

Wilga M. Rivers



The Northeast Conference was deeply saddened to learn of the death of Wilga M. Rivers, Harvard Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures, Emerita, and Harvard Extension School faculty member, on

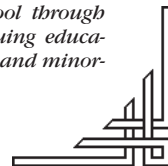
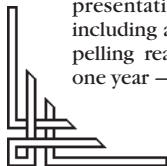
June 23 at the age of 88. Professor Rivers was the 1984 recipient of our Nelson Brooks Award for Leadership in the Profession, and her achievements set the standard for all future honorees.

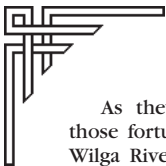
She was born in Melbourne, Australia, receiving her bachelor's and master's degrees from the university there. Her licence ès letters was conferred by the Université de Montpellier, and she earned her doctorate from the University of Illinois. She taught in public and private schools, at the secondary and postsecondary level in Australia, the U.S., and Great Britain. One of the first women to be appointed to a full professorship at Harvard, Rivers published and presented widely during her career. Following her retirement from Harvard, she taught at that university's extension school for many years. She served as the first president of the American Association of Applied Linguistics, was a member of innumerable boards (both within and outside the profession) and was showered with awards, including ACTFL's Steiner Award for Leadership and Papalia Award for teacher education.

Dr. Rivers honored NECTFL with her presentations at the conference — including a riotously funny but also compelling reading from her autobiography one year — and with a seminal chapter in

the 1979 Northeast Conference Reports. Positing the need to “review ... objectives from time to time with great care,”ⁱ Dr. Rivers encouraged the foreign language profession to develop goals that would ensure the centrality of our role in the larger “educational enterprise” by considering two questions for students: “What can I do with it in practical domains?” and “What can it do for me as a person and as a citizen?”ⁱⁱ To craft answers to these questions and in recognition of the myriad pressures facing foreign language teachers, Dr. Rivers wrote:

... I decided to draw on the collective wisdom of a worldwide profession, exercising its responsibilities in widely varying circumstances, to clarify the relationship of foreign language objectives to geographical, social, and political situations. To this end, I sent questionnaires to language teachers in many countries on widely separated continents and to all fifty states, asking which of twenty-one objectives frequently mentioned in the literature on foreign or second language teaching constituted the most important goals for language learners in their particular teaching situation. Respondents ranked seven of the items proposed, added extra items they did not find on the list, and wrote short statements, some of which have been quoted in various parts of this Report. Approximately 500 questionnaires were sent out and 580 were returned, because a number of recipients passed the questionnaire on to colleagues or tried it out on teachers and teacher-trainees in summer institutes or orientation programs. Teachers from forty-eight countries and fifty states are represented in the sample. They teach twenty-one languages at all levels, from elementary school through graduate school and continuing education; some teach immigrants and minority-language students.ⁱⁱⁱ





As they read the above quotation, those fortunate enough to have known Wilga Rivers will find themselves in an all-too-familiar situation: wondering which of its many astonishing elements they should respond to — personally, I believe Wilga is best reflected in what must be the only study questionnaire return rate on record of 116%! And yet, always ahead of her time and always willing to take risks, Wilga Rivers simply aimed for the moon, usually achieved what she aimed for and inevitably learned something new to share with us on her journey. We shall miss her.

i Wilga M. Rivers. “Educational Goals: The Foreign Language Teacher’s Response.” In *The Foreign Language Learner in Today’s Classroom Environment*, *Northeast Conference Reports*, ed. Warren C. Born (Middlebury VT: Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages), p. 19

ii Ibid., p. 20

iii Ibid., p. 35