



# Research that Matters

When considering the content of their Communication Studies courses, students often reflect the practical aspects of the discipline and, in particular, how the study of human communication can make it possible for one to be a competent contributor to personal, professional, and civic life. Although practical applications are a key component of the information students learn in Communication Studies courses, it is also important to recognize the rigorous research that is completed in order to help students and scholars determine, for example, which forms of communication are going to be the most effective and ethical in a given circumstance. Understanding the breadth and depth of Communication Research helps us understand why some forms of communication can be so powerful.

In the stories featured on the following pages, Texas State's Communication Studies faculty were asked to discuss a research project that they were in the process of completing. Because the faculty at Texas State actively engage in research, the work they are doing will eventually inform the content being taught in courses at this institution. Our hope is that by examining these research projects in their early stages, it will be possible for those interested in the study of human communication to make some predictions about the future of the field. Often, faculty pursue these research ideas in collaboration with both graduate and undergraduate students, which prepares the next generation of scholars and teachers to conduct research of their own that extends our knowledge of the field even further.

We're excited to present these interviews and present some of the most cutting-edge research in the field of Communication Studies. If you are interested in learning more about a project, consider contacting the faculty member and/or registering for a course with them, declaring a major/minor, or even pursuing graduate school. We hope you enjoy learning more about the future of Communication research.

## Dr. Tricia Burke

### Understanding Why Caregiving Can be Make Us Feel both Half Full and Half Empty



Dr. Tricia Burke is an Associate Professor of Communication Studies. Her research interests focus upon the theoretical and practical aspects of health and relational communication. She wants to help others understand how to engage in more effective communication about health and relationships and to develop the theoretical perspectives that allow us to understand why some forms of communication are more/less effective. As Dr. Burke notes in her bio, “I am interested in relational communication processes (e.g., social influence, support, conflict, social skills, intimate behaviors) as they relate to health/well-being and relationship quality in romantic and family relationships.” Courses that students could take from Dr. Burke to learn more about her research include COMM 4326: Health Communication, COMM 4351: Relational Communication, and COMM 3326: Family Communication. Students can sign up for a online course with Dr. Burke this coming Fall 2022.

We asked Tricia to talk about an ongoing research project that she describes as, “The Caregiving Journey: The Role of Communication in Navigating Challenges and Providing Support”. As she explains, this project is designed to help us understand why caregivers can find their responsibilities to be both rewarding as well as challenging. Dr. Burke explains, “Serving as a caregiver for a family member can be a difficult role to adopt – it introduces stress, role strain, burnout, and other sources of challenge. At the same time, providing care for a loved one can be tremendously rewarding. This project highlights the ways in which communication helps people navigate the experience of providing care for a loved one.

**Question: As a research project, what are you doing to explore this topic and develop research findings?**

**Dr. Burke:**

I am currently conducting interviews with caregivers and will soon begin the process of transcribing and analyzing those interviews. After that, I will write an original research article and outline a book proposal that addresses the topic of caregiving and communication.

More concretely, I am interviewing caregivers about their experiences providing care for a loved one. These caregivers include spouses or children of dementia patients, a parent of an adult child with cancer, and parents of young children with complicated medical conditions and special needs. In my interviews, I learned about their experiences supporting their loved ones emotionally, physically, and as health advocates, as well as coping with the stress, burnout, and grief that goes along with providing care while managing daily responsibilities. In each case, communication has been critical to their well-being and their loved ones’ well-being.

**As a Communication scholar, it's clear that you need to delve deeply into the theories, research findings, and data to develop conclusions about communication. Although most students see you primarily as a teacher, it's clear that you spend just as much time completing original research. Why is it important to engage in this type of research?**

The U.S. has a large population of aging adults that are increasingly facing financial insecurity, which means more of us will find ourselves in the position of serving as a caregiver for a loved one. We are especially finding this to be the case during the global pandemic when other caregivers cannot come into people's homes. This project highlights the critical role that communication plays in navigating the multifaceted caregiving experience. By understanding the ways in which communication can ease challenges associated with caregiving, we will all be better equipped to care for our family members and support caregivers.

**It often seems like research can be so detached or even irrelevant to the concerns of students in courses. However, it seems to often be the case that the relevance of the research lies just below the surface and can be discovered if a reader is interested. For you, personally, does this research hold any particular relevance?**

When my son was born, we learned that he had a very rare syndrome that would require regular visits with a team of specialists, endless surgeries, and training in some medical care. While all parents serve as caregivers, our experience is much more involved and intense than the average parents. I am not only his mom, but I am also his primary health advocate, insurance coordinator, scheduler, nurse, physical therapist, speech therapist, and occupational therapist. Over and over again, effective communication helped us navigate the challenges associated with being caregivers. This experience also made me reach out to and develop relationships with other caregivers I know, who all touted the importance of communication in their caregiving experiences. As a result, I decided that I wanted to learn more about and contribute to the research on caregiving and communication.

**Clearly, communication research demands a considerable investment of time, energy, and emotion. What is it about this research project that makes it possible for you to do it, despite having classes to teach, papers to grade, and meetings to attend?**

It's close to my heart. It's informed by and informs my life, and I am grateful that I have the ability to explore this topic as part of my career.

**How do you see the project developing over time? What are the next steps once the project is complete?**

My hope is that this research will be published in a peer-reviewed journal, presented at a conference, and also published in the form of a book. In writing the book, my aim is to write about research in an approachable way that will be digestible and interesting to a non-academic audience.

**What is one question that you want someone to ask you about your research project (and what is the answer)?**

Something that I hope someone will ask me about is “What have I learned that might be surprising to others who have *not* been caregivers?”

We discovered that one theme that was evident across the caregivers interviewed – adults caring for terminally ill spouses or parents, parents caring for children with special needs, and parents caring for their sick adult children – was the experience of grief. Grief is an obvious component to caring for a terminally ill patient, but was also a powerful element in the experiences of parents caring for their sick or special needs children. This grief is driven by a totally different sense of loss than caring for a terminal patient, however. Instead of grieving the loss of the patient, these caregivers grieve the loss of the life or expectations for which they had hoped.

**Thank you for your time, Dr. Burke!**