

The Passing of Dr. Joel D. Oppenheim

Dear Colleagues,

It is with great sadness that we share news of the passing of Joel D. Oppenheim, PhD, professor emeritus of microbiology at NYU Grossman School of Medicine, on Monday, January 29. Among his many distinguished roles, Dr. Oppenheim served as director of what is now known as the Vilcek Institute of Graduate Biomedical Sciences from 1994 to 2014 and as senior associate dean for biomedical sciences from 2002 to 2014. In these positions, he oversaw the training of approximately 350 students and over 700 postdoctoral students annually, as well as twelve graduate research training programs. Dr. Oppenheim also created the country's largest university-based career development programs for predoctoral and postdoctoral fellows.



No words can fully express just how much Dr. Oppenheim meant to our institution and to the scientific research community at large. His greatest passion was promoting underrepresented students to participate in graduate sciences. To this end, Dr. Oppenheim founded NYU Grossman School of Medicine's [Summer Undergraduate Research Program](#) in 1990, which has helped hundreds of students from minority backgrounds explore a graduate career in the sciences. He also helped launch [The Leadership Alliance](#) in 1992, which received the Presidential Award for Excellence in Science, Engineering and Mathematics. Dr. Oppenheim's legacy endures, as the current enrollment of the Vilcek Institute consists of 57 percent women and 24 percent students from underrepresented groups.

Dr. Oppenheim's [mentorship](#) often went beyond his professional obligations. Sensitive to the obstacles underrepresented students face as they pursue graduate education, he supported them in every way. He helped one student get dental care to end her severe headaches, and accompanied another to their hometown to calm their fear of flying. As one of his former students put it, Dr. Oppenheim was "part cheerleader, part boot camp commander, part funding guru, part therapist, part parent, and part friend." For his devotion to mentoring underrepresented students and his commitment to programs that recruit and retain them, Dr. Oppenheim was honored with the American Association for the Advancement of Science Mentor Award for Lifetime Achievement in 2011.

Beyond his administrative and mentorship roles, Dr. Oppenheim was a noted scientist and researcher. He ran a National Institutes of Health-funded lab in the Department of Microbiology from 1973 to 1994 and

published more than 50 papers between 1970 and 1995. He served on many national advisory committees, on numerous grant study sections, and as a reviewer for the National Research Council, National Science Foundation, and National Academy of Sciences.

Dr. Oppenheim earned his PhD in medical microbiology from Loyola University Chicago's Stritch School of Medicine in 1970. He completed his postdoctoral fellowship in the Department of Microbiology at NYU Grossman School of Medicine in 1972, and called our institution home from then on. After his retirement in 2014, Dr. Oppenheim served as diversity advisor to NYU Langone's Office of Science and Research. He served on review panels for prestigious awards, consulted with historically black colleges and universities nationwide, and was a member of the board of BioBus, a science education nonprofit known for its mobile labs.

Dr. Oppenheim is survived by his wife, Susan, two daughters, Gena and Lisa, two grandchildren, Eleanor and Ezra, and his sister, Judy. In memory of his dedication to equity, his family requests donations to [BioBus](#), in lieu of flowers.

While Dr. Oppenheim will deeply be missed, his spirit lives on through students of the Vilcek Institute—past, present, and future.

Sincerely,

Steven B. Abramson, MD

Executive Vice President
and Vice Dean for
Education, Faculty, and
Academic Affairs
Chief Academic Officer

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