



Paul Yarbrough

August 24, 1937 – October 1, 2016

Professor Emeritus Paul Yarbrough passed away on October 1, 2016, at his home in Georgia following an extended illness. He was 79. Paul received his B.S. at the University of Georgia and M.S. and Ph.D. at Iowa State University, where he remained on faculty until Cornell recruited him to join our department in 1982 as a full professor. While at Cornell, Paul developed a well-known research program examining role performance and professional communicators and the communication processes in directed social change programs. It is perhaps the latter for which he is best known, having conducted seminal research examining the adoption of new communication technologies in agricultural communities. At Cornell, he taught courses in communication and strategies, survey research methods, and the impact of communication technologies.

Paul retired from our department in 1999, having played an important part in the transformation of our program from one primarily associated with teaching and service to one recognized for its enduring contributions to social scientific research.

Paul was a respected and cherished member of the Communication department. Emeritus Professor Cliff Scherer describes him in this way: “Paul Yarbrough was driven by curiosity. More often than not, it was manifested in his search for answers to questions that related to the contradictory outcomes of information availability and application. During his years of research at Iowa State University and Cornell University, he focused on such issues as why some people adopt new technology while others don't and why some information is ignored while at other times the same information changes behavior. The answers to these questions, which he shared through his publications and discussions, were critical in understanding this area of our discipline.”

His work with students was equally remarkable. He would spend hours helping students understand and clarify a particular research question or topic. But he expected much in return—and pushed students beyond what they even thought possible. Professor and Chair Katherine McComas was fortunate to have had Paul as a professor when she was a first-year graduate student.

In Katherine's words:

"I will never forget when he asked me the ever-relevant, yet totally terrifying, 'so what?' question after I presented my final paper to the class. Not to be mean, his question gently encouraged me not to accept as a 'given' that people will agree that every bit of research is important and, hence, motivated me to consider the 'so what' question throughout my career. I [have] in turn asked it many times of my students and others."

Due in part to Paul's dedication to teaching and mentoring, many of his students and colleagues have become strong and respected pillars in communication research. We are thankful for his presence in our lives and our discipline.

Written by Katherine McComas with input from friends and colleagues in the Department of Communication