

Paul Dixon Minton: LSD for Statisticians from a Southern Gentleman

James M. Davenport

Virginia Commonwealth University, P. O. Box 843083, Richmond, VA 23284

Abstract

Paul Dixon Minton joined Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) during the summer of 1972 as the Dean of the School of Humanities and Sciences. It was a time of change and transition as VCU had been created in 1968 by an Act of the Virginia General Assembly. Dr. Minton provided the leadership that was needed and admirably served the university as Dean until 1978, then as Director of the Institute of Statistics before retiring in 1988. A dominant theme in his career is his dedication to serving all of his constituents. He was a recipient of the prestigious American Statistical Association's Founders Award (1991), and the namesake of the Paul D. Minton Service Award given by the Southern Regional Council on Statistics (SRCOS). An anecdotal remembrance of several events in Dr. Minton's years at VCU and his years of participation with SRCOS will honor this kind gentleman who loved his puns.

Key Words: Paul Dixon Minton, history, contributions to statistics, SRCOS and ASA, remembrance

1. Introduction

What a wonderful occasion this is to be honoring our friend, Paul Dixon Minton. I want to thank all of the individuals who played a role in the early development of this session; there were several but early on the most notable were Dwight Brock, Bob Johnson, and Russ Lenth. There are several others who must go without mention here, but nonetheless, played an important role, and I thank you.

I am honored to be here before you reminiscing about Paul's years at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), his involvement with the Southern Regional Council on Statistics (SRCOS), and how both our lives seemed to be intertwined over the past 40 years. I am also very humbled and not sure that I am the most fitting person to do this. It seems that there are several others who are equally qualified, if not more so. However, since I did join the ranks of VCU in 1987, and I have been called the "latter-day-Paul-Minton," and one of my first major projects was to pull together a symposium to honor Paul on his retirement (which I will discuss in more detail momentarily), perhaps it is fitting that I am the one of many who gets to tell his story today.

A word of explanation is in order about the title of this paper. When it came time to submit a title, I was at a loss. I did not want to use sometime as pedestrian as "Paul Minton's Impact at VCU and SRCOS." So I solicited a little help for my colleagues at VCU. Bob Andrews suggested, "Paul Minton, A Significant Difference Maker at VCU and SRCOS," and Jim Kilpatrick suggested, "A Southern Gentleman."

Let me take an aside here. Did you know that Albert Hofmann recently died at the age of 102? Don't know who Albert Hofmann was? Shame on you. He was the Swiss chemist that discovered LSD in 1938. He labeled his drug LSD-25, and because it had a similar compound structure to Coramine, he hoped that it would be a stimulant for the respiratory and circulatory systems. It didn't work out successfully, and the rest is history.

Fast forward to 1967. I was a first year graduate student in the recently formed Department of Statistics at Southern Methodist University (SMU). I promptly joined the American Statistical Association (ASA) and the North Texas Chapter of the ASA. Early in the fall semester, this chapter had a dinner meeting one evening to which spouses and significant others were invited. It was held at a local restaurant – a very nice affair. The dinner speaker was Paul Minton, and the title of his talk was "LSD for Statisticians." Remember, it's 1967; the 1960s counterculture drug revolution, Timothy Leary, "tune in, turn on, and drop out," and all that. And I'm thinking, "What is this guy going to talk about?" Well, I learned very quickly that it of course was "least significant difference," and that was my introduction to Paul Minton's love of puns. As a finishing note to this tale, I have no memory of what Paul said that night, but I do remember the title of his talk.

Paul certainly did love his puns. While I don't think that I can top the "fiancée with the wooden leg" pun, I will relate a couple later on. I also want to offer some insight into what I consider to be one of Paul's greater qualities: and that is he was a great champion

of those who were in need of assistance, opportunity, and needed encouragement. He had this innate ability to meet you where you were, offer words of wisdom, give you the resources you needed, and push you in the right direction. He was truly a great teacher.

2. At Virginia Commonwealth University

Paul Minton left SMU and joined VCU in the summer of 1972. I remember it clearly, as I had received my Ph.D. in May of 1971 and was in my first year of teaching at Western Carolina University. When I learned in mid-year that Paul was leaving SMU, I was somewhat concerned. We exchanged a few letters (yes, actual letters – no email), and he shared that it was time for him to move on and try something else. In hindsight, it is perfectly understandable, but at the time it caused me some angst. We crossed paths on the “moving highway” as he and his family moved from Dallas to Richmond, while I moved from Sylva, NC to Lubbock, TX to join the faculty at Texas Tech University.

Upon arriving in Richmond, Paul and his family were very quickly greeted by an angry lady – hurricane Agnes. In Richmond, Paul and Mary Frances had purchased a home “south of the river.” VCU is north of the river – that’s the James River to those of you not familiar with Richmond, VA. As is usually the case, there were many problems in the aftermath of Agnes associated with flooding. Flooding along the James River downstream of Lynchburg, VA was the worst known since at least 1870 and was well over the 100-year recurrence frequency levels. The flow at Richmond, Virginia, was 50% greater than during the peak of the 1969 Camille flood. This was before the current floodwalls were constructed. Years later, Paul shared with me his frustration with this. He said, “Jim, I was supposed to be at work, learning the ropes of being Dean, and I couldn’t get to work. Those bridges downtown were under water, and we couldn’t cross the river.” Certainly a memorable start to his career at VCU.

He joined VCU as the Dean of the School of Humanities and Sciences, and he served until 1978. Under the leadership of the next Dean (Elske Smith), the name was changed to the College of Humanities and Sciences. It was a time of major changes and transitions for all at VCU, and the challenges were many. Evidently, Paul knew this and willingly accepted those challenges. Let me offer some background.

Prior to 1968, VCU did not exist. It was created that year by an act of the Virginia Legislature, which merged the entities Richmond Professional Institute (RPI) and Medical College of Virginia (MCV) into Virginia Commonwealth University. RPI had an outstanding background with excellent, nationally ranked programs in Social Work, Masters of Fine Art, Sculpture, Graphic Design, Jazz, and other arts programs, and at one time, it was a part of William and Mary. A well-developed and strong humanities and sciences unit simply did not exist at the Richmond campus, and what was there existed only to offer these professional programs the service courses that they needed. MCV’s reputation was equally stellar, having been founded in 1838 as a part of Hampden-Sydney College, and it was a pioneer in transplant surgery among many other outstanding achievements. It of course was strictly a graduate/health sciences college. Most modern universities in the United States began with excellent humanities and sciences programs and then developed their “professional” schools later. VCU’s genesis was the opposite.

Let me further set the stage upon which Paul Minton was about to step by relating the following story. I recently retired from VCU (May 15, 2008 after 21 years at VCU), and my colleague John F. Pagles in Biology also retired on this date. At the reception for retiring faculty we were all sharing anecdotal stories of our years at VCU. John Pagles joined VCU very shortly after it was formed. He said the Dean at that time (who was not Paul Minton) told him during his interview, “Young man, you must realize that this research thing is just a hobby.” Such was the atmosphere in the School of Humanities and Sciences at the newly formed VCU in the late 60’s to early 70’s. Enter Paul Minton in the summer of 1972. He was essentially hired to begin the process of changing this culture – a formidable task, indeed.

He began by hiring many new young faculty. He personally hired the current (as of July, 2008) Dean of the College of H&S, Bob Holsworth, and for years nurtured his career. Bob remembers that Paul was very encouraging to the young faculty offering as many resources as he could to develop their careers. A recurring theme was he treated everyone with the same civility and modesty; he was a decent man. Also, he was very helpful in establishing VCU’s Survey Research Lab and later the Institute of Statistics. Paul’s legacy is still being felt at VCU and at other institutions through his nurturing of new faculty.

There was also a dark side to these years. As I indicated earlier, many challenges were present and many hard decisions had to be made. Needless to say, several faculty members were caught in this transition, and when it came time for their promotion and tenure review, things did not go well. Many were denied tenure under the new “research oriented” guidelines. Lawsuits followed. Paul was a defendant in several of these. While it was his job to make these tough decisions and he did so, it still troubled him. I believe that he was deeply hurt by all of this. It was years later, even after he retired I believe, that we were together, and he seemed very joyful. He shared that the last of the lawsuits to which he was a part had been cleared. But what a toll it must have taken on Paul’s psyche.

So where is VCU today? It is the largest institution of higher learning in the Commonwealth of Virginia. For what it’s worth, the U.S. News and World Report ranks VCU’s Sculpture and Nurse Anesthesia programs as number 1 in the nation. There are dozens more that are ranked in the top 25. After 30 years, the College of Humanities and Sciences continues to develop. I think that Paul helped begin a difficult journey that continues to be a work in progress.

3. Institute of Statistics

In 1978 Paul stepped down as Dean. I have no idea of the particulars, but feel that a significant facet of this was he simply had had enough. So he moved on to other things and in February 1979 proposed the formation of an Institute of Statistics to “ ... coordinate statistics better on the two campuses, especially in the consultation service and instructional areas and functions.”

Helping to coordinate statistical activities on campus is illustrated by the following comment by Walther S. Griggs, Jr. in the School of Business.

“When Paul headed the Institute of Statistics and I was a department chair, we met on a weekly basis to discuss faculty issues. He went out of his way to help me even though it was not part of his job. I can still recall his calm voice and intellect. His advice was always given in a kind and caring fashion which certainly helped me in my work at VCU and in my relationships with my faculty. He truly wanted me to

be a good administrator and in many ways I sought to emulate him and to follow his ideas.

I remember Paul as a caring, kind person whose gentle spirit will always be a part of my memories of VCU.”

Another anecdotal story concerning Paul and the Institute goes something like this. A researcher from the School of Medicine contacted Paul and sought help. Paul arranged for a fellow statistician to meet with said researcher, who proceeded to somewhat arrogantly instruct the faculty member to “write all I need to know about statistics on a 3 by 5 card” (This wouldn’t happened today, right?). Supposedly the faculty member’s response was as follows:

Paul D. Minton, Ph.D.
Director of the Institute of Statistics
Statistical Consultant

Figure 1: “All I need to know about statistics on a 3x5 card”

Paul also was involved in many other assignments as the Provost and President deemed appropriate. One was to head up a search committee to hire a technology staff person to run the computer center and otherwise direct the development of technology services on campus. You must remember that this was in the early 1980’s and technology services was not as well developed and entrenched as it is today. At that time, faculty members still played a significant role in such things. So the story goes, the committee worked together so well, they decided they wanted to continue to meet and needed a reason to do so. So Paul suggested they form an investment club affiliated with the National Association of Investment Clubs, and they did so in 1983. The name of the club was the Search Investment Club [SIC], and henceforth Paul, loving his puns, continually told everyone that he was off to a “sick” meeting.

Paul remained as Director of the Institute of Statistics until 1987. I was hired to succeed

him. Some time during the next year, a local manufacturer approached the Institute to teach their employees a little introductory statistics. I was involved with other things at the time and asked Paul if he would be willing to do it for the Institute. He said yes, and I quickly set up a meeting with our contact person. We had several meetings in which we discussed the contents and level of this course, and we collected several data sets specific to their industry. During the course of these meetings, our contact person must have said a dozen or more times, that he wanted just the “briefest” of introductory courses. Paul had materials that he had already prepared from a previous such endeavor; so he modified the examples, made necessary editorial changes, and changed the title of the course. I am sure that by now you have guessed it. He called it “Brief Statistics for the Films Industry.”

I planned and executed a Symposium on Statistics in Honor of Paul Minton’s retirement. This was one of the first major projects as Director of the Institute that I undertook. It was held in April of 1988. Part of the Symposium was a series of presentations by Paul’s colleagues and former students on various topics of statistics ranging from teaching statistics to change point problems to quality control issues to applications of statistics to gerontology.

It was at this Symposium that Dwight Brock (and I’m fairly certain his wife, Mary Brock had input) settled once and for all that troublesome question, “How do you spell Mary Frances’ nickname?” This was a game and Paul loved this word play. He took great delight in challenging everyone as to the spelling of Mary Frances’ nickname. Dwight and Mary declared that it was “Mosse” which rhymes with posse.

As another part of this Symposium, I undertook to create a book of letters. I invited all of Paul’s former students and his colleagues to write letters of congratulations and thanks to Paul upon his retirement. I had the privilege of reading those letters and of having them handsomely bound into a very nice leather volume. It was absolutely amazing that my personal story was repeated over and over and over. My story follows:

I was working at a local industry in Dallas, and late one evening received a call from none other than Paul Minton. He introduced himself and proceeded to offer me a fellowship for graduate studies in statistics at SMU. We had never met, and I had not applied to the program. I asked how he got my name, and he replied that the chairman of the Mathematics Department at my undergraduate institution had given him my name with a recommendation. That’s the way Paul was. He sought you out, met you where you were, gave you the opportunity and resources to move on from there. I personally will be forever in Paul’s debt for his friendship, his mentoring, and the opportunities that he so graciously offered to me. After reading these letters from my fellow students, I discovered that there were scores and scores of us for whom each of our stories was essentially the same. What a great teacher.

Mosse passed away on February 12, 2006. She was one “fine, super trouper” as her daughter-in-law, Jan Minton, declared. The family held a memorial service on February 16, 2006, and the family and friends gathered at Jan and Roland Minton’s home afterwards. During this time together, Paul shared with us that the “Book of Letters” was never far away. However, Paul said, “I can’t read it. Every time I start, I begin to cry and cannot continue.” God speed Paul and Mosse.

4. Southern Regional Council on Statistics

In the post-World War II era, the Rockefeller Foundation examined higher education in the United States. As Boyd Harshbarger states, “They had found ... that the South was dragging its feet. They weren’t doing much.” So the Rockefeller Foundation contributed a great deal of money to help address this issue. The governors and/or their representatives from the various southern states were invited to a meeting that was held on Jekyll Island. The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) was formed with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation and assessments paid by each state. The first president of SREB was John Ivy. One of the functions of SREB was to form various committees on disciplines and in turn invite various institutions to join the committee and send representatives to their meetings. One of these was the Committee on Statistics (COS) with Gertrude Cox initially providing the leadership. This was formed about 1954 or 1955.

As an aside, SREB decided sometime in the mid-1980s that it would no longer support “Committees” of the SREB, but encourage these groups to form free standing organizations to continue their work. SREB

would continue to send a representative and offer support in other ways. Thus, the SREB – COS became the Southern Regional Council on Statistics (SRCOS).

While Paul was not an original member of this Committee, he did join the committee in 1963 and served as SMU’s representative from 1963 until 1972. He again joined this group as VCU’s representative in 1979 until 1987. Paul was chairman of the SREB – COS from 1968 through 1969.

As a part of the Symposium to Honor Paul Minton, I arranged for seven of the early members of this group to come together and have a panel discussion on the founding and early history of the SREB – COS. The panel members were R. L. Anderson, Ralph Bradley, Cliff Cohen, Donald Gardiner, Boyd Harshberger, Carl Marshall, and Paul Minton. This panel discussion lasted for an hour and was video taped. What you are about to see is the very end of the discussion, and the panel members are wondering about the future of the SREB – COS and the profession of statistics in general. What you are about to see is “vintage Paul Minton”. His last remark on the video is, “Get out there and sell statistics.” (A note to the reader - a five and a half minute video was shown at this point in the presentation. A transcript of the dialogue follows the next paragraph.)

This video was made in 1988 and initially recorded on ¾” tape using three video cameras. It was edited into an hour long video and the edited version was copied to ¾” tape. This was then copied to ½” VHS video tape, and recently converted into digital files. So the quality is rather poor, and I apologize for that. But given the time frame involved, this is the best I could do. Let’s watch the video. It should last about five and a half minutes.

5. Transcript of the Dialogue

Marshall: May I make one last comment? One of the characteristics of this Committee was that, on any subject that came up, there could be found at least two people diametrically opposed.

Anderson: Those two people are sitting here amongst us!

Gardiner: And, in spite of us, the Southern Regional Committee on Statistics is alive and well. None of us are

active on it any longer, and have not been for some while. I wonder if we have any words of advice to the people who still are involved, those who are out there in the audience?

Bradley: How about keep a sense of humor?

Gardiner: I think that’s very important.

Marshall: When I asked the member of our University who is currently serving on the Committee what he thought about it, I think he felt like the Committee was one in search of a mission.

Gardiner: Much like it was back when you were chairman, Ralph.

Bradley: Well, the Committee has found several new missions. One of the directions they are considering is the accreditation of programs in statistics.

Anderson: Well that one will be a sticky one.

Bradley: That could produce some arguments.

Anderson: Yes, that could. That’s something that I would like very much to see the Committee do. As Fred [Leone] talked about this morning....

Bradley: I think I’m opposed, Dick.

Anderson: I wouldn’t be surprised. On this subject, Ralph and I have not agreed unanimously. As Fred remarked this morning, the idea that the ASA is a professional organization is an idea with which a good many people wouldn’t agree. I would think that a majority of the members of ASA do not agree that it’s a professional organization. But, I feel very strongly that it should be. However, I don’t see how the ASA can become a professional organization unless we have some means for certifying who should be

a member of the profession. This is something I hope the Committee on Statistics will discuss. I hope that if they do discuss it, they will invite me to attend the meeting.

Minton: Well, I hope the Committee will continue to work on all the problems that the profession of statistics has, that Fred mentioned – work on them the same way we worked on them before. We try to reach a consensus among ourselves and see what we can do, and then we try and see how much we can get the ASA to take over what we started. We've done that before. There are plenty of problems to work on. The problems of educating the public as to what statistics is; the problem of finding good people to enter the profession; the problem of statistics as a career; the problem of the practice of statistics in the public arena, in industry, in government, and everywhere you look, but not by professional statisticians because there aren't enough of them out there. We have all of these problems. There are plenty of things to work on.

Bradley: 'Minton, 1983.'

Gardiner: And it's on tape. Our host, Jim Davenport, has just relinquished the post as Chairman of the Southern Regional Committee on Statistics. I'm sure his influence is still strong. He's listening and he's going to have a copy of the tape of this panel discussion. Perhaps some of these things can be accomplished, or started anyway. We're about to wind up. Carl has ...

Marshall: No final comment.

Gardiner: ... given some advice and remarks a few times. Boyd, do you have any parting remarks?

Harshbarger: I just want to thank the University [VCU] here for making this possible.

Gardiner: Thank you. And Cliff?

Cohen: I would like to thank Jim Davenport and Virginia Commonwealth University for the opportunity to be here and to present this program. And, I'll say to Paul Minton, 'I hope that you enjoy your retirement years as much as I've been enjoying mine.'

Gardiner: That's a great close.

Minton: Thank you, Sir.

Gardiner: Ralph?

Bradley: Well, we've had lots of thanks to the organizers and the University, and I certainly add my own. I also want to thank the University and Jim and Paul for creating this opportunity to see so many old friends again.

Anderson: Yes, I would like to second all these nice remarks. You know, it's very unusual for me to come to a situation without being able to think of one bad thing to say. But I can't do it today. I just think this has been a marvelous opportunity.

Gardiner: Let me add my thanks also. I'll even thank God for Paul Minton.

Minton: Get out there and sell statistics.

6. Concluding Remarks

Paul Minton was a great champion for the profession of statistics. He also knew that the world needed good statisticians. He worked very hard at both of these and was extremely successful. Paul was a great leader; the ASA recognized his leadership by giving him the Founders award in 1991. He was a tireless worker in service to the profession, and SRCOS recognized this by creating the Paul Minton Service Award. And Paul was a great teacher; he is responsible for many, many of us being here today. Thank you Paul Dixon Minton.