

- Letters and Memories of Norton Starr (arrived after booklet deadline)
  - Norton's Remarks at the celebration of his retirement
  - Amherst Magazine, Summer 2009
- 
- 

• **Sent:** Wednesday, May 27, 2009 11:39 PM  
Subject: Happy Retirement

Hi Professor Starr,

I heard that you are retiring from Amherst and wanted to wish you well! Not sure if you remember me (Claudia Baker '93), but in 1993 (possibly 1992), I was a senior who decided I wanted to learn more about probability and statistics. Lucky for me, you were willing to teach me probability as an independent study class. I then went on to Georgia Tech to study in the School of Industrial and Systems Engineering (which incorporates Operations Research). Rather than completing my PhD, I left with an M.S. in statistics and I started my career at Fair Isaac (the FICO score company) where I was able to cut my teeth building credit scoring models for all types of U.S. and international credit portfolios. I eventually landed at Wells Fargo where I originally worked on Wholesale Banking Credit Analytics with a particular focus on the Basel Capital Accords. I am now heading up a group responsible for developing strategies to help combat Fraud in Home Equity lending. So while I may not be currently working in as a statistician, all of the techniques I learned along the way help make better decisions.

So thank you for offering to teach me probability - it definitely made a difference.

Best wishes for a happy retirement!  
-Claudia (Baker) Lee '93

---

• **Sent:** Tuesday, June 30, 2009 10:47 AM

50 years, wow!  
Your teaching career spanned Michael Jackson's entire life!

William Waite

- **Sent:** Friday, May 29, 2009  
**Subject:** Congratulations on Your Retirement and Regret for Missing Your Reception

Dear Professor Starr,

Imagine my surprise when I received a letter opening with "Dear Mathematics Graduate." As one of your original flunkees in the fall semester of 1966, I could not be happier to join this select group. David Cox and Dan Velleman assumed too much when they found my name on your electronic rolodex.

However, I may have been one of your most academically successful flunkees. Thanks to you giving me a most undeserved 59 - I hate to think how low it really was - I was able to recover and graduate with my class in 1970, *cum laude*. Your gracious and humane treatment of me - and others I will add - made it possible for me to recover from a rough and eye-opening first semester freshman year to have a successful college experience. As you know, I then went on to law school and graduated with honors in 1973. I also later earned a MSc in economics (Public Administration and Public Policy) in 1985. Not to say that none of this academic achievement - not to mention 36 years as a practicing attorney, most of which were as an Assistant Attorney General for Vermont - would have occurred but for failing Math 11, but your class and treatment did more to help me develop into a grownup than any other class or experience in those formative college years. For this I will be forever grateful and indebted.

I had hoped to attend the reception this afternoon. But for reasons beyond my control, I am not able to be with you. I do think of you, and have often told of your seminal effect on my academic and professional careers. I wish the best for you and Irene in what I hope and rust will be many years of a happy and productive retirement. For selfish reasons, I hope you stay in the Amherst area so that we will be able to revisit at least next year at my 40th reunion and any other time I make it to Amherst, which has been all too infrequent.

With sincere thanks,  
Tom Viall, '70

- 
- **Sent:** Monday, June 01, 2009  
**Subject:** RE: Your pedigree has just been enhanced

Thanks for sending a copy of your remarks - you have some funny stories and should write them down sometime (if you haven't already). I received an invitation and would have liked to attend, but I am currently out of the country in Portugal (doing math in Porto).

Congratulations on 50 years of teaching and researching mathematics. You were without a doubt my favorite professor at Amherst and I am very glad to have kept in touch over the years, even without the many boxes of books!

I wish you a very relaxing retirement, filled with things you want to do, rather than with things you have to do.

Best Regards,  
Mark Demers

● **Sent:** Wednesday, June 03, 2009

**Subject:** books

Dear Norton,

Got a few more books from you today (or earlier -- been out of town for several days). Thanks -- they look great.

I also wanted to say that I'm sorry I missed your retirement party on Friday, and I'm also sorry not to have written a note to include in the book they gave you. I hope you know what a great mentor and friend you've been to me for many years, since even before I applied to Amherst: I'm not sure if you remember that you called me at home after I was accepted at Amherst, replying to a letter that I wrote to David Cox. That phone call was instrumental in my deciding to attend Amherst, and to continue my plan of majoring in math undergrad and then OR in grad school.

I really appreciate all of the advice, guidance, invitations, and books you've sent my way over the past years. I wish you all the best in retirement, and I hope you don't think that your retiring gets you off the hook for me asking you for advice when I need it!

Finally, I wanted to tell you about my favorite (off-topic) memory from Math 22, which I took with you freshmen year. You probably already remember this, but if you've forgotten, then that's a shame and you should be reminded. Jeff Woglom from the Econ department was auditing the class that semester, and one day, well into the semester, you entered the room and without any preamble launched into the proof of the theorem you had stated at the end of the previous class. On the board, you wrote, "WOGLOM (without general loss of meaning), we can say..." To this day that's my favorite math anecdote ever.

Thanks again, and best wishes.

Larry Snyder

---

● **Sent:** Tuesday, June 09, 2009

**Subject:** Thanks!

Norton-

A great photo! I'm glad Dan could speak for the Phi Deltas. (Didn't know that about his dad; not many doctors have earned a Walker.... )

When you attend these events you're left thinking: I hope there are as many students so changed by \*my\* teaching. Certainly part of my decision to teach was the thought that I'd have the opportunity to show a great number of (often unsuspecting) people the beauty of computer science.

After 20 years, 50 seems an impossibly distant milestone.

My son asked me the other day when I decided to become a teacher.

Frankly, I can't remember when that would have been, but it was a lock when I started taking courses at Amherst. You were my first instructor and frankly had a lot to do with pushing me along that route. Amherst was a great place to see people who loved teaching, and UMass was an even better place to see people who didn't. I didn't always make the best use of my opportunities at Amherst, but I can really appreciate those opportunities now. Thanks!

I had hoped to talk with you more and find out where you're headed and what you'll be up to. I suspect our paths will cross in the future, but keep us informed.

Best,

Duane Bailey

● **Sent:** Friday, September 11, 2009

**Subject:** Congratulations

Dear Professor Starr,

I wanted to offer my congratulations on your retirement from Amherst College, and to offer a word of thanks.

I had the good fortune of having you, both as a professor in my first year at Amherst in the fall of 1995 and as an academic advisor during my first two years at the College. If you recall anything about me, it is that I was perhaps a mediocre (hopefully I'm not being too generous to myself) math student. And I must confess that whatever skills I did possess have certainly developed a considerable amount of rust with the passage of time. But although my recall of the subject matter is not particularly great, I remember fondly the time I spent in your classroom and in your office, and I have always appreciated the time and effort you put into helping me trying to figure things out (math as my professor, and some sort of direction as my advisor).

So please consider this a thank you, thirteen years later, for your dedication to your craft and to the students you taught. And although I do not claim to have met all of the professors at the College, I think the Amherst faculty just might be a little less interesting without you! Enjoy your retirement.

Warmest regards,  
Andrew Ditchfield

---

● **From** [www.amherst.edu/aboutamherst/magazine/issues/2010winter/letters](http://www.amherst.edu/aboutamherst/magazine/issues/2010winter/letters)

#### **A teacher most of all**

I was pleased to see notice taken of the retirement of Mathematics Professor Norton Starr (College Row, Summer 2009) but I can't help feeling that insufficient attention was paid to his greatest contribution to Amherst: teaching. I don't recall anyone spending more time preparing lecture notes, grading homework and exams or personally tutoring students. I waited until fall of senior year to declare my math major, and without Professor Starr's encouragement, mentoring, one-on-one teaching over Interterm and bending of normal protocol for majors, I would not have completed it as I did.

Professor Starr, with his trademark "hoo-boy" and "any port in a storm" exclamations in the face of tricky problems, made you feel that you were not alone in your struggles, and that the real joy and triumph of math was in taking on such challenges. Two other treasured memories further personify him for me:

Back in the era of slate blackboards and colored chalk, Professor Starr pushed the medium's capabilities. Once, having covered all available panels with so many colored overlays that even a vigorous erasing left a thick coating of light gray, he switched gracefully to black chalk and continued with an extended proof "in negative" without missing a beat.

Much later, I returned to campus after many years and with embarrassment confided to Professor Starr that I had not made much professionally of my Amherst honors and education. He would have none of it, insisting to the contrary that a conscientious life of raising a family and assisting in the local community could be just as fitting and honorable a return on an academic investment.

It is people like Professor Starr who made Amherst the special place it was. I fervently hope they still do.

David G. Boal '78  
Portland, Ore.

- **Norton's Remarks at His Retirement Party:**

Thank you for showing up to confirm my departure. I'm delighted to find the Department staffed with first rate faculty, and happily leave a great job to succeeding generations. Of course, there is a self-serving motive for stepping down: my backlog of mathematical and nonmathematical pursuits has exceeded any Gladwellian tipping point. Moreover, this summer marks fifty years of teaching and, coincidentally, fifty years of happy marriage, so it's a suitable terminus.

I also thank my colleagues for planning this event without my cooperation. When I saw that they had invited former students to submit anecdotes, my reaction was that I have more stories about former students than they have about me. My colleagues prevailed on me to cap the accounts at five, and also ordered me to spare both the innocent and the guilty in my details.

My earliest incident of note occurred in Math 11 the fall of my first semester here. During an exam a student approached me, looking shattered. The large section was jammed into ancient, tiny, hard-arsed tablet arm chairs, and this fellow's eyes had fallen on an adjacent test paper. He felt tainted by that chance observation, and as a pre-med student, feared this could be a career-destroying violation of the Honor Code (we had an honor code in that era.) I had no idea whether what he saw was relevant or even correct, and instinctively told him to ignore the incident and just try to complete the exam as best he could. He is now a cardiologist. Recently scanning the enrollment in that same calculus section, I saw, among other physicians, an NIH researcher who lectured here recently, a famous pediatric cancer researcher (and honorary degree recipient here), and a Norwegian physician who heads a noted NGO working in Africa to combat fistula. (He nor Margaret Bangser, an honorary degree recipient this year for her work in the same effort, were acquainted with each other but had not known of their common Amherst background or that they both had been students in a math course with me.)

In the *opposite* direction, two years later a freshman complained about the D he had earned in Math 11. He was premed, and similarly feared that this would kill his chances for such a career. I probably tried to point out the irrelevance of first year grades, among other remarks. (I've long felt that first year grades should not appear on the transcript.) His senior year this same student approached me, and out of the blue thanked me. I was mystified and asked what brought that on. He said his *parents* wanted him to become a physician, but he had always wanted to be a minister, and that D grade helped him realize his dream: He is an admired Reverend of a Presbyterian church in Maine.

A third incident from early in my time here occurred back in an era when we had a curriculum. A sophomore had been assigned to me as advisor. In our initial conversation I ascertained that he had taken a broad array of courses, was working on or had completed his Language Requirement, a Two-course sequence in one of our three traditional areas, a Three-course sequence in another, his athletic requirement, etc. He chose to enroll in four courses, including Philosophy 11, and I signed his registration form. The next day he showed up with a sheepish look, seeking permission to switch from Philosophy 11 to Religion 11. In light of our lengthy conversation the day before, I readily signed the add/drop form. As he left I asked him why he was changing courses. He replied that when he went to the bookstore, he noticed that he owned all the books assigned for Philosophy 11. Then he realized that he had *taken* the course the previous year. I sent a note to Joe Epstein, then senior professor in Philosophy, telling him that his courses were attractive but did not stick to the ribs.

Again reversing direction, my last true tale arose concerns *false* memory. I now have a list of at least 22 names of alum's who claim or of whom it was claimed (by spouse, mother, etc.) that they took my course, when in fact, they took *no* course with me. One such was even a Smith student who spent a semester here. This whole phenomenon has implications for witness testimony in court.

I'd like to end on a particularly encouraging note. Two of my students were math majors whose grades in our field were rather consistently at the C level. One is now a prize-winning mathematician, nationally prominent

both for research and teaching. The other is a professor of Orthopedics at an Ivy League university and former President of the American Society of Biomechanics.

In conclusion, it's been an interesting run and I'm happy to have my successors carve out their own legends in their own ways.

---

● Amherst Magazine, Summer 2009

[www.amherst.edu/aboutamherst/magazine/issues/2009summer/collegerow/starr](http://www.amherst.edu/aboutamherst/magazine/issues/2009summer/collegerow/starr)

Norton Starr retired after  
43 years at Amherst.  
Photo by Frank Ward

## Norton Starr Retires

By Emily Gold Boutilier

Norton Starr, the Brian E. Boyle '69 Professor of Mathematics and Computer Science, has retired after 43 years at Amherst.

Starr came to Amherst from MIT, where he earned a Ph.D. in mathematics, served as an instructor and received the Goodwin Medal for "conspicuously effective teaching." In his early years at Amherst, he remembers, there were pitchers of milk and unleashed dogs in Valentine, nearly every professor lived within blocks of campus, and he once felt out of place for wearing a sweater rather than a coat and tie to a faculty meeting.

Named a full professor at Amherst in 1978, Starr has taught courses in advanced calculus, complex variables, probability, statistics and data analysis, among other subjects. He also taught a first-year seminar in computers and society. His most frequently cited publication is an article about the 1970 Vietnam draft lottery, published in the *Journal of Statistics Education* in 1997. In recent years, he has published on mathematical puzzles.

During a 1972-73 sabbatical at Canada's University of Waterloo, he chanced into the young field of computer graphics and created a wide variety of computer drawings based on mathematical themes. A number of them have appeared in books and magazines. In 1989, he displayed his work *Experiment in Shading*, drawn by a ball-point pen under computer control, and *Tecumseh*, a lithograph of a graph-theoretic drawing made by computer-controlled fountain pen, as part of an invited exhibit at The Print Club in Philadelphia. *Tecumseh* had previously been displayed in the juried National Prints and Drawings Exhibition at Mount Holyoke in 1976. Most recently, *Tecumseh* appeared in a 2007 exhibit at Kunsthalle Bremen, where it is in the permanent collection.

When the math department moved to the Seeley Mudd Building in 1984, Starr could have picked an office with a view of the Holyoke Range. Instead, he chose a room facing the Quad, where students who walked by in the evening could see his light on and know he was available for questions.

This summer, Starr spent weeks clearing out that office, including 50 years of files and nine bookcases full of books. (The files include articles about nonacademic careers for philosophers and a list of at least 22 alumni who believe they were taught by him when, in fact, they were in none of his courses.)

In retirement, Starr will continue to write for a column in the *College Mathematical Journal*. "I look forward to simply being able to read a book, walk into town, see a movie," he says. First, though, he must organize the papers and files that now overwhelm his house. Once he accomplishes that task, he says, he'll feel retired.

