

IN MEMORIAM

Wilbert (“Bill”) James McKeachie (1921–2019)



Educators around the globe were bereft upon hearing the news that Wilbert (“Bill”) James McKeachie, noted educational researcher and organizational leader, had passed away at the age of 97 on June 12, 2019, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. A past American Psychological Association president, Bill’s influence was not limited to the psychology community but extended to teachers of all disciplines who cared deeply about how their students could learn most effectively.

Bill was born on August 24, 1921, in Clarkson, Michigan. Both of Bill’s parents were teachers, and Bill’s father was his teacher for Bill’s first 8 years of education in a one-room schoolhouse. Bill’s mother taught piano lessons, and Bill’s father was passionate about sports, especially baseball; both of these childhood interests profoundly influenced Bill for the rest of his life. Bill earned his bachelor’s degree in Mathematics from Michigan State Normal College (now Eastern Michigan University) in 1942. Bill married Virginia (Ginny) Mack the day before he enlisted in the Navy, as he served in combat in the Pacific Theater during World War II. After returning from the war, he switched to Psychology

and earned his master’s degree in 1946 and his doctoral degree in 1949 from the University of Michigan. With degree in hand, Bill had offers from Northwestern University and Yale University, but University of Michigan Psychology Department Chair Don Marquis asked him to stay and teach the introductory psychology course and to revamp the undergraduate psychology curriculum. Bill served the University of Michigan for his entire career, retiring after 44 years in 1992.

Moving quickly through the ranks, Bill was a full professor by 1960. In 1961 he became Chair, serving the department in that capacity until 1971. In that span of a decade under his leadership, the Department of Psychology at the University of Michigan grew from 70 faculty members to 200 faculty members. When asked in an interview conducted by Jane Halonen about leading this many faculty members, Bill said “I had a new problem every half hour.” He viewed the process as the opportunity to influence the field and to hear the latest findings from new psychologists before those findings were widely known. Bill’s incredible work ethic, his leadership, and his positioning at Michigan also afforded him the opportunity to contribute to major national meetings that would shape undergraduate psychology, particularly curriculum concerns, for decades to follow. He participated in the Cornell Conference in 1951, the Michigan Conference of 1960, the St. Mary’s College of Maryland Conference of 1991, and the Psychology Partnerships Project in 1999.

Bill’s research interests were focused in the areas of (a) student motivation (particularly test anxiety); (b) how student motivation, cognition, instructional choices, and classroom characteristics interact; (c) the improvement of instruction; and (d) helping students to become self-regulated learners. Of course, Bill’s textbook, *Teaching Tips*, has positively influenced teachers in and out of psychology for decades and is currently in its 14th edition.

Bill was exceptionally generous in providing leadership. He served as President of all of the following: the Midwestern Psychological Association (1953–1954); Division on the Teaching of Psychology (APA Division 2; 1956–1957); University of Michigan Chapter (American Association of University Professors, 1970–1971); Division of General Psychology (APA Division 1; 1972–1973); Division of Educational Psychology (APA Division 15; 1975–1976); American Psychological Association (1975–1976); Ameri-

can Association for Higher Education (1978–1979); American Psychological Foundation (1980–1982); Division of Educational, Instructional, and School Psychology (International Association of Applied Psychology, 1982–1986); and the Center for Social Gerontology (1990–1991). The number of times he served on Boards, Councils, chaired Committees, served as Secretary and/or Treasurer are too numerous to mention here. His outstanding contributions earned many top accolades, including the American Psychological Foundation Distinguished Teaching in Psychology Award (1985), the American Psychological Association Award for Distinguished Career Contributions to Education and Training in Psychology (1987), and the Gold Medal Award for Enduring Contributions to Psychology in the Public Interest (1998). Bill cofounded the annual Improving University Teaching Conference, which celebrates his and Ginny's memory with an award in their honor. Bill also received seven honorary degrees.

Bill's life beyond academia was rich and satisfying. He thoroughly enjoyed singing with his wife Ginny at their Baptist church on Sunday. He was well known for his love of singing and playing the piano. Bill hinted that one reason he may have received the job offer at Michigan was so he would play for the faculty softball team in the Psychology department. He often said he would not trade his 30+ no hitters as a fast-pitch softball pitcher for 30+ publications. His competitive nature continued off the sporting field and into the faculty lounge, as Bill and his colleagues were renowned for playing cards, including their original card

game "Murder." The card game has now been renamed "McKeachie" in tribute to Bill's prowess and enthusiasm.

Whatever Bill endeavored to do—whether it was to conduct research on educational outcomes, write a highly successful book on teaching tips, lead a conference on curricular improvements, sing, play fast-pitch softball, or play cards—he wanted to do it with zeal and with all of his ability.

Charles Brewer, a legendary figure himself, described Bill McKeachie at an APA symposium in 2000 in this way:

At numerous meetings, we have eaten enough stale Danish pastry to sink a battleship. Always prepared for the task at hand, Bill is astute, compassionate, diplomatic, evenhanded, generous, gentle, incisive, knowledgeable, soft-spoken, unflappable, unpretentious, and kind. I have never heard Bill say an unkind word about anybody, and I have never heard anybody say an unkind word about Bill, which may be unique in my experience with vocal bipeds.

Bill was predeceased in death by his wife Ginny, his daughter Karen, and his sister Joyce. He is survived by his daughter Linda, brothers Mel and Duane, and granddaughter Erica. The loss to teachers everywhere is inestimable.

R. Eric Landrum
Boise State University

 Jane S. Halonen
University of West Florida