

Who was Boyd Harshbarger?

(Feb. 15, 1906 – May 20, 1998)



Boyd Harshbarger was one of the early pioneers of statistics in the United States. He received his bachelor's degree from Bridgewater College, and his M.S. in Mathematics from the University of Illinois, and an M.S. from Virginia Tech. His career at Virginia Polytechnic Institute began in 1931, where he founded one of the earliest (third oldest) Departments of Statistics in the country. In 1935, he organized and taught the first courses in statistics in the Department of Mathematics. He received a Rockefeller Fellowship and left to pursue his Ph.D. in 1940. He wrote his doctoral dissertation under the direction of distinguished Professor W.G. Cochran at Iowa State College and George Washington University, and returned to VPI in 1942.

The success of the VPI Department of Statistics was due to the foundation laid by Boyd Harshbarger. Boyd Harshbarger was the founder of the Statistical Laboratory at VPI in 1947 and the Department of Statistics (1949). He was the head of the Department of Statistics from 1949 to 1972, and was named professor emeritus in 1976.

He received many honors in recognition of his services to the statistics profession and to the sciences in general. In addition to receiving an honorary doctorate from his alma mater, he was named a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), the American Statistical Association (ASA), the Institute of Mathematical Statistics (IMS), and the Virginia Academy of Science. He was a charter member of the Biometric Society and president of the Eastern North American Region (ENAR) from 1956-1958. The VAS honored his work with the J. Shelton Horsley Research Award (1946), with the Ivey F. Lewis Distinguished Service Award (1966), and with honorary life membership. Harshbarger organized the Statistics Section of the VAS, and served as its secretary (1945-1946), vice-chair (1947) and chair (1948).

With respect to today's Southern Regional Council on Statistics, a Committee on Statistics was coordinated through the Southern Regional Education Board, and consisted of representatives from 14 southern states, from Maryland to Texas. (This was the precursor to today's SRCOS.) Their charge was to promote statistics graduate programs in the southern colleges and universities. Boyd Harshbarger was the first chairman of this committee (1961-1962). In 1954, Harshbarger organized and supervised the first Regional Statistical Summer Season (the first "Summer Research Conference") at VPI, bringing together scientists from five continents and students from 35 states of the US. Harshbarger influenced many students and colleagues with his enthusiasm and vision of statistics. The Boyd Harshbarger travel awards were given in 1994 at the SRC in Williamsburg, Virginia, supported entirely by the SRCOS. Beginning with the 2000 SRC, also in Williamsburg, support in the form of grants from federal agencies was obtained for this student award, along with the R.L. Anderson Award.

References

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- Taylor, R.L. and Padgett, W.J. (2006) "The Summer Research Conferences and the SRCOS: A Historical Perspective," *Journal of Statistical Computation and Simulation*, Vol. 76, No. 5, May, 2006, pp. 373-383.