

## Profiles in Excellence

# Business prof found keys to motivating college students in lessons learned from kindergarten teacher and clown

Danny Butler of Auburn's College of Business traces his award-winning approach to collegiate teaching to the two most influential people of his childhood. One was a kindergarten teacher, the other was a professional clown. His parents.

Butler, who is the Thomas Walter Professor of Technology Management at Auburn and an associate professor in the college's Department of Marketing, was one of two recipients last fall of the Leischuck Endowed Presidential Awards for Excellence in Teaching. The other recipient was Steven Kincaid of the College of Veterinary Medicine, who was featured in the Dec. 8 Auburn Report.

Long before being named a Leischuck Award recipient, Butler was widely recognized as one of Auburn's most effective teachers. A member of the Auburn faculty since 1989, he has received more than 25 awards for academic excellence from university units and organizations and external, professional associations.

*"I try to make it fun for them to come to class, but, once they are there, I want them to learn."*

— Danny Butler

In nominating him for Auburn's top teaching award, Jimmy Lawrence, director of corporate services in the College of Business, wrote: "I have known Dr. Butler over the past 19 years of his Auburn career, and I can say without hesitation that he is the most comprehensive embodiment of a teacher that I have met while at Auburn."

Joe Hanna of the college's Department of Aviation and Supply Chain Management recalled team-teaching with Butler in a multi-class, multi-disciplinary project: "Dr. Butler challenged his students unlike any professor I have ever seen. Nevertheless, he was positively received primarily because of two reasons: First, the students were convinced he was teaching them relevant subject matter that would provide them with significant benefits upon graduation. Second, each student knew Danny cared about them as individuals and was committed to having them learn the course material."

Former students describe Butler as a highly motivated teacher whose classes are both demanding and entertaining. "In the classroom, he is equal parts professor, comedian, Marine drill sergeant and motivational guru," wrote Anthony C. Brown, who received two degrees from Auburn in the early 1990s. "He instilled in us a joy for learning, showed us the importance of practical application and inspired us to never settle for mediocrity."

Tara Jones, director of development for Auburn's College of Architecture, Design and Construction, recalled a marketing class she took under Butler in 1995. Describing him as one of the most demanding and most enlightening teachers she encountered as a student, Jones wrote: "Dr. Butler has many talents, but teaching is his calling. Dr. Butler does a fantastic job in teaching the material in a way that makes you want to learn more."

Butler, who holds bachelor's and M.B.A. degrees from the University of Central Florida and a Ph.D. from the University of South Carolina, has said he could not imagine pursuing a career that did not involve teaching. "I found my niche," he said. "I found what I am good at." He recalled developing a 20-year plan in 1977 and assessing the results in 1997. "I found that I was doing what I had planned to do, and I am still doing it."

Although he held jobs in the corporate sector early in his career, the Florida native decided early in life that he wanted to be a teacher. In an otherwise conventional childhood in Miami, Butler found inspiration for his future career in dinnertable conversations between parents who found much common ground in two seemingly very different occupations. From his mother, who was a kindergarten teacher, and his father, a professional clown who had a recurring spot on a Miami television show, he learned that entertainers and teachers can learn a lot from each other.

Around the dinner table in the evening, young Danny would watch as his parents, Richard and Betty Butler, discussed ways to communicate with their respec-



### Making learning fun

In nearly 20 years of teaching in the College of Business, Danny Butler has won consistently high marks for motivating students in classes that graduates describe as demanding but never dull.

tive audiences. Danny's mother drew upon her knowledge of educational psychology to help her husband add meaning to his comedy, and he helped her develop ways to hold the attention of her pupils through timely use of humor.

Although they worked in different arenas, Butler said his father was as much a teacher as his mother and his mother could be as entertaining as his father. Each was always practicing his or her craft, looking for ways to make it more meaningful for others, he explained. "I was always taught that you could achieve anything you want as long as you are willing to work and get somebody to show you how," he said. "That's what teachers do."

He added, "My mother always said, never forget what it is like to be a kid; they don't know things, so you've got to figure out a way to get into their heads. And part of it is the use of humor to make it fun."

The key, Butler said, is the timely use of entertainment for precise purposes in the classroom. "The little games that I play — based on theory, by the way — have been used by a lot of folks in some very stoic scenarios," he added.

"I try to make it fun for them to come to class, but, once they are there, I want them to learn," he said. "I want to make a difference in the world, and, long ago, I figured I could do it one student at a time."

Butler continued, "While I am teaching the entire class, I am trying to figure out what it takes to get through to each student.

"You never know who will be that one student to save the world," he said, "so I have to treat each one like he or she is going to be the one."

— Roy Summerford

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*Editor's Note: Profiles in Excellence is a periodic series of feature articles about Auburn faculty and staff who have been honored by the university or nationally for the top level of achievement in teaching, research, outreach or within a professional field.*