical origins of the holiday when a student had asked why it had a rotating date. No ridicule nor “irreverence was intended.” His letters were signed by the entire enrollment of both his Spanish 201 and 313 classes, the students having voted unanimously in a secret poll that “all or none of us are to sign so that there will be no coercion.”



On May 17, in response to Tatum's campaign, the student body passed a seven-point resolution in support of the school. In this remarkable document, they asserted that the charges that free love and miscegenation were being advocated were "absolutely false and ridiculous" and that the charge that their faith was being undermined was "absolutely untrue." Comparative religions, they asserted, "are studied in a way to give us a deeper understanding and a broader basis for our own Christian faith." They also pointed out that the extracts from the texts published by Tatum were misleading and taken out of context, "mostly from books we had never read and in many instances did not know were in the library." They praised Conradi and the faculty as upholders of "high moral and spiritual ideals," lamented that the "false charges" were making the state a laughingstock "before the world," and, finally, went even further than Conradi in taking the high ground of Victorian gentility and defending their honor:

[W]e resent the reflection these charges imply against our character, our ideals, and our intelligence, as young women, and must here express our utter surprise that men who claim to be gentlemen could persist in making such false charges and casting such reflections upon our character. It is unthinkable that any group of young women of character and intelligence would peaceably accept such teaching as is charged by the accusers. ("Resolutions")

Though the students effectively play to traditional and gendered Southern codes of gentlemanly conduct and womanly virtue—cards that Tatum himself first played—they in greater measure employ cool logic and empirical evidence to skewer their target. A. Suresh Canagarajah has argued that "students must be encouraged to come out of the safe houses to negotiate the competing discourses in the academy" (192). While the intimate campus environment and shared sense of purpose FSCW engendered undoubtedly contributed to campus solidarity and perhaps ideological conformity, outside attacks on the college such as Tatum's may have inadvertently served to bring students into the contact zone of public discourse about the institution.

Conclusions

As a public women's college, Florida State College for Women represents an important and nearly forgotten legacy in rhetorical education. In addition to recapturing part of that legacy, this study affirms the value of using local histories to illuminate larger historical phenomena and looking beyond official institutional histories to uncover the details of student lives. Textbooks, catalogues, and classroom exercises, while immensely valuable, can only give



us part of the picture; we must hear from the students themselves. And the student voices from FSCW suggest a campus far more dynamic and dialogic than has previously been acknowledged.

I do not wish to suggest, however, that the story I have recorded here is complete. It is impossible in the space of an article to do full justice to the richness of the rhetorical environment at this or any college. FSCW's oratory or journalism program alone would be worthy of extensive treatment. The close fine-grained analysis of student voices I have attempted here allows less space for other voices. And the vagaries of archival records always introduce an imbalance into any historical work. We can only examine what is there. As Lucille M. Schultz has noted, "every reading—and, of course, every history—is contingent, perspectival, partial" (7).

Nor do I wish to suggest that FSCW was a Southern Shangri-La. Students there could be as academically indifferent as we sometimes accuse students of being today. In 1929, for example, 443 of the campus' 1,594 students were placed on academic probation (Smith 5). Said Elizabeth Thomson, "I think then and even now, the girls are in school for the purpose of doing what everybody else does and finding a husband" (6). While FSCW students were aware of economic inequalities, often coming from modest circumstances themselves, they were largely sheltered from racial ones. The absent presence of race on this and other campuses for white women deserves detailed scrutiny.

In 1947, responding to the pressure of returning veterans flooding the campuses of public universities, FSCW went coeducational; as with other public colleges for women, its name and memory have been largely lost.⁴ We still know far too little about the experiences of students and educators at these schools. Yet it was precisely at schools such as these that many of the challenges that we still face today were most keenly felt. With little precedent to guide them, educators at FSCW sought to educate a previously underserved population; recognize students' vocational interests while still promoting the liberal arts; and prepare students for participation in public life. As Beth Ann Rothermel has noted of Westfield State Normal School, FSCW "did not produce many radical feminists" (55), but it did prepare women for public and professional life by encouraging public writing and speaking, offering both practical and "literary" subjects, and promoting an intimate campus environment that allowed students to explore their identities, both public and private, through both writing and speaking.



Florida State College for Women was a small, intimate campus with a focused mission. At most college campuses today, it is unlikely that a student literary journal or newspaper could still serve as a campus voice or that an entire student body could unite in a single rhetorical endeavor. Disciplinary fragmentation has meant that the work of teaching reading, speaking, and writing is split among departments of English, speech and communications, and, increasingly, rhetoric and writing. And few campuses are small enough to offer a tightly focused social community and sense of institutional purpose shared by students and faculty alike. Thus it is even more crucial that we offer students the opportunity to write in public and proto-public forums and support their accidental excursions out of the safe houses of academic discourse and into a larger public. Such student productions can still serve as powerful reference points for teachers and scholars, reminding us that our lessons are not contained by the boundaries of the classroom and that all students have much more complex rhetorical identities than we, and perhaps even they, may sometimes recognize.

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Notes

1. The schools in their order of founding were Mississippi State College for Women (1884), Winthrop College in South Carolina (1886), Georgia State College for Women (1889), North Carolina College for Women (1891), Alabama College for Women (1896), Texas State College for Women (1901), Florida State College for Women (1905), and Oklahoma College for Women (1908).
2. Bradford went on to become an influential literary figure, serving as editor of the *New York Herald Tribune's* weekly book review from 1926–63. She was married to Carl Van Doren from 1912–35.
3. Smith, Simmons, Wellesley, Mt. Holyoke, Radcliffe, and Goucher.
4. Only two of the schools retain a reference to their original titles, Mississippi University for Women and Texas Woman's University, both now coeducational institutions.



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