When entering the Virginia Tech campus from the north side of the town of Blacksburg, you pass under a broad arch. The structure, encased in blocks of grey dolomite-limestone also known as Hokie Stone, is inscribed with the university’s motto, *Ut Prosim* (That I May Serve). The arch also serves as an enclosed connection from the library to the Advanced Communications and Technology Center across the street, also known as Torgersen Hall. The arch is the Torgersen Bridge. In addition to providing a link to the library, the Torgersen Bridge is an open study area, occupied by students 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The iconic structure welcomes freshmen to campus on their first day of class. They pose in front of it in their caps and gowns on graduation day. Literally and symbolically, the Torgersen Bridge is a bridge to knowledge, as was Paul Torgersen himself.

Paul Ernest Torgersen passed away on March 29, 2015, at the age of 83, just 10 months after teaching his last engineering class. He was born on October 13, 1931, on Staten Island, New York. His legendary affection for athletics helped launch his academic career as he attended Lehigh University on a tennis scholarship (he once ranked 8th in the nation in doubles), graduating with a bachelor’s degree in industrial engineering in 1953. He went on to earn an MS and PhD at
Ohio State. In 1954, he married Dorothea (Dot), with whom he would spend the next 60 years. After teaching at Ohio State and Oklahoma State, he arrived at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in 1967 as professor and head of the Department of Industrial Engineering. Virginia Tech quickly became home—a place that engaged his love of teaching, dedication to his discipline, passion for athletics, and spirit of service. He remained true to those principles as a professor, dean, and eventually president of the university.

I first knew Paul as a neighbor. My father, Wilson Schmidt, was the head of the university’s Department of Economics, and our family lived next door to Paul and Dot and their children, Karen, Janis, and James. Paul and my father borrowed each other’s tools and shared a chainsaw. I mowed the Torgersens’ lawn. Our families were close, but Paul was much more than a good neighbor. He was also a kind and thoughtful mentor who took an interest in the future of a young man considering a career in engineering. Though I did not attend Virginia Tech, I was one of the many students who benefited from his wisdom and guidance. We remained close through the years, and I greatly valued his friendship.

Paul’s legacy in the arena of engineering and higher education is one of service, growth, and vision. As dean of the College of Engineering at Virginia Tech, he led the college to national prominence, establishing more than 40 endowed professorships. During his 20-year tenure, the college moved from the bottom 10 percent in national rankings for research to the top 10 percent.

As president, he advanced diversity at the university, hiring the first woman to serve as senior vice president and provost, and the first female deans of the College of Architecture and Urban Studies and the College of Human Resources and Education. He appointed the university’s first African American vice president to lead the newly created Office of Multicultural Affairs.

He promoted athletic excellence as a means to advance the university’s national profile and to increase opportunities for students. As president, he was often absent from the
president’s box at football games, electing instead to watch from the sidelines.

A champion of technology, he set the stage for Virginia Tech’s evolution to an advanced twenty-first-century research university. He advocated the construction of the Advanced Communications and Information Technology Center and the Virginia Smart Road. He supported the development of broadband technology and the university’s first Internet home page. He was the first Virginia Tech president to use email and a laptop computer.

He sought to advance research and technology not solely for the sake of growth and advancement but for the difference it could make in the lives of people. For Paul, the human equation was the most important part of education. Regardless of the position he held at the university, he refused to relinquish his face-to-face connection with students. He taught throughout his career, even teaching a class every semester as president, and continued to teach following his retirement—a total of 58 continuous years in the classroom at Virginia Tech.

Paul’s professional accomplishments and honors in the field of engineering include appointment to the Virginia Governor’s Task Force on Science and Technology, the 1992 Virginia Engineering Educator of the Year Award, and recognition as a fellow of the Institute of Industrial Engineers and the American Society for Engineering Education. He authored several books and served on the editorial boards of *Journal of Engineering Education*, *Journal of Industrial Engineering*, and *AIIE Transactions*. He was elected to the National Academy of Engineering in 1986 and generously gave his time to the organization. He served on multiple NRC committees and councils, including the Commission on Engineering and Technical Systems; the Coordinating Council for Education; the Committee for the Study of Quality Assurance Mechanisms for the University Transportation Centers Program; the Academic Advisory Board; the Committee on Engineering Education; the Greatest Engineering Achievements of the 20th Century Selection Committee; the Charles Stark Draper Prize Committee; the NAE Council; the Committee on Science,
Engineering and Public Policy; and the Committee on the Federal Science and Technology Budget.

Paul Torgersen excelled in everything he did or was asked to do, and he did so with quiet humility, grace, and humor. He was a powerful advocate for everything he held dear, including his university and his students. During his time as dean and president of Virginia Tech, Paul signed 62,191 diplomas, and I know from personal experience he was a positive influence on the lives of thousands more who benefited from his wisdom and foresight. His legacy will continue to connect us to our future, like the “bridge to knowledge” on the Virginia Tech campus that bears his name. As you prepare to pass under the Torgersen Bridge and enter the campus, the arch frames eight stone pylons rising in the distance representing the university’s core values, values exemplified by Paul’s life: brotherhood, Ut Prosim, leadership, loyalty, sacrifice, honor, service, and duty.