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# Reflections on Dean Truman Pierce as Educator, Boss, Mentor and Friend

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My first remembrances of Dean Pierce was as a young graduate student who came to Auburn for Saturday classes from nearby Columbus, Georgia as a warm, slightly-graying gentleman who came out of an office and greeted everyone with a "good morning and a smile". It turned out that I was fortunately assigned to Dr. Wayne Teague as my first graduate advisor. I came to understand over the years that then Associate Dean Bob Saunders and Dr. Teague were "favorites" of the dean so Dean Pierce soon came to know my name and always inquired personally, "Foster, how are things in Columbus". I came to find out over time that he attempted to personalize his relationships and conversations with all with whom he worked and especially the students that he came to know individually. Hence, my earliest reflection of Dean Pierce was as a "student-centered" leader.

Previously referenced Dr. Teague, later superintendent in Auburn City and Alabama State School Superintendent, assisted me in securing a National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) Internship award that allowed me to incorporate a full year as assistant principal for instruction at Avondale High School, DeKalb County, Georgia as an integrated part of my Ed.D program. That year and two others in a federal project, the Regional Curriculum Project (RCP), that focused upon the leadership roles of state departments of education kept me away from Auburn for three years. Auburn through Dean Pierce's leadership had been a key player in the development and funding of that project. I am sure that Dr. Teague and he played key roles in my being selected for that position. Dean Pierce and Dr. Teague were lead players in the development of the Southeastern Educational Laboratory (SEL), one of the regional labs set up across America in an effort to improve public education. Dr. Teague had been Auburn's first representative for the SEL's operations in the state that worked with six local school systems in school improvement initiatives. Dr. Teague's selection as superintendent for the Auburn City school system created a vacancy that brought me back to the university. If you reflect on this paragraph, one will conclude as I have from the beginning, that it was very fortunate for me to have been assigned to Dr. Teague as my first graduate advisor.

Two federal projects were referenced above which provide me with a link to make the point that Dean Pierce operated on a national level in professional associations and educational organizations and was on the cutting edge of looking for external funding relationships that would complement and extend his careful use of the limited funding available through state sources. To his credit, he never let the university's central administration rest from his persistent quest for education's fair share of funds available to them. In support of his effort, I recall a study that we did that took a comparative look across the state line at the College of Education at the University of Georgia. The results indicated that with similar enrollments, UGA had three times as many regular faculty lines than we had at Auburn. I also recall vividly one day when he had come back from a less than satisfactory trip to the "hill". He looked out the window toward the agricultural side of the campus and "lamented that those people care more about preparing people to work on pigs than they do in adequately funding programs to prepare people to teach their children and lead their schools". In passing I would hope to add that he inoculated me with that passion early on, and I have pushed that agenda over the years as well.

Dean Pierce was an early supporter of efforts to make the educational leadership professorship one that was organized and respected. He was an earlier player in the development of the University Council on Educational Administration (UCEA) and supported Auburn's participation in it. As an educational leader with overall concerns and goals, he always had a balanced view of the role of the Alabama Education Association. His appreciation of higher education's participation in AEA is best reflected by his support of previously referenced Associate Dean Bob Saunders who worked through the leadership ranks and served a term as president. Early on, he recognized that Dr. Paul Hubbert was an unusual educator leader with significant potential. From my

vantage point in the next office, I was aware that they communicated regularly along the way in the many challenges to the Education Trust Fund by governors with wishful eyes and on a number of other items with implications for Alabama public education.

Before getting away from the external funding area totally, it should be noted that Dean Pierce was involved with the Kettering Foundation's efforts to develop Individually Guided Education (IGE) programs across the nation that endeavored in the late 60s to develop schools in which students "learned one at a time, together". Those early efforts were extended by the work of the SEL in school systems across Alabama. Even before IGE and SEL, in cooperation with International Paper (IP), the school of education worked in school systems with IP locations in school improvement initiatives. Personally, I made a number of trips to Choctaw County during my early years back at Auburn to work with Dr. Robert Fortenberry, a graduate student peer, who found the education of black students to be "almost a missionary effort" when Dean Pierce sent him to Butler, Alabama.

The above reference to the challenges of school desegregation in Choctaw County serves as a transitional link to a discussion of perhaps Dean Pierce's most significant contribution to Alabama public education during his tenure. Without the overwhelming interest of and support from some at Auburn and from the governor's office, the School of Education applied for a federal grant that supported the operation of the Auburn Center for the Problems Occasioned by the Desegregation of Schools. Through his continuing contacts with his doctoral graduates who were in the "trenches" during those challenging times, he became aware that two of them, Dr. Stafford Clark in Troup County, GA and Dr. John Martin in Jackson, MS, had gotten ahead of their local school boards in trying to do the right things and were looking for employment. He brought them to Auburn where both of them provided yeoman service to school systems across the state. I had the opportunity at the memorial service for Dr. Clark to say to his family that "Dr. Clark probably did more than any one single individual to help save public education in Alabama through his effective work in the Auburn Center". I have lost track of John Martin, but am in a position to make similar comments about him as well.

While Dr. Clark through his role as Coordinator of Field Services and Dr. Martin as Auburn Center Director provided leadership to the Auburn Center's efforts, the major fieldwork of the Center was carried out by doctoral students who utilized the Kettering-based IGE program, discussed earlier, and school improvement and staff development initiatives being developed in the emerging educational lab program in assisting school systems through the desegregation process. Allen Cleveland, who later followed Dr. Teague in the Auburn City School System, and C.C. Baker, one of the early African-American doctoral graduates of Auburn University, were among the group that included Tom Taylor. Drs. Baker and Cleveland later served for a number of years in the state department of education with Dr. Baker serving as president of Alabama State University during a transitional period of that institution.

In discussing the dean's relationships with Dr. Hubbert earlier I made the veiled point that Dean Pierce was a player in Montgomery. I also mentioned his maintenance of contacts with Auburn graduates across the state. Two of those doctoral graduates, Drs. Wayne Teague and Ed Richardson, extended that Montgomery link for a number of years through their subsequent selection as state school superintendent. Ed who was one of my doctoral students, recruited from his position as principal of Andalusia High School, who also served Auburn University as president after leaving Montgomery. Dean Pierce used these relationships over time to assist in trying to move Alabama education in the right direction more effectively than any dean that I have been aware of in my 50-plus year in the education business. Drs. Teague and Richardson, also in my opinion, were the first real proactive state superintendents who used their position to advance the causes of public education in Alabama.

References have been made to Auburn graduates a number of times to this point. It might be timely to note at this time, that there are a number of them in this room today who by their selection to this advisory council and their presence today indicate that they have been involved in productive leadership roles throughout their respective careers. Drs. Tom Taylor, Carlton Smith and Ron Saunders had longstanding relationships with Dean

Pierce and remember him fondly. Those three cannot escape the personal claim that I proudly make of them as "three of mine" as well.

Another one of mine during the Pierce era was Dr. Maurice Persall. We recruited Maurice reluctantly to Auburn as he was a big "Roll Tide" fan. It was to be a package deal with his very talented wife, Jerri, to become my secretary. They came to town in the fall and things went well for about a month. I was out of town on a three-day trip—came back to find Jerri's desk moved outside Dr. Boyd Scebra's office. Boyd was a recent doctoral graduate who had come into the Dean's Office about the same time as I did. It seems that it took two of us to replace Dr. Saunders when he left to become dean at Memphis. Dean Pierce had decided in my absence in "collaboration" with Boyd that she was too talented to work on the academic program side of the house and could serve the college better in assisting Boyd look after the money. Many of you remember Boyd well who not only looked after the financial concerns of the School of Education but in his professorial role made a strong academic contribution through his regular teaching of the finance sequence. The couple stayed with Maurice completing his degree and subsequently serving as superintendent in Arab and later as Associate State School Superintendent.

The above reference to my loss of a secretary allows me to point out the importance the dean put on the financial side of the operations and leads into a few "money related" stories about Dean Pierce. Literally, he tried to get a "dime out of every nickel" that came his way in his personal life and in his work within the School of Education. At times the dean and I traveled together. I soon found out that he never had any money with him. I found myself repeatedly "picking up" the small tabs for coffee breaks and such. I developed the habit of always having a bit of money with me after I got caught and had to put purchases of less than a dollar on a credit card—which was not the accepted practice back then.

Another even more personal revelation came to me after I left a position as associate dean and coordinator of graduate programs at Auburn to go to Tuscaloosa. Being one that never negotiated on my salary, I was a bit floored when Dean Paul Orr offered me over \$5,000.00 more to come to the University of Alabama as a professor with no initial administrative responsibilities. The closest I ever came to negotiating a salary had been with Dean Pierce. When I first went into the dean's office, he offered a reasonable salary increase and I took it upfront. My first paycheck did not correctly reflex the agreed upon amount as I recalled it. In a doorway conversation with the dean, I indicated such to him. He reflectively asked: "Foster, do you have anything written down about that?" I immediately responded that I had it down in my black book which was at home. It was lunch time and I was on the way home. He asked me to bring my black book back after lunch. I spontaneously said I would, and turned to leave. I had a second thought about the exchange and returned to say to him that "If I have to bring my black book as evidence to our earlier agreement, you can just keep this job". He paused for a minute and responded, "Foster, I do not believe that you need to bring your black book back". I thought carefully about including that exchange, but it allows me to make a key point about Dean Pierce. He was open to feedback and was able to move on with ease even when things may have gotten a bit tense.

Let me pick up on the reference to Dean Paul Orr and the University of Alabama. The two deans were very cordial but also very aware of each other and sparred in leadership manners in the state. Dean Pierce had a humorous way of putting that relationship into perspective. He often mused that "we will let the University of Alabama try to save South America (a reference to Dean Orr's significant interest in international program delivery); we are going to try to save South Alabama and the rest of the state".

Boyd and I were relatively young and both recent graduates of the doctoral program when we went into the Dean's Office. Two of the old-timers who were in mid-level leadership positions had trouble getting over the fact that "those two used to be graduate students around here". Dean Pierce never let them run around us to him and made both of us feel that we had his full support in the day-to-day operations of the School of Education. Early on in my return to Auburn, I attended the Administrative Council meetings as a representative

of Dr. John Walden, our very effective departmental chair, when he could not attend. Those sessions gave me the opportunity to see how Dr. Saunders handled those meetings with Dean Pierce interjecting himself appropriately at times to make a point or clarify a position.

On another lighter note, my fellow administrators made me aware along the way that perhaps my greatest leadership accomplishment was when I finally convinced the dean to move the Administrative Council meeting from Saturday morning at 10:00 to Friday afternoon at 1:00. Dean Pierce operated always on a six-day work week, and more often than not, on Sundays as well.

In the opening paragraph, I discussed some of Dean Pierce's personal traits that contributed to his great success in working with and inspiring others to be the best they might be. Through the subsequent paragraphs I have tried to demonstrate and embellish others. In a bulleted manner, I will list a few more for your reflective consideration:

- High Expectations for All
- Strong Mentoring Skills that made one feel that those Expectation were within Reach
- Gave Latitude to people to Perform
- Provided Developmental Feedback
- Worked to develop the "Grand We"
- Gave Credit where Credit was Due
- Deflected any Personal Recognition for Success

From a mentoring perspective, I sought and considered his advice on a couple of occasions when I had job opportunities that would have carried me away from Auburn. While always being certain that the decision was mine to make, his exploratory and extending comments about those two opportunities led me to the conclusion that the timing was not right. However, I later came to feel that he wanted to keep his good help like Bob Saunders as long as he could. My subsequent move to the University of Alabama was made when it became clear that I could not be a candidate to attempt to follow Dean Pierce because of my Auburn doctoral degree. Dr. Fran Kochan and those who preceded her and our current dean, Dr. Betty Lou Whitford, have all had the position that I coveted over the years. I am certain that they have been and will be in the future much more successful in that role than Foster would have been. Dean Pierce's career advice kept me from crossing the Mississippi line so that my career, if I am allowed to call it such, has been spent back and forth over the Alabama/Georgia line.

I attended the recent celebration of Lifetime Achievement banquet in this building as the guest of one of my doctoral students—Dr. Jim Hughes. He had been invited by one of his former football players, US Army General Lloyd James Austin III, one of the four recipients of the award that evening. General Austin made it clear in his comments that Jim had been a key player in his early development that laid the foundation for his significant success in the service of our county. I mention that event to make a closing point. Being in the room with so many dedicated War Eagles and walking the campus after a McDonald's breakfast with Jim reminded me in emotional ways how special Auburn University is and what a key role my coming here played in my life. Much has changed around Thach Hall and the Haley Center over the years, but I was able to find those two building and reflect on my early Saturday morning contacts with a dean who was in the building, as I came to understand later, for the Administrative Council meeting.

As a Georgia Tech football player from the Bobby Dodd era, I probably will never yell "War Eagle" with the right degree of intensity. However, I tried to get both of my children to come to Auburn without success. I still believe that this "Cow College" knows how to embrace students in inviting ways and to make them feel more than just a "number" in a list of numbers better than any other large public university. I have been diverted from recognizing such with my career in higher education but motivated by this morning's event and all it has

resurrected in my mind and the recent time with the General and all of those War Eagles, I hope to do better down the road.

Dean Pierce and I maintained a degree of contact over the years. From my perspective, we continued our mentor/mentee relationships as I discussed emerging issues that came up in my subsequent employment situations in seeking his thoughts and guidance. When my travels carried me back to the Auburn-Columbus area, I would always take the route between the locations to go by his rural Alabama home and visit with Dean and Mrs. Pierce. He delivered the keynote address at my inauguration as president of Gainesville College in Georgia. His stature as an educational statesman of the highest order was most evident to those Georgia folks on that special day in my life. Sadly, he had passed when I was installed two other times, but I reread and reflected on his words that are saved among my valuable papers and accepted his challenging words again on each occasion.

I want to thank Tom Taylor especially for making it possible for me to participate in this special recognition of a person who remains a role model for me as I continue to try to figure out what I will do next as I hope to keep "failing retirement"! I always associate Tom with one of Dean Pierce's own doctoral students, Dr. Brandon Sparkman. Brandon and Tom served together or followed each other in several locations. Brandon has written of their experiences in following John Martin in Jackson, Mississippi in a recently published book. Another link with Brandon and an illustration of in my mind of the continuing legacy of Dean Pierce is the service of his son, Dr. Robert Sparkman, as superintendent in Jasper, Alabama. Closer to us this morning is another such extension of legacy example. Dr. Wayne Teague's daughter, Dr. Karen Teague Delano now has followed her father in that position in the Auburn City School System. We started with Dr. Teague in this discussion. Perhaps it has gone on too long, but, it seems fitting and I know timely, to close the loop with a mention of the father-daughter legacy example in Auburn. Karen was in an early administrative role as an elementary principal when Dr. Byron Nelson, a member of this council, assumed the position as superintendent in Homewood. Byron and I have "spared" with each other over the years about the real value of 'college professors' in the practical world of education. But seriously, I have always valued his friendship and his success in leading multiple school systems across the state. I am certain he made a positive developmental impact on Karen as a young administrator. It is not a surprise to me that he joins Tom Taylor, Carlton Smith and Rod Saunders in this room this morning.

I have tried to share my thoughts on the Educator, the Boss (although I never thought of him as such), the Mentor and the Friend that I knew and admired. It may have come out that I was just "talking reflectively to myself", and to a degree, I was. I hope each of you enjoyed it as much as I did.

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