

# Princeton University

Honors Faculty Members  
Receiving Emeritus Status



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The biographical sketches were written by  
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# Marguerite Ann Browning



Marguerite Ann Browning, a theoretical linguist who has served as master of Wilson College since 2004, is leaving Princeton to become vice president for student life and dean of students at Harvey Mudd College, a science and engineering college in the Claremont University consortium. Maggie's move from professor to student-affairs dean is only the latest twist in a career as inspiring as it is improbable.

Born in 1952 in central Texas, Maggie was the first child of a well-known circus drummer and band leader, Bill "Boom Boom" Browning, and his wife, Martha. Maggie's early fascination with science and math gave way in her teens to a passionate interest in theater, which was nurtured by her extraordinary high-school drama teacher in Ohio, where the family had moved. Although Maggie didn't see college in her future, the drama teacher did, and was instrumental in helping her gain admission to Denison University. After studying dramatic arts for two years, Maggie dropped out of college to join Stage One, a Boston-based experimental theater group influenced by the revolutionary Polish director Jerzy Grotowski.

In her late twenties, Maggie decided to complete her undergraduate degree at the University of Massachusetts Boston, where she hoped to study American Sign Language in preparation for a career working with deaf people. As it happened, UMass Boston didn't offer ASL courses, so Maggie took a class in the closest subject she could find—linguistics. She fell in love with the formal nature of the inquiry and became fascinated by the structure of language and the theory of universal grammar. It wasn't long before she was taking classes at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with Noam Chomsky, who eventually became her dissertation adviser.

Maggie earned her B.A. *summa cum laude* from UMass Boston in 1982, the first in her family to graduate from college. She immediately matriculated at MIT as an Ida Green Fellow (1982–83) and a Linguistics Department Research Fellow (1982–87). While a graduate student, she also held a prestigious four-year National Science Foundation Fellowship (1983–87). After receiving her Ph.D. in 1987, she spent a year teaching at MIT, then two years serving as assistant professor of linguistics at the University of Texas–Austin. In 1990, she was recruited by Princeton to join the Program in Linguistics and in 1996 was awarded tenure.

Maggie’s work in linguistics has focused primarily on theories of syntactic movement—the rules that govern how the underlying structure of a sentence (e.g., John hit the ball) can be transformed (The ball was hit by John). By investigating a particular phenomenon in language known as “null operator constructions,” Maggie has been able to illuminate the nature of syntactic movement, the constraints that govern it, and the structures it creates. Her research has appeared as a monograph, *Null Operator Constructions*, and in articles published in the major journal of the field, *Linguistic Inquiry*, as well as in many other journals and edited collections.

In recent years, Maggie has reinvented herself as a historian of linguistics, focusing on the new approach to the study of language that emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, when traditional Indo-European linguistics and the anthropology of Franz Boas converged in the persons of Edward Sapir and Leonard Bloomfield. As part of a new generation of anthropological linguists, Sapir and Bloomfield took Indo-European methodology into the field and applied it for the first time to the indigenous languages of the Americas. In the process, they created American structural linguistics, a discipline that quickly separated itself from anthropology and ultimately formed the basis for contemporary linguistic theory. Maggie’s project, based on archival

research, tells the story of the birth of American structural linguistics through the eyes of the key people involved—not only Boas, Sapir, and Bloomfield, but also the mostly forgotten Native Americans who were their co-workers.

A fervent advocate for linguistics at Princeton, Maggie served as director of the Program in Linguistics from 1997 to 2001. In this role, she expanded the number and variety of courses offered, boosted enrollments, increased the number of certificates awarded annually, and in general raised the profile of the program. She also invited visiting professors to teach courses such as “Linguistics and Race” and “Linguistics and Law,” and she created and taught the University’s first laboratory-based linguistics course, “Linguistics and Language Acquisition,” a popular class that satisfied the University’s requirement in science and technology. Finally, in conjunction with the then-chair of the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, Maggie instituted a successful joint Ph.D. program in Slavic and theoretical linguistics.

In 2004, Maggie was appointed master of Wilson College, where she has distinguished herself by cultivating the college’s reputation for the arts and by vigorously promoting student-led initiatives. For example, she brought a group of young Native American artists to Wilson for a week in residence; the highlight of their stay was a performance piece involving live music, skateboarding, spoken-word poetry, and the graffiti-style painting of a 30-foot mural. Under Maggie’s mentorship, Wilson students created an arts studio and regularly sponsor exhibits in Wilcox Commons. They also hold an annual Mr. Wilson College pageant and occasionally produce original plays. In 2005, Maggie guided a group of freshmen and sophomores to form the BlackBox, a hip-hop-flavored, alcohol-free dance club. For the future, we wish Maggie the best of luck as she embarks on the next stage of her incredible journey.