

EUGEN MERZBACHER

During his almost forty years in the University of North Carolina Department of Physics, Kenan Professor of Physics Emeritus Eugen Merzbacher became an internationally recognized scientist. His origins began under the dark cloud of international politics. At the age of fourteen, he was forced to flee the city of his birth, the Berlin of Nazi Germany, and he and his family resettled in Turkey. Aspiring first to be a travel agent and then an art historian, he eventually settled on physics, taking his Licentiate Degree in Istanbul and then teaching high school in Ankara. He came to America to pursue his Ph.D. in Physics at Harvard University, completing that degree in 1950. Two years later he joined the Department of Physics at this University.

His research led him into the study of quantum mechanics and its application to atoms and nuclei. His textbook Quantum Mechanics, published in 1961, revised in 1970, and now being revised again for a third edition, has been a standard text for a generation of the nation's graduate students. In the 1960s, he was one of the founders of the Triangle Universities Nuclear Laboratory, a cooperative venture including this University, Duke University, and North Carolina State University. The collaborative teaching and research of the departments of these three campuses now account for the training of nearly 8% of the graduating Ph.D.'s in experimental nuclear physics in this country.

Eugen Merzbacher has held several offices in the American Physical Society -- consisting of 43,000 members -- and served as its president in 1990. In 1992, the American Association of Physics Teachers conferred upon him its Oersted Medal, its highest award in recognition of "notable contributions to the teaching of Physics."

The Chair of the University's Advisory Committee on the General Education Curriculum from 1968 to 1970, he became the author of the renowned "Merzbacher Committee" recommendations that helped redefine the undergraduate curriculum at a time of the University's greatest and most rapid growth. For his outstanding contributions to this Institution, he received the Thomas Jefferson Award in 1972. From 1977 to 1982, he was Chair of the Department of Physics and Astronomy. A warmly approachable colleague and teacher, Eugen Merzbacher has repeatedly instigated department outdoor activities ranging from bicycling through Orange County, to several-day hikes in the Appalachians, to overnight campouts at Kerr Lake.

Upon his receipt of the Oersted Medal last year, he noted the importance of teaching fundamental concepts of modern physics, citing in particular conservation laws, indistinguishability of identical particles, energy bands and gaps, etc. He then concluded, "These are some of the notions that govern our world. They sound abstract and remote from everyday experience, but they are at the bottom of almost everything with which we come in contact. We must learn to communicate these ideas by as direct and elementary methods as those discovered in the eighteenth century for conveying the intricacies of Newtonian mechanics." No professor-scientist in this country has more successfully demonstrated the art of teaching science than Eugen Merzbacher, and the University that has been his home for many years now proudly crowns his achievement with this Doctor of Science degree.