

Frederic L. Pryor

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Source: [Swarthmore News](#)

The Swarthmore community has lost one of its most intellectually voracious and lively faculty members – a polymath known for the broad scope of his interests, the vitality of his scholarship, and his passion for the facts. He was also known for his irreverent sense of humor, once quipping: “An economist is someone who sees something working in practice and asks whether it would work in theory.”

“When I think about Fred, I remember how fun he was as a colleague,” says Professor of Economics John Caskey. “Every month he was thinking about something new, and you never knew what or where in the world it would be. He worked hard because he had fun with his work. I will miss him greatly.”

“Fred’s specialty was comparative economic systems, an area dominated by big questions about how economies and societies work,” says Gil and Frank Mustin Professor of Economics Stephen O’Connell. “He was one of the most prolific liberal-arts economists of his generation, publishing articles and books at a rate more characteristic of an entire department than an

individual. Over the course of his career he studied a dazzling array of topics, always expanding the boundaries of knowledge and often puncturing airy and long-standing debates.”

Fred and his twin brother Millard were born in Owosso, Mich., but spent most of their childhood in Mansfield, Ohio, where they graduated from Mansfield Senior High School in 1951. After receiving a B.A. in chemistry from Oberlin College in 1955, Fred spent a year living and working in South America and Europe, including a three-month stint on a commune. When he returned to the U.S., he enrolled at Yale University to pursue a Ph.D. in economics.

Focusing his doctoral thesis on communist foreign trade, Fred moved to West Berlin and frequently visited East Berlin to conduct research. Shortly after finishing his dissertation in August 1961, he drove to East Berlin to deliver a copy to a professor. By then the Berlin Wall was under construction, and Fred was arrested by the Stasi (the East German secret police) on suspicion of espionage. After nearly six months in an East German prison, Fred was released as part of a prisoner exchange that included U.S. Air Force pilot Francis Gary Powers and Rudolf Abel, a convicted KGB spy. The experience was later dramatized in the Steven Spielberg film .

“Half a year of prison isn’t fun,” [Fred said in 2015](#) after seeing the film, which he said he enjoyed. “It was good. But they took a lot of liberties with it.”

Fred had hoped that, after earning his Ph.D., he would work for the U.S. government, such as with the State Department or the Agency of International Development. But they refused, citing his espionage arrest. Industry jobs were closed to him as well for the same reason.

“The only places that didn’t pay mind to my prison experience were colleges and universities,” he said. “Swarthmore didn’t care. In fact, I think the students kind of got a kick out of having an ex-con teaching them.”

Fred joined the Swarthmore faculty in 1967 and quickly attained the rank of full professor, later chairing the department three times in the 1980s. After retiring in 1998, he maintained an office on campus for many years, noting in 2015 that it “keeps me happy.”

Over the course of his career Fred wrote 13 books – three after he retired – and more than 130 scholarly articles. His widely-cited work includes articles co-authored with Swarthmore colleagues in economics, mathematics, and engineering, and his research was supported by grants and awards from the National Science Foundation, among others. Fred was also a visiting scholar at several institutions in the U.S. and abroad, including the Hoover Institution and the Brookings Institution.

As his subject matter vanished with the fall of communism, Fred found new paths to follow, examining such varied topics as the

economics of religions and of feudal agricultural societies, those who are not working in society and why, the possibility of wars over water, the future of capitalism, the differences in happiness and unhappiness across countries, and what it means to be human through a comparison of human and nonhuman primate economies. He published three journal articles in 2014, poignantly on the lives of the elderly. His final scholarly contribution was an article on income inequality in the United States in 2015.

“Fred was interested in everything,” O’Connell says, “and he differed from many economists of his generation in avoiding fancy theoretical models. His questions came from all segments of the social sciences.”

In 1964, Fred married Zora Prochazka, a fellow economist he had met several years before at an American Economic Association meeting. They worked and travelled together until her death in 2008.

Outside of his academic work, Fred loved to see and experience new cultures and he often combined service and vacation, such as offering free lectures at universities where he travelled. For many years he also served as a trustee at historically black institutions such as Miles College, Wilberforce University, and Tougaloo College. “His generosity and philanthropy were less visible components of his life,” says longtime colleague Ray

Hopkins, the Richter Professor Emeritus of Political Science.

That service also included his work as research director for the Pennsylvania Tax Commission and a brief stint in local public office. When asked by the head of Swarthmore's Democratic Party to run for judge of elections, Fred agreed and was elected to the position twice. In 2006, he noted that his campaigns consisted "solely of cooking up slogans." The first, right after the 2000 debacle, was "No Floridas in Pennsylvania." For his 2005 campaign: "He Had Pryor Experience."

Fred never sought attention for his supporting role in one of the notable events of the Cold War. In his clear-eyed assessment, he was characteristically dismissive of his brush with infamy: "In these kinds of exchanges, everyone had two lawyers: a capitalist lawyer and a communist lawyer. My communist lawyer was also the lawyer for the [Russian spy]. My capitalist lawyer was also the lawyer for [the American pilot]. So when the two lawyers were negotiating between Powers and Abel, they tossed in their common client, namely, me."

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