

Conversations with Professor Duncombe via Work Rather Than Words: A Tribute to Bill

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Foreground

Professor William David Duncombe was a prolific researcher, a serious scholar with the fullest integrity, an outstanding mentor of doctoral students, and a true friend to all students, colleagues, and fellow researchers in the public budgeting and finance as well as education finance and policy communities. Everyone called him just “Bill” – he was always humble, ready to help others, and sincere. To me, Bill was a teacher, professor, mentor, and friend. He and I got to know each other, and later developed a close teacher-student and co-author relationship through our work together. Bill died of cancer on May 11, 2013, less than three months before I returned to Maxwell as a professor; but Bill will long stay in the research community, with his students, friends and colleagues, and with me, in particular.

First Acquaintances

I came to the Maxwell School in January 1997 to study public administration; but I did not have a chance to meet Professor Duncombe until the fall semester when I took the statistics class of about 30 students that Bill taught. The typical “me” did not speak in class – I would take a seat in the third row, not too close and not too far from the podium. I carefully covered readings before each class and well finished homework assignments. It must have been my silence in class in tandem with good performance on homework that had caught his attention. At the final exam, I finished ahead of most others in the class. On my way out of the exam room, Bill in a soft voice said simply, “Yilin, good job.” That was how he and I met and got to know each other, through actual down-to-earth work, not conversations.

Beginning from January 1998 I worked as a research associate on the Government Performance Project (GPP). The 1999 survey was of 35 of the largest cities, for which Bill was invited to serve as the faculty expert in the financial management section and I was the coordinator between him and others working in that section. Again there were few words between Bill and me – the main reason, I guess, was that he was always busy with multiple tasks. And besides, he was observing me at a distance, because I was a doctoral student and he wanted to know for sure whether I was worth his time and attention.

As a second-year doctoral student, I had only respect for him but otherwise knew next to nothing about him. I did not pay much attention either, because Bill’s office was on the 4th floor while we were on the 3rd floor at the Center for Policy Research and our “big boss” was Patricia Ingraham, the Principal Investigator of the GPP Project and Director of the Campbell Institute. The way I coordinated the financial management section was to simply work, much in

the same way as Bill did – however early he was sending an email to me on anything (Bill always came to the office early), I was already in my office and responded to him quickly (he was kind and considerate not sending emails too early in the day of course); however late he sent out a message in the late afternoon or early evening, I would also respond to him quickly. It was this responsiveness to his messages that inspired his confidence in me. This similar ethic and attitude towards work spawned the chemistry between us.

With the chemistry increasingly at work, Bill and I got to know each other well. Making use of the data that we collected from the projects and analyses done, Bill assembled a strong team, with Bernard (Bunny) Jump and two professors at the Lemoyne College, who employed fuzzy logic to conduct empirical studies of city financial conditions and dissected the black box behind credit ratings. Two research papers came out of these efforts in the *Public Budgeting and Finance* journal (2011). Of the team members, Bill was the center: he was the organizer, the mastermind, the final writer, and editor of the symposium in the journal.

Building Strong Bond

In the spring of 2000 I began preparing for the doctoral comprehensive exams. That was the time when our relationship began to become close. Bill intentionally spent more time with me than before, in small doses, with encouragement, suggestions, and tips on small details, to help prepare me. I got a “High Pass” on the Public Finance exam. In the fall of that year, I attended the annual conference of the Association for Budgeting and Financial Management (ABFM) for the first time and presented my preliminary results on state rainy day funds. The conference was held in Kansas City. Bill rented a car during that trip and took me and Bob Bifulco to the City Zoo for a half-day trip. That seemed a very rare occasion, for Bill to go out of his way for an excursion with two students.

The summer of 2000 through the spring of 2002 was my dissertation period, during which Bill and I had by far the most frequent “real” conversations. The most common format was in the late afternoon or early evening when Bill had finished his long day of work. He would show up in my office, in a seemingly relaxed and casual way. He would chat with me about topics that he thought would be useful to me. It could also be something light, not many though – Bill was trying his best to provide me with some comfort, solace, and intellectual amusement.

My job search was somehow a lengthy period of uneasiness. The search and interviews were intermingled with some unexpected and unfortunate events. The result was less than desirable: two positions were cancelled and one went awry. At the final stage, the selection among available offers was not easy either. The typical Bill was never imposing any idea on me; he offered his side of opinions, trying to give a perspective while maintaining full respect for my own opinion, stand, and considerations.

Lasting Mentorship

In May 2002 I defended my dissertation. The Committee and Department nominated me for the Maxwell and Syracuse University best dissertation awards. Bill provided editing

finance to improve the format and language of the dissertation. In that summer before I left Maxwell for Rutgers-Newark, Bill and Jeff Straussman called on me to team-teach the summer intensive MPA budgeting course for the 2003 class. They put together the teaching materials and syllabus, then added my name on the cover – I was free-riding. My guess was, Bill was doing a new phase of his mentorship that did not stop at the graduation of a student; it continued. It was an educating process for me from Bill's side. I feel that I, personally, learned more from the teaching than those students learned from me.

In the spring of 2003, I got my first solo paper accepted. In the revision process, Bill was a constant help, being forever patient, detailed, and encouraging. The conversation was mostly via email, some over the phone. Then we started collaboration on a paper to analyze fund balance of New York State school districts. It turned out that work on this paper lasted for the next ten years. Bill was never satisfied with drafts. He would go over again and again details in the model and data. Any time we had some feedback from a conference participant or a reviewer opinion from a journal, he would throw in a new round of data modification and mining, then remodeling, analyses revision, and text polishing.

Friendship

Five years after I left Maxwell, Bill and I got a 10-day window to be together. Though we had been able to meet each year at the annual ABFM conferences, those meetings were usually brief and often interrupted by panels; receptions and group dinners during conference days were not occasions for detailed exchanges. That was the summer of 2007, Bill was able to be away from his office to participate in a conference-lecture trip to China that I put together. It was intended to be a working vacation for Bill; but he insisted to continue working all the way.

The first stop was Shanghai at Fudan University's School of International and Public Affairs. The conference lasted a day and a half. Bill spent most of the time at the conference and did not do much sightseeing. The second stop was Beijing at the Central University of Finance and Economics to deliver two lectures. He did that with due, probably over-diligence. During a rare free day, he insisted on making a day trip to Nankai University in Tianjin to deliver a lecture on education finance and cost analysis. His lecture was warmly accepted, but he became exhausted.

In August 2008, on my way to the Minnowbrook III conference at the Blue Mountain Lake Syracuse University facility, I stopped at Maxwell and visited Bill in his office (he just took over Bunny's office on the east side of the CPR hallway). The conversation was not particularly long; but we were able to have a very pleasant, thorough chat about a few things.

Then in July 2009 we were together again for a week on a teaching mission organized by Maxwell. It was for training Indian federal officials ready for promotion. The site was the Missouri, India Federal Administrative Institute on the southern slope of the Himalayas. We had a really good time, each day dining together, taking walks, and attending each other's lectures. Particularly relaxing and rewarding was, on an open day we hiked up the mountain for several hours, to the White House of Mr. Everest – the British who first formally discovered the

world's highest peak and gave it a masculine name. After the mission was over, we took the train back to Delhi. It was an eye opening six hours for us to see a lot that we would not otherwise have learned about Indian society.

Revisiting Athens, GA

I had talked with Bill for quite some time to invite him to the University of Georgia for a couple of lectures to my students there. He had been preoccupied with endless projects, then with court testimony in Texas on education finance policy. Finally, after two postponements, he came down near the end of November, 2012. That was a very relaxing three days, for him and for me. On the first afternoon, after a short break upon his arrival (he drove to Athens from the Atlanta Airport) he lectured for three hours to MPA students on cost analysis. As always, Bill was almost immediately a popular teacher with the students. In the evening, he enjoyed a dinner with Thomas Lauth, Dean of SPIA at UGA and me at the Five & Ten restaurant, the reputedly best in Athens. The three of us talked about almost everything that each of us was interested in over a long dinner with wine.

The next morning, Bill spent almost two hours listening to my doctoral student presenting their ideas on dissertation research. Bill offered advice. In the afternoon, I took him to the Botanical Garden to have a walk, then had coffee and snacks in the Garden. In the evening he lectured to MPA and doctoral students on education finance. After lecture, I put together a late dinner for him to meet with four doctoral students. He left early the next morning. It was a two full day visit. I noticed he was constantly coughing and saw him take a cough pill several times; so I asked him about it. He said it was just a cold.... In early January 2013 words came that in late December Bill had been diagnosed as having late stage lung cancer. It was a complete shock to everyone.

An Hour-long Conversation

From then on till mid-April, he and I stayed in touch via email. In late February I gave a talk at Maxwell. At that time he was going to Boston for surgery. I scheduled a short meeting of 10 minutes at his home. I said it would be short, only 10 minutes. I knew he would be unwilling to meet people when he was in such condition and he was uncomfortable talking; but somehow I felt I had to meet and see him. He agreed; he wanted to see me and talk.

I got to his home at around 11am. Julie was present. I made it clear upfront that I would stay for only ten minutes. Bill was having much difficulty talking, short of breath and energy but he very much wanted to talk with me – it seemed that he had a lot to tell me. I felt that. I interrupted him several times, telling him that he should stop for a while at least and that I and Julie would chat with him listening. He would very soon take over again. Julie had an appointment; she left. I stayed on. Thus, Bill talked and talked; the meeting lasted for a full hour. At the end, I had to say, "We must stop here. You are exhausted. I will come to Boston to visit you after your operation." He said, with his usual consideration for others,

“Don’t take that trouble. I will come back to Syracuse not long after the operation. The doctor is the best on treating my type of cancer and he is optimistic. So we will be meeting again in May when you come up again.”

That was the last of our real verbal conversations.

Our communication continued via email. He was still editing the *Public Budgeting and Finance* Journal. As editor, he was playing his full duty. The next half dozen emails he sent me were on revising the paper on balanced budget requirements that my former doctoral student Dan Smith and I co-authored. Bill even took pains to make detailed revision comments on the electronic file. Later I told Dan Smith that we must accept every piece of Bill’s points in the final version. The second issue of the journal came out in June. By then, Bill had been gone for a month. He advised me in the spring of 2003 on my first solo paper; ten years later his last advice was on another paper of mine, with a new generation of doctoral student.

We had all hoped that the “treatable” diagnosis by the Boston expert of his disease would turn out as predicted by the doctor. But the word coming out of the operation room was not. Even after that, he and I had a couple of more email communications. He told me Julie would take over his writing role in responding and he would go to Portland, Oregon to recuperate. I felt empty because I could not find out anything that I could do to help him. In early May I sent him a box of Chinese tea, hoping that whether or not he was able to drink his favorite beverage, seeing some good tea would help or provide some solace. Then on May 11, he passed away, one month shy of his 58th birthday.

Forever Bill

My conversations with Bill would not stop or end. The heart-to-heart communication will continue in ways other than words or writing. Our communication is through a unique kind of chemistry, intuitive mutual understanding. I felt that Bill has left with me multiple missions that he had wanted to accomplish, quite a few things that he thought should be done. I will do my best. Bill stays, in particular with me.