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Learning Fiscal Policy – and Lifelong Lessons

By Denver Severt
UCF Forum columnist
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We are all students and learners and teachers.

I write this in tribute to my greatest teacher from a student's perspective. Maybe you will stop to think of a favorite teacher, mentor or role model, and perhaps even reach out and say hello to them.

Dr. Elbert V. Bowden taught at Appalachian State University, and from a piercing gaze behind large, wired glasses, the wild-haired eccentric professor enthusiastically discussed his economics course assignments, office hours, grading policy and the course's planned 84 essays in a totally unusual way.

And he issued this challenge: "If past performance indicates future performance, no student will earn a Bowden 'A.'"

With no clue of what macroeconomics was, these declarations already waged war within me. Over time, the war became a voyage to take all of his courses and to earn a Bowden 'A'.

He continued energetically: "I never answer a phone but return answers to machine messages daily starting at 2 a.m., a dull time for me for which I perform routine tasks. Turn on your answering machine if you don't wish to speak."

By this point in his life he had authored dozens of publications and his book, *Economics, The Science of Common Sense*, traveled the globe as a merchant marine during World War II, recorded country songs, earned a Ph.D. from Duke University, and changed the lives of thousands, challenging them to reach their potential. Appalachian State's student-managed investment fund was named in his honor in 2001.

He said the lack of an 'A' in his class resulted from a heavy work load and his grading policy.

We had to study hard, write continuously and prepare for examinations.

To prepare, I read, wrote, outlined, timed, and answered. I wrote essays on broad subjects in 10-minute segments creating unexpected physical and aesthetic challenges.

Tight pencil gripping brought perspiration that dropped onto the quiz sheets like dew drops on the morning grass. The water made the typical left-handed graphite smudges into puffy, irregularly bordered cloud-like rings of graphite. A soft knot formed on one of my fingers that started to bleed small droplets of blood onto the paper.

The graphite smudges, sweat, and blood mixture cast a watercolor effect upon the handwritten essay, making it an overall mess.

One week as Bowden handed out quizzes, he blasted: "Good news, there was a Bowden A on quiz 7. Is it the student with clutter behind his desk, with dreadful handwriting, who wrote a note apologizing for the blood and sweat on the quiz?"

I was purple-faced as he handed me the paper and said: "Keep it up" and "Keep the clutter to a minimum."

I will never forget that triumphant moment.

Six courses, several Bowden 'A's, and a few years after graduation, I requested a letter of recommendation. He wrote: "Denver may not know his true potential," "is too worried about success to see his potential," "is a hard worker," "earned Bowden 'A's, never missed class."

We learned fiscal policy, the multiplier effect, and so much more in these long-lasting lessons he left us with:

- Achieve the work inside your dream while waiting for the dream.
- Loving what you do is economically intelligent and easier.
- Rigorous work and accountability develop potential and possibility.
- Work hard, expect hard work, inspect work.

- Write and read copiously.
- Time pressure, preparation, and desire teach the ability to synergize information.
- Everything has opportunity costs. “Yes,” to one thing means saying “no,” to everything else at that moment.
- Well-designed systems explained clearly are hassle-free and fair.
- The majesty of accomplishment is in the tenacity of earning it.
- Life is learning and earning, not teaching and grading.
- Generating understanding is vital! Generating agreement is not vital.
- Success and dreams appear as sweat on the brow of realized potential activated through efficient and effective effort.

During my time with Bowden, I was challenged as never before – and learned that I also had a desire to teach and inspire others.

Here’s to the spirit of lifelong teaching of Dr. Elbert V. Bowden, teaching to infinity and beyond.

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