

# David Williams, Psychology

**MARCH 27, 2018** | **VOL 64 ISSUE 28 ([HTTPS://ALMANAC.UPENN.EDU/VOLUME-64-NUMBER-28](https://almanac.upenn.edu/volume-64-number-28))** | **DEATHS** | **PRINT**



*David Williams*

David Richmond Williams, professor emeritus of psychology at Penn, died at his home in West Philadelphia on March 16. He was 83 years old.

Dr. Williams was born in Orange, New Jersey. He spent his childhood in Garden City, New York, before attending boarding school in Connecticut. In 1956, he received his AB degree in psychology from Harvard, where he worked in the laboratory of B.F. Skinner. Upon completing his PhD at Yale, Dr. Williams joined Penn's faculty in 1961.

Throughout his professional life, Dr. Williams advocated for bringing the study of human experience to the forefront in psychological research. In his early years at Penn, he emerged as a leading behaviorist and was well-known for his experimental work in learning theory.

Confronting the limitations of prevailing scientific paradigms for understanding fundamental aspects of human experience, Dr. Williams subsequently trained as a clinical psychotherapist. He later served as director of clinical training in the department of psychology.

In his most recent work, Dr. Williams explored unexamined synergies between two influential branches of psychology: learning theory and the existential/humanistic strand of personality theory. Creatively harnessing the computational power of rapidly evolving technology, he developed software designed to, as he explained, "liberate people from needless self-imposed limitations" and empower individuals to live authentically.

Dr. Williams was a renowned presence in the classroom. He was a passionate lecturer who cultivated in his students a deep understanding of research in psychology while inspiring them to pursue further insight in academic settings and beyond. Committed to innovation not only in research but also in the classroom, Dr. Williams created a series of web-based Learning Modules to provide students with meaningful personal experiences related to core concepts in behavioral, existential and humanistic psychology.

Dr. Williams served as director of undergraduate studies in the department of psychology from 1984 to 1987. In 1985, he was appointed chair of the Committee on Undergraduate Education in the College of Arts and Sciences. Under his leadership, the College faculty ratified a landmark requirement to ensure that undergraduate training includes consideration of non-Western cultures and marginalized groups in the United States.

Dr. Williams is survived by his wife, Amy Sarnier Williams, C'73; his four children, Juliet, Daniel, Matthew and Jessica; and eight grandchildren.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests donations to the Penn Wissahickon Hospice Friends Fund. Gifts may be made at here (<https://giving.apps.upenn.edu/fund?program=MC&fund=843419>). Gifts may be made by check payable to "Penn Medicine" and mailed to: Kelly McBride, Penn Hospice Development, 3535 Market Street, Ste. 750, Philadelphia, PA 19104.

A memorial service will be held at 1 p.m. on April 3, at Fleisher Art Memorial Sanctuary, 719 Catharine Street, Philadelphia, PA 19147.