MARILYN COLEMAN ADMITS THAT SHE TOOK a somewhat circuitous route to family studies. Undergraduate degrees in dietetics and institutional management, a master’s in child development and a doctorate in special education presaged her groundbreaking research into re-married couples and stepfamilies, the hallmark of her decades long career with the College of Human Environmental Sciences.

Coleman retired this year after a remarkable 45 years with the department of Human Development and Family Studies. In her time with HES, Coleman has established herself as the go-to authority to understand the interactions and behaviors of stepfamilies, which she has studied for over three decades. Coleman has written or co-written (often with husband and department co-chair Larry Ganong) seven books on the subject, as well as over 200 articles.

Coleman uses in-depth interviews with members of stepfamilies to better understand how they interact and communicate. In recent years, Coleman has helped train family therapists in Italy and Japan how to better address the needs of stepfamilies.

“Much of what we’ve learned is that these families are not as negative as many had feared decades ago,” Coleman said. Coleman’s work has helped to debunk the stigma that children with re-married parents are doomed to live worse lives than those children with un-divorced parents. “I think our work has brought some understanding and comfort to these families,” she said. “It shows that divorce and re-marriage does not ruin your kids.”

College of Human Environmental Sciences Dean Stephen Jorgensen praised Coleman’s contribution to her field. “Dr. Coleman is widely known as the international luminary in the study of remarriage, stepfamilies and child outcomes of diverse family structures,” Jorgensen said. “Take any college textbook in the family studies arena and you will see her research contributions cited more frequently and more thoroughly than any other scholar in this important, contemporary field of study.”

Although Coleman taught her last semester in fall 2013, students will likely still catch her around campus, as she plans to continue mentoring graduate students for the foreseeable future.

Reflecting on her long career, Coleman laughed, “I really had no ambition at first to do any of this. … So much of this, what I’ve done and accomplished, it’s just amazing to me.”