

Eric Weinberg, Biology

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Eric Stephen Weinberg, a professor emeritus of biology in the School of Arts & Sciences, died on March 24. He was 83.

Dr. Weinberg grew up in New York and attended Bronx Science High School, the University of Rochester, and Rockefeller University. For his dissertation at the latter, he traveled to the jungles of Mexico to study a rare fern. He then served as a postdoc in Sicily, Naples, Glasgow, and Edinburgh, where he cultivated an encyclopedic knowledge of Jewish history, medieval art, Italy, and wine. In 1972, he joined the faculty of Johns Hopkins University, where he developed a rigorous and forward-looking approach to molecular embryology.

Eric Weinberg

Then, in 1979, Dr. Weinberg joined Penn's faculty as an associate professor of biology. At Penn, he was among the first to clone, sequence, and characterize histone genes, helping to define how genome organization and transcriptional regulation unfold during early development. These studies, which involved work with sea urchins, established Dr. Weinberg as a leader in the emerging field of molecular developmental biology. Then, mid-career (after a 1991 sabbatical in Germany), Dr. Weinberg pivoted his research and became an early adopter of the zebrafish as a model for vertebrate development, contributing to foundational work on embryonic patterning, axis formation, and gene regulation. His laboratory trained many graduate students and postdoctoral fellows who went on to careers across academia, industry, and public service. Meanwhile, Dr. Weinberg advanced through the ranks of professorship at Penn, becoming a full professor in 1996. During his time at Penn, he also taught in the College of General Studies (precursor to today's College of Liberal & Professional Studies) and in the Schools of Medicine and Dental Medicine.

Dr. Weinberg's contributions to Penn extended well beyond his research. Dr. Weinberg served on Penn's Faculty Senate and University Council, chairing the latter's Committee on International Programs. As one colleague recalled in a tribute, he "jump-started molecular genetics at Penn by establishing a seminar series in this area, which he ran single-handedly for many years." He served as undergraduate chair of biology from 2007 to 2016, playing a central role in shaping the curriculum and mentoring students and junior faculty. Colleagues remember Dr. Weinberg not only for his scientific rigor, but also for his generosity and presence. He was a trusted source of advice for junior faculty navigating grant writing, teaching, and the complexities of academic life. One colleague recalled that "you could step into his office with a half-formed idea or a practical problem and find him there... considering, then responding... as if he already saw the shape of the answer but was inviting you to arrive at it with him."

Dr. Weinberg retired from Penn in 2019. "His presence continued to be felt long after," said his department. "He was, in every sense, a pillar of our community, a scientist, teacher, mentor, and friend." Outside of Penn, Dr. Weinberg cared deeply about the Jewish people and progressive politics that promoted equal opportunity and human rights in the United States and beyond.

He is survived by his partner, Rebecca Olshan; his daughter, Tanya Weinberg Yahana, and her husband, Shlomi, and daughter, Maya; his sister, Emily Goldberger, and her husband, Hank; his nephews, Ethan and Jesse Goldberger; and his great-niece, Zoe.

Donations in Dr. Weinberg's memory may be made to the New Israel Fund, Friends of Neve Shalom, World Central Kitchen, or the International Rescue Committee.