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The Forces Behind Mountaintop Removal Mining

By NIKKI MATSUOKA
GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

West Virginia. What comes to mind when thinking of this state? Coal, Confederate sympathizers, Trump supporters? Fair. West Virginia's stereotypes make it, for many, a place to avoid. In fact, before traveling there for my Alternative Spring Break trip, these stereotypes led me to form my own negative thoughts about the state. In my initial assessment of West Virginia, I failed to take a step back and think: why can't this state break out of its negative stereotypes? After volunteering with the non-profit organization Coal River Mountain Watch, I began to realize how underlying forces in West Virginia ensure the state's commitment to coal.

It is no surprise to anyone who follows politics that coal is in West Virginia's DNA. The state had been thrown into the national spotlight following President Trump's visits, in which he reaffirmed his support for the coal industry and promised to bring jobs back to West Virginia. Coal River Mountain Watch is an anomaly there. The people in the organization belong to the minority of West Virginians who oppose coal. Not only that, but they also speak out against the dangers of the coal industry.

Coal corporations in West Virginia risk the good health of the communities in which they operate. For example, a full-scale coal plant was built right above the Marsh Fork Elementary School in the unincorporated town of Naoma. Over the years, the coal dust gave many students at Marsh Fork health complications. The corporation in charge of the plant, Massey Energy, had been one of the major donors to and supporters of Marsh Fork. Ironically, every so often Massey executives and

employees would go down to the school and hand out small toys to the students. A small handful of enraged parents and community members joined forces to fundraise and protest against Massey's influence. The parents were successful and a new Marsh Fork Elementary was built away from the coal plant in 2013.

Politics are a major influence in any situation, and in West Virginia it is no different. Governmental support bolsters West Virginia's deep-rooted commitment to coal. "Junior," one of the environmental activists at Coal River Mountain Watch, told our group: "West Virginia is coal and coal

is West Virginia." There is no better way to explain its attitudes toward the coal industry. Most of the state's elected officeholders are supported by the donations and endorsements of powerful coal corporations. This ensures that their coal operations will not be slowed down, despite the industry's harmful effects on the community in the form of health hazards and environmental degradation. West Virginia's commitment to coal is the product of a vicious power dynamic in which coal corporations have too much control over government officials.

In a state so heavily tied to the coal industry, the work that Coal River Mountain Watch does to address and curb the harmful effects of mountaintop removal mining is extremely admirable. It is unlikely that West Virginia will cease coal operations, especially after President Trump's calls to revive the coal industry. And it is important to understand the forces behind West Virginia's reliance on coal before being so fast to judge, since there are some people in the state guarding against the encroachment of coal corporations.

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Abroad in Virginia: Reflections on a Year

By ANDREW JUCHNO
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

I vividly remember walking past the History Department's offices on the second floor of Kirner-Johnson in late January of last year. It was cold out — the kind of cold particular to upstate New York—and I felt trapped. Hamilton was already beginning to feel small. I saw, tacked on the bulletin board across from Professor Kelly's office, a poster emblazoned with the College of William & Mary's distinctive logo. Intrigued, I walked over to read it.

Underneath the intertwined W and M lay the question: "Are you interested in early American history?" Somewhat taken by the moment, I replied aloud in the affirmative. It continued: "Then apply to study colonial American history at the alma mater of a nation." My mind instantly turned to southern Virginia. Surely it must be warmer than Clinton.

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Surely there must be more professors to meet, and different histories to learn. I found myself imagining a year in Virginia studying at one of the best colonial history departments in the country. Studying away from Hamilton for a year was something I had considered. Yet I had been, up to this point, unable to find a program that suited my needs and interests.

Listening to my friends talk about study abroad programs felt more like an exercise in vacation planning than serious preparation for an academic year. They threw out different

continued on back

countries— France, Greece, Italy, and Spain — and talked of the cultural experiences to be had there. Yet lost in these conversations was a sense of the academic. Trips to Versailles are undoubtedly useful, informative even, yet I could not help but get the sense that these programs lacked the intellectual content of a Hamilton course. In between weekends spent in Ibiza or excursions to the Cliffs of Dover, where was the time for reading? When

would substantive discussion occur and papers be written?

I am well aware of the age-old justifications for such programs. “It’s a cultural education,” argue most advocates. But this rationale

is convincing only if the student is studying a foreign language and pursues an immersion program. The Hamilton program in China, from what I have heard, is both intensely rigorous and effective in advancing students’ language abilities. What seems less valuable, however, is when American students study abroad in programs conducted mostly in English. Internships in offices speaking our native tongue often take the place of much of a Hamilton year’s coursework, so students have a less-than-collegiate amount of school work. In this case, “cultural education” can amount to little more than an excuse to drink overseas.

Evidently, I was not meant to go abroad. With my options thus limited, I turned to Hamilton’s own domestic programs. Since I’m a government major, it would have been natural to attend the semester program in Washington. The program has, however, the reputation of being a semester of networking and internships, and is, by most accounts, an artificial grade-point-average boost. I understand that for some students these are the program’s main attractions, but I believe these are experiences best had during the summer, or after completing your undergraduate education.

I have always been acutely aware that we have only four years to spend

as undergraduates. At the beginning of freshman year, this seems like a long, even daunting, stretch of time. Yet as most students quickly realize, four years breaks down into eight semesters, which on average means 32 classes. If you pursue a year abroad, subtract eight of them, leaving you with 24 classes at Hamilton.

In most cases, half of those will be spent on major requirements, leaving only twelve variable classes, with which we are supposed to make ourselves well-rounded scholars. Unsure of what I would do after Hamilton, and whether I would have the chance to be a student again, I could not bring myself to sacrifice eight classes in the name of culture.

With all of these thoughts in the background, William & Mary seemed like a natural fit. I have always loved the South, it would get me off campus for a year, and I would still be in a demanding academic environment. I sent my application in early February and received my acceptance letter during Spring break. I turned to the process of enrolling in the program. For the sake of brevity, I won’t get into the bureaucratic drudgery that went along with this, but there’s one important point to be made — that my Hamilton professors were highly supportive and encouraging. This was heartening, since they teach at an institution that claims to value the student’s ability to forge his or her own path. The Hamilton administration, in contrast, seemed to do everything in its power to dissuade me from pursuing a domestic program lacking its name. Given that the academic caliber of Hamilton and William & Mary is similar, I can only conclude that Hamilton was reticent because my tuition dollars would go to a different institution for a year.

It is impossible to make my year studying colonial history at William & Mary relevant to students with majors that are far afield from this. I am not sure many readers would want to hear about my esoteric knowledge

of the hierarchy of space created by brick patterns, nor would my archival research on St. George Tucker and his 1796 plan for abolition of slavery in Virginia hold sway over many audiences. The best I can do is impart the two lessons I drew from the year.

The first: an affirmation that our time as students is fleeting. Writing this with only three weeks left in my year feels bizarre. As much as I wish it would, time passes no more slowly here in the Tidewater region. I would implore students not to take for granted the value of remaining in an academic setting, at least for these four years. Moreover, study what interests you. As one of my professors here told me: “There is no shame in pursuing history; at the very least, it is a beautiful gift to be able to study your passion.” There will be endless vacations, later, dedicated to exploring far-off lands. There are only eight semesters dedicated to exploring knowledge.

The second: take some time to get off of College Hill. This does not have to mean a program that removes you from Hamilton altogether. While study abroad and domestic exchange programs can be valuable, they are certainly not for everyone. William & Mary gave me, among other things, a different perspective from which to view Hamilton. The one thing I think William & Mary does better is community engagement. Hamilton has programs that bring students into Clinton and the surrounding schools, but I would like to see more students become involved with these programs. Take the time to go out into the greater local community and your education will be better for it.

Looking back on this year in the Tidewater, I have nothing but appreciation for the serendipity and people that brought me here. Hamilton prepared me to excel at William & Mary, and William & Mary heightened my appreciation for our college on the hill. In my undergraduate education, I cannot imagine the one without the other.

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