



Meet Your Footnote: Douglas Ehninger

by [Michael Calvin McGee](#)

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photo by J. L. Lucaites

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Douglas Ehninger was born and raised in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. He married his high school sweetheart, Flo Beth, who he called by her childhood nickname "Sissy" until the day of his death. He loved baseball and intercollegiate debate, riding his interest in argument to a Ph. D. from Northwestern University. He served his country during World War II as an intelligence officer, a cryptographer who helped crack German naval codes. After the war, he set up shop as a debate coach for the University of Florida, always fielding a respectable team, and occasionally a powerhouse. He was an obsessive and a compulsive intellectual who would shut himself up in his study for days, sometimes weeks, at a time, working on an essay. He earned the respect of, and developed a collegial friendship with, famed philosopher Charles Morris. Ehninger was committed to the analytical schools of thought about argument, however, and did not take up semiotics. In 1960, or thereabouts, H. Clay Harshbarger hired him away from his comfortable position in Florida, enticing him to finish his career in the cold clime of Iowa. In the dénouement of a distinguished and influential academic life, he contracted a malignant brain tumor and died in 1979.

Ten years earlier, or thereabout, he went "home" to Florida to attend a convention. By this time, Ehninger had former students from Florida and from Iowa scattered throughout the nation. From time to time they would participate in one of academe's oldest rituals, the showing of the new. Traditions are passed from one generation to the next, in practice, much as younger baseball players replace "the boys of summer." The young professor of each generation of scholars eagerly awaits the brilliant young undergraduate who next will receive the tradition. He courts the young student, encouraging her, asking about interest in graduate work, and advising her about graduate programs that fit her interests. He alerts his network of mentors and former teachers about the availability of a "rising star," and both formal and informal evaluation of the new scholar begins. A secondary evaluation is also under way, of course; the young professor's demonstration that the learning given to him is passed on to the next generation, the chain extended, the tradition preserved.

It is morning, early, and Douglas Ehninger checks his watch as he stands in front of the "please wait to be seated" sign in the hotel coffee shop. He is about to be irritated that his former student is late for the breakfast they had scheduled when the former student walks around the corner.

"Professor Ehninger! Sorry to be late. I was on the phone with Rising Star, the young scholar I told you

about. She's going to drop by the convention sometime today. I hope you get the chance to meet her."

"No problem, Former Student. I just got here myself. I am hungry, however, and breakfast is my favorite meal. I always say that it's hard to mess up breakfast food just before they serve me rubber eggs."

In the tow of a hostess, the two wandered off toward a table, and juice, and coffee. They ordered breakfast and exchanged news of each other's lives. Soon they were talking about some topic of analytical philosophy relating to argumentation, who was thinking or writing what about that topic, what the truth might be. Before either noticed, breakfast was a smear of egg yolk on a dirty plate, and they had only conversation to chew with the coffee they sipped.

There was a commotion behind him at the hostess station, but Ehninger paid it no mind. Former Student, however, looked up and beckoned someone: "Oh, there's Rising Star now! What a coincidence! You wouldn't mind meeting her, would you Professor Ehninger?"

Before he had a chance to respond, or even to stand up to face the oncoming charge at eye level, Ehninger found himself with a hand in his face outstretched to shake. Former Student is listing Rising Star's accomplishments, spicing the recitation with evaluative comments about her brilliance and potential for success in academic pursuits. When it is Rising Star's turn to speak, she surprises by listing a number of Ehninger's publications, briefly mentioning each essay's burden, concluding by saying "Oh, Professor Ehninger, I think I've read everything you've published, but it's really, really special to meet you. That's what's so great about these conventions. You get to meet your footnotes!"

For years after that episode, those of us who knew about it, and who dared, teased the great man mightily. "It's Professor Footnote," I remember saying at a convention in Chicago, watching the wisp of a smile form in the corner of his mouth and his face turn bright red.

Meeting your footnotes. That is, coming face to face with the scholars whose work informs your own. But more than that, meeting your footnotes entails an encounter with the human side of scholarship. As I recall this episode in my mentor's life, he comes alive again, and I see him in his seminar, his face bright red with passion as he demands - yes, demands - that I think carefully and quickly toward the right inference. The narrative and the memory are so strong in me that I have no need for film. Not all of that can cross in this attempt to communicate something of the man to my readers. I will never make my memories of him clear enough, powerful enough, to affect my readers as those memories affect me. All I can do is add a line to the lore of Douglas Ehninger, and in that to the lore of the field of communication studies.

Lore is the "silent partner" of research and teaching in academic fields. It is the reputation of scholars among peers and especially among subordinates. We play the game in all graduate programs, as "experienced" forebears tell tales out of school to frighten rookie first-year students about to enter the dreaded classroom of Professor "X." We play the game in convention bars and crowded parties crammed into - whose room is this, anyway? We play the game in emails and chance conversations, any place two or more scholars gather to discuss ideas and the people who inscribe them into our professional books and journals. And we hope to play the game here, on the screens of the American Communication Journal.

Buddy Goodall has sent reminiscences of Gerry Phillips, so the spotlight will fall upon that famous mentor in the next issue of ACJ. Please, all of Professor Phillips's students out there in Internet Land, can you give us some more lore of your famous footnote? What else can I add about Professor Ehninger? And who else can I put in the spotlight in future issues? Answer any or all of these questions by stopping by the [Interact](#) page.

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