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In Memoriam: William Loomis, Distinguished Professor of Biology, 1940-2016

William F. Loomis, an emeritus distinguished professor of biology who spent 50 years as a faculty member at UC San Diego, died June 30 from cardiac arrest in his campus office while working on a manuscript. A resident of Del Mar, CA, he was 76.

Well known for his critical thinking and lively sense of humor, Loomis was regarded by his colleagues as one of the leaders on the campus in the field of developmental biology.

Students and faculty alike benefited from his generous perspectives on their research projects. At the end of a long day in the laboratory, he enjoyed cruising home along the coast in his sports car adorned with the license plate “Dicty,” his affectionate nickname for the tiny soil amoeba *Dictyostelium discoideum* that he studied in his laboratory.

Loomis was born in 1940 in Boston. He received a bachelor’s degree from Harvard University in 1962 and a Ph.D. from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1965. He did postdoctoral research at Brandeis University, joined the UC San Diego faculty in 1966 and became Distinguished Professor Emeritus in 2010.

Throughout his career at UC San Diego, Loomis focused his research on elucidating the mechanisms regulating the development of *Dictyostelium*, which shares many of the genetic features that are retained in humans, but is much easier to use for experiments. He discovered molecular processes that control how cells interact in Dicty and showed that humans work the same way.



Bill Loomis Credit: UC San Diego

“Without his research, our current understanding of human cells would still be many years in the future,” said Steven Briggs, a distinguished professor of biology and chair of the Section of Cell and Developmental Biology.

An incredibly productive scholar, Loomis published more than 240 articles, books and book chapters. His achievements were recognized by advancement to Distinguished Professor, the highest faculty rank at the University of California, election as the president for Society for Developmental Biology and his election as a Fellow of American Association for the Advancement of Science. He was also awarded a National Institutes of Health Senior Research Scientist Fellowship and named an American Cancer Society Scholar.

One key to his success as a scientist, say his colleagues, was his remarkable ability to train himself in the use of emerging technologies.

“He began his career studying the developmental regulation of enzyme activity in Dicty and isolating mutants that were disrupted at each stage of development,” said Briggs. “With the advent of molecular biology, he refocused on genes and the mutual regulation between genes and development. He helped characterize the Dicty genome and applied this knowledge to understanding cellular interactions. His most recent research explored the use of extremely powerful microscopes to record the behavior of cells in a three-dimensional matrix.”

Loomis was also a mentor to many undergraduate students, graduate students and postdoctoral associates during his five decades at UC San Diego.

“Bill had an infectious enthusiasm for science, always ready to discuss and argue the most recent findings,” said Rick Firtel, an associate dean and professor in the Division of Biological Sciences who was a long-time collaborator and colleague of Loomis’. “He was a cheerleader for the Dicty field, pushing the field forward while being highly supportive of his colleagues. His contributions over his many years in science have been exceptional. He will be sorely missed.”

Loomis was also a devoted husband, father and grandfather who loved to paint, write, work in his garden and travel. He is survived by his wife, Maria (Marga) Margarita Behrens of Del Mar and daughters Catherine Healy, Emily Murphey and Carolina Arahuetes; and by his six grandchildren.

MEDIA CONTACT

Kim McDonald, 858-534-7572, kmcdonald@ucsd.edu

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