

Dept. of Physics & Astro – Tribute to Bob Stearns – Dec. 2009 fac mtg

Bob Stearns devoted 35 years to Vassar, arriving as an assistant professor in 1958 following his undergraduate degree at Wesleyan and his PhD at Case Western Reserve University, and teaching at Queens College. He served a remarkable 6 terms as department chair, and along with Henry Albers helped form the merged department of Physics and Astronomy. With such a long commitment to Vassar came Bob's devotion to service across the campus, from Dean of Freshmen to Vice-Chair of United Way, chair of FASC, the Budget Panel and Central Allocations Committee, pre-med advising committee, and the college Radiation Safety Officer, to name just a few.

Bob's service also extended to the physics community; he was on the executive committees of the NY State sections of the American Physical Society and the American Association of Physics Teachers, and was active in the AAAS and Sigma Xi as well.

Bob carried out an active career as a nuclear physicist. His research won grants from the NSF and Department of Energy for work done at the Brookhaven Advanced Nuclear Lab, CERN in Geneva, and Los Alamos. Bob's work was on nuclear structure and later on hyperphysics, focusing on "strange nuclear systems". He discovered normal nuclei with very short lifetimes, and his work was recognized in several press releases. He published over 50 professional papers, and presented his work at several international conferences.

Throughout Bob's career, he engaged undergraduates in his research. Long before URSI existed, Bob secured NSF grants to employ students at the Brookhaven accelerator in the summers. Bob also taught a dozen different courses, including one in environmental physics over 20 years ago! His dedication to students is also apparent in the textbook and supplementary texts he wrote on physics. One student review said "Of all the classes I've taken this year, this was the one I thought would be awful, because the thought of physics strikes fear in my heart. As it turned out, the material was really interesting, and I thought you did a really good job of presenting it. what we learned was important and applicable to everyday life, which seems to be rare with a lot of science classes."

Bob was meticulous in his attention to detail. Jim Challey recalls how, when he purchased one of the first Hewlett-Packard calculators, he got out his log tables to compare with the calculator values, just to make sure the calculator was doing it right! And he was our official timekeeper, maintaining the daily upkeep on an historic clock in Sanders Physics.

Bob passed away unexpectedly on June 13, 2009 during surgery. Those of us who were fortunate enough to know Bob will recall his avid tennis playing, and will perhaps best remember him for his sense of humor.

Respectfully submitted,
The Physics & Astronomy Department