

Bob Cunningham: The Executive in Residence

Amy: You're listening to "Beyond 1894," a podcast where we hear from Louisiana Tech University scholars, innovators, and professionals on their personal journeys and the impact they're making in the world around them. I'm your host, Amy Bell, and my co-host is Teddy Allen.

Amy: In this episode, we hear from Dr. Bob Cunningham. As an Executive in Residence in the College of Business, he has been cultivating long-term relationships with students and faculty and has been sharing his expertise and insider perspective with students in the classroom, on research projects, and through out-of-class mentoring opportunities. He is also an instructor of accounting, and his passion for teaching and creating relationships with students is truly significant.

Bob: People are interesting. Everybody has a story. There are aspects to their story that you can relate to. No matter what color they are, no matter what economic background they came from, you're going to find something that "Wow, you know, I can relate to that." So I enjoy communicating and relating to people, and teaching just kind of enhances that.

Teddy: He's in it, you can tell, he's in the profession and back in teaching now because he loves his relationship with students. And he feels that he's been called to relationship, and teaching is a way that he's able to experience that and serve.

Amy: Yeah, yeah, that's something that I noticed when we were talking. I noticed he seems to say and do things with intention, like with purpose. And there doesn't seem to be a ton of separation between his personal life and his career. Creating meaningful relationships through teaching and mentoring is a huge part of his life, including at the pulpit.

Teddy: Yes, he serves as an evangelist is my understanding. And I think if you're reading Colossians, there's a verse that "whatever you do work with all your heart, as working for the Lord. It is the Lord Christ who you're serving." So in his faith, he's on the clock all the time, you know. I've never been at the grocery store with him or the auto-fix-it place or in the classroom, but I think in each of those he looks for opportunities to serve. And specifically in the classroom. He'll tell you that he was raised in Ringgold. There were racial tensions. He experienced those at Tech in the late 60s, and he also flunked out of school. And there were some teachers and people that helped him and he uses the term in here, at some point, this "old white guy," that was one of the guys, along with his mother, who got him back into school, got him with a different crew. He ended up getting three degrees from Tech. A success in the classroom as a professor and also in some private businesses that he had and has. So just a very engaging, forgiving, "I want to make things better" man.

Amy: He was one of the first African American students on this campus and to graduate, and I think that it takes a lot of resilience to be an... like to feel like an outsider and still push on every single day and believe in yourself enough to finish and accomplish what you meant to, you know?

Teddy: He mentions a lot of professors that helped him and made him feel a part of, and he became the first black faculty in the Business... College of Business. He had never thought about getting his doctorate until he was asked to by one of his professors and said "We could use you around here." So... It's an inspiring story, and he tells it very humbly and openly. He does. You can tell there's a sweetness and goodness about him.

Amy: And on that note, let's go to the interview.

[start of interview]

Amy: Okay, so you said that you grew up here. Have you always lived here?

Bob: Well, I grew up in a little town called Ringgold. It's about 45-50 miles from here. Very rural, small town, probably a thousand people. So very small. I went to an all black high school. It was during segregation, so the black school and white school, it was way back in 19... late 1960s. And so that's where I grew up: *there*.

Amy: What did you want to be when you grew up?

Bob: I wanted to be a doctor. That's where I wanted to be, you know, in a rural... you know, you watch TV a lot. You see Marcus Welby, MD. You probably don't remember that show. It was a doctor show. Had a lot of doctor shows on TV when I was a little kid. So I wanted to be a doctor, you know. Didn't know what I needed to do. Just wanted to be that. But when I got to Tech, I realized I wasn't prepared about zoology, biology. It was hard. So I said "No, I can't be that." So I changed to business. And it was just a... kind of a default to business. I had a good business teacher in high school: Mr. Jackson. He was so good and encouraging, and he was a big influence on me, Mr. Jackson was. You know, at those black rural schools, a lot of teachers had to come in, they moved in to teach. Cause they didn't stay in the town; they had to come in to teach. We had a lot of good teachers who drove in to Ringgold to teach us because they went where the teaching jobs were. Then, you know, the black teachers had to teach at black schools. They couldn't teach at the white schools. So they had to drive some distances, some of them, you know, to teach. But we had good teachers.

Amy: Do you think having that good business teacher in high school encouraged you to go towards business when you figured out that you didn't really want to do biology?

Bob: Yes. High School, you don't know what you want to do, and you don't realize that you're being influenced by teachers even when you, you know, you're going to class. But when I started thinking about what I wanted to do, when I saw that I wasn't prepared to go to pre-med, Mr. Jackson stood out because he was a very professional guy. He had high standards. And

even though he was at a rural school, he tried to prepare us for anything for college and so forth. So he was a real big influence.

Amy: So you came to Louisiana Tech in 1969?

Bob: '69.

Amy: '69. So what was that like to be here, you know, not too far into integration?

Bob: Well, it was pretty tough at first because... in fact, I think we were about this... I think the first blacks came to Tech if I'm not mistaken in '66. And it was just a couple... few people, local, Ruston, from Ruston High. But when we came, it was a big group. I think it was a large group, maybe 100, 150. And it wasn't accepted really well. I got some negative things, you know, the N-word, you know, and people felt kind of justified, I guess, in treating you that then to some degree. But I... you know, my mom taught me to respect people, even though I grew up in a segregated town. I didn't really have any real animosity toward people, even those that might have used the N-word and just kind of looking at you crazy and writing racial epithets on your door in a dorm. And I credit my mom with that. My mom always taught us to respect people, regardless of what color they are.

Amy: How did it affect your education, though?

Bob: Hmmmm...uh, how did that affect my education?

Amy: Yeah. Did it feel uncomfortable?

Bob: Yes, it felt uncomfortable when I got here. In fact, the first year I didn't do so well. The first year I flunked out of Tech, in my sophomore year. It was just... it was difficult. I was in the band. I was trying to adjust socially. But I got with the wrong crowd, guys that who really weren't about studying anything. And I was president of my class when I graduated high school, you know, kind of the "most likely to succeed" guys. So I felt a lot of pressure to really succeed. But I flunked out of Tech in the fall of 1970. And it was a real eye opener because my mom had so much hope in me to finish college. She really was disappointed. I was disappointed in myself. It wasn't because I couldn't have done the work, I just got with the wrong crowd. And that's easily done in college. I dropped out from one quarter. I wasn't gonna come back to college. I moved to Kansas City, Missouri. I was going to stay up there, get me a job. But the way the Lord had it worked out, I couldn't find a job. And there were jobs everywhere back then. Man, I just couldn't find a job.

Bob: And so my mom called me up one day, I was in Kansas City, and she said, "Mr. Knowles is trying to contact you." Mr. Knowles was the vocational rehab person for the parish, and I was going to school on rehab. And so he called me. An old white guy, Amy, probably in his seventies. Here's this old white guy calling me up in Kansas City saying "Bob, you need to come back to school. You need to. You can be successful. You need to come back to school." And that touched me. Between my mom and this guy, I came back to Tech. And my attitude was

different. I made better grades. I had to work, you know, cuz I didn't have extra money. I had two jobs working. My grades improved dramatically.

Bob: But there were several professors in the College of Business, I think I mentioned this to you when we talked earlier about... that took a liking to me. My advisor, Dr. Shaper, I remember him. Mr. Smolinski, Harold Smolinski. He was the department head in accounting. Dr. Cato. These were professors who made me feel included. And I guess that was important because every class I went into in the College of Business, just about every class, I was the only black person in the class.

Bob: And it was pretty intimidating, and a lot of times the students weren't friendly. At that time in the classroom, they weren't real friendly. So the professor, I guess, took it upon themselves to make me feel included, knowing that it was a pretty hostile environment for me to be in at that time. So they just reached out doing things like making sure that I understood things and asking me to come by the office and visit. And we just talked a little bit like we're talking now. He asked me about my background, people that take an interest in you. So that helped to make me feel included. And probably kept me focused so that I could graduate, you know. But they were pretty instrumental in really helping me feel included.

Bob: And then when I graduated, I worked for a while. And then I came back to grad school to get an MBA and Dr. Phil Rice, he was graduate director then. I was about to get my MBA, and he called me up in his office. I was wondering "Well, what have I done," you know. I knew Dr. Rice cause he had to sign off on all my courses, but I didn't ever know him face to face. And I appreciate him, Amy, because he was very honest with me. He said "Bob, we don't have any black faculty in the College of Business. And we need some black faculty." This was 1983-84. I had worked a while, and I came back to school. And he said "We believe you could be successful in the doctoral program." Amy, I had never thought about a doctor degree. I didn't even know what it was, really. I was thinking about getting my MBA, came back. I just want to be a CPA and just, you know, just be a CPA. So, I went home and I told my wife. I said "You know, Dr. Rice asked me about going to grad school. What do you think about that?" She said "Well, do you have a job?" I said "No." "Are they gonna pay you?" "Yes, assistantship." "Okay." That was her answer. "Take the job." Cause we had two kids. You know, we were struggling. You know, I was in grad school so it was kinda tough. So that's how I got in the doctoral program. That's how I got there. And it was just... And then I was in it. I was about to graduate, and then Grambling called. I taught at Tech for five years. Went to Grambling, stayed there 16 years, and that's how it kinda...happened.

Amy: Yeah. Did you like being a teacher?

Bob: Yes. I like teaching. I love teaching. Teaching... the rewards of teaching is, as so many people have probably said before, is just seeing the light go on in a student's eyes. That's the moment when you can actually connect. You, really just kind of like you said earlier, you bond with the student intellectually. That's really what it is. You say "Wow, they actually know what you're talking about." And it's encouraging to you because, you know, teachers are always

assessing themselves that “Did I really get that across? Did I really explain that?” You know, “Did I really?” I mean all teachers do, I think. / do! So yes, I enjoy teaching. I really do.

Amy: We’re going to take a quick break to hear a message from the School of Accountancy in the College of Business here at Louisiana Tech University.

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Amy: We’re back with Dr. Bob Cunningham. He is an Executive in Residence and Lecturer of Accounting in the College of Business.

Amy: Do you have any advice for professors on how to help their students feel more included?

Bob: Absolutely. I could. The first thing that comes to mind is that, however way they can facilitate it, they need to make sure that the student/students... that they feel welcome in the class. And there are a lot of ways you can do that. But I think the best way to do it is to make statements in front of the entire class that are inclusive, that would show that, you know, this class is, you know, totally unbiased, every student's going to be treated the same. And that sounds kind of obvious, but you'd be surprised at how a minority student will feel if they hear the professors say something like that.

Bob: You know, it doesn't sound like it's a whole lot. But when they say “Oh, you know, Dr. so-and-so said that everybody in this class is going to be treated the same.” That means a lot. And then the next thing they can do is just make sure that little things don't shipwreck that relationship that they have with the student, you know, because like, for example, when they come by your office, you know, be just as inviting as you would to anybody else. You know, that's important, cause when a student is one-to-one on a professor, that's a pretty powerful relationship there, when you're right in front of the professor, that you're taking XYZ course under. And they can sense whether or not you're really interested in them, you know, you doing

well in the course. Even if you say “Oh, I want you to do well in this course,” students can kind of tell if you really mean that. [Laughter] I mean, it's just... they do! They can! So I'm just saying: be authentic, be real, you know, with these students, you know. They're bright students. They are perceptive. Just be real with them, and they can appreciate you, even though they may disagree with something you might say or something. Respect.

Bob: One thing I have to say about these students, the students that I've had, you know: “their way.” If you show them respect, they'll respect you. That's really simple, but it's powerful. They will. But if you show any kind of disrespect toward them in any way... and there's a lot of ways you can disrespect people. A lot of ways these days especially. [Laughter] You can disrespect people in ways you never even thought about. But if you show them respect, Amy, they'll respect you. And you know, I just kind of pride myself in being able to connect with students. I'll share this story with you since we just talkin'. And this is about this. And this is interesting, because this is my first time teaching a class after 16 years. Let's see, I retired...

Amy: This... this quarter?

Bob: Yes, I retired back in... no, 14 years. I retired back in '06.

Amy: Oh, wow.

Bob: So this is the first class I've taught, Amy.

Amy: In 14 years.

Bob: In 14 years. Okay, so I was kinda excited about it. You know, this technology is kind of...

Amy: What class is it?

Bob: It's accounting class.

Amy: Accounting, okay.

Bob: Accounting 202.

Amy: Accounting, yeah.

Bob: And I told the students, I said “Look, I like to get to know my students. I like to know your name. I like to call on you in class. But if you don't like being called on in class, you may be in the wrong class. Because I do that.” I say that the first day, so they know if they want to drop. Fine.

Amy: They know what to expect.

Bob: They know what to expect. So I said “Now, it'll probably take me a couple of two or three weeks, but I'm gonna learn everybody's name in here. And so what I want you to do is...” I made them a name tent. I had it the first day of class, I had my roll. I said “Okay!” I passed out

the name tent. Now the name tent helps me to learn them too, because I'm passing their name tent and by the third or fourth class I know their names. And you'll be surprised, Amy, how people respond positively when you know their name. Like today, I said "Cameron." She commented in class on something else. "Wow." I said "Cameron. Wow, that's a great point you made." People like to hear their name called. So in my classes, I've always learned my students. I don't like saying "Hey, you there with the blue shirt? Why don't you say something?" To me, that's disrespectful. This person's in your class. You see them two or three times a week. You need to know their name. To me, that's respect. And they responded. Now, I call on them. Like today, I call on them... a couple of people today and they weren't intimidated at all. But the first time I did it on the first day, they were like...[pauses] [laughter]

Bob: So just one of my little things. But anyway, that's just...

Amy: Yeah, I think it would make me feel important if I were that student. It'd make me feel important and valued.

Bob: That's right.

Amy: Yeah.

Bob: And not only that, Amy. When you feel that way, you're gonna do your best in that class.

Amy: Yeah, for sure. Yeah.

Bob: Not necessarily for that professor, because you feel like "Wow," you know, "I feel good about this class and what I'm learning." And I see the change in them too, because they paid more attention today, and we were going over some very difficult material, than they did when we were going over the simple material. So that tells me I'm getting to them in terms of connecting, because I'm always working to try to connect with them. And the way you know that you've connected. [laughter] Wait, I know. Okay. Every morning when I come in, I speak to every one of 'em when they come in. "Good morning. Morning. Good morning." The other day, two of them, when they left: "Dr. Cunningham, have a good weekend." They started speaking back. Most times, these students, they just walk in, walk out. They don't have anything to say. But they responded. They don't know I'm kind of working on them little by little. And by the end of the semester, I probably have some buddies in there or something, you know.

Amy: Do you like creating relationships with your students?

Bob: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. You know, like, see, we can't have office hours now face-to-face. It's on virtual, so I can't have the relationship I normally would have. But yes, I enjoy connecting with people. People are interesting. Everybody has a story, Amy, as you know. Everybody has a story. There are aspects to their story that you can relate to. No matter what color they are, no matter what economic background they came from, you're going to find something that "Wow, you know, I can relate to that." So I enjoy communicating and relating to people, and teaching just kind of enhances that.

Amy: Yeah.

Amy: We're going to take a quick break to learn about the Louisiana Tech University Digital Commons.

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Amy: Let's get back to the interview with Dr. Bob Cunningham.

Amy: So you're the CEO of two different consulting firms, right? The Heritage Group and The Cunningham Group? Can you tell us a little bit more about those?

Bob: Well, when I retired from teaching, I had all these skills, you know, accounting skills, auditing skills, and I wasn't quite ready to retire. So I just started these little small consulting firms. The Heritage Group is mostly focused on schools, colleges. Me and my partner, we assist schools in various things. Like, for example, let's say a school is... my partner, my brother-in-law, he was the president at Grambling State, and so he has a lot of knowledge about higher education. And so, let's say a school or college wants to develop a program to attract more minority students to their college. So we will sit down with them and help them come up with some plans: how you can attract more students in this area to this major or... so mostly academic consulting.

Bob: The Cunningham Group was the first company I formed. It was just focused on fraud investigation, fraud, white collar crime. You know, talking and trying to help businesses prevent fraud. We do a fraud investigation, prevention, and assessment. You know, if you have a business and you want to assess "Well, how weak is my business in terms of somebody being able to steal from me?" Well, I can come in and, you know, tell you "Well, you need to do this, this, this, and this. This could happen." But we don't push it very much. I don't want to get too busy. I just take a job if I want a job, so it's not like I'm out there hustling trying to get work. But I enjoy helping people in that way.

Amy: What do you think is one of the most meaningful things you've done in your career?

Bob: Wow, that's a loaded question there, Amy.

Amy: I know.

Bob: Oh man, most meaningful thing?

Amy: Most meaningful.

Bob: In terms of... you got to narrow down for me a little bit.

Amy: Yeah, yeah, yeah, no worries. Um, in terms of... that it's meant a lot to you. That you're really proud of it that you like telling people about it. That if you're sitting down with, I don't know, like a grandson or daughter, or whatever, that you're like "This is what I want you to know about me. Like, this is something I'm really proud of."

Bob: Becoming a Christian.

Amy: How do you think your faith impacts the way that you go about your business?

Bob: The way that I treat people is the way that I want to be treated. And the way that I know Jesus would treat me if he were here. I look at people as people, everybody as a person. And I try to approach that from a standpoint of love, understanding, compassion, empathy, because that's how the life of Jesus impacted me. When I started reading these stories in the gospels, and I started seeing how he interacted with people and how he treated people, I tried to emulate that. And that's how it's impacted my life: being honest with people, telling them the truth in love, you know. Trying to... you know, the hard truth about something is hard enough. If it comes harsh, that makes it doubly bad. But if you can say something to people and they can feel the love you have for them, that to me is the impact that my faith has had on me. I don't know if that answers the question, but that's...

Amy: No, I think our personal beliefs definitely give more meaning to our lives. It affects the way that we approach a lot of the things that we do. I'm glad that you can share that with us.

Bob: Faith is a big part of my life. You know, I don't... like I say, I don't beat people over the head with who I am. But I try to be, not just talk, but be what I know I need to be.

Amy: Well, thanks so much for letting me interview you.

Bob: Uh, I don't know how it's gonna come out. But anyway, I just... I enjoyed sharing.

Amy: No, I thought it was interesting. I think it was pretty evident how much you care about creating relationships with your students, making sure that they know that you care about them. And I think that's a really big deal. As a student, sometimes you don't really know that this authority figure actually cares about you. And if you're able to do that well, I think, you know, like you said, it does inspire them to work harder.

Bob: It does. I can see it in the few weeks I've been in this class. I've... been a couple of students who came in that they were just like... didn't say anything. Now they comment all the time because they feel comfortable.

Amy: Yeah.

Bob: You know, anyway. Well, thank you!

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