

# Lynn Steen: 1941 - 2015



Lynn Steen 1941–2015 Northfield—Lynn Arthur Steen, emeritus professor of mathematics at St. Olaf College, died of heart failure on June 21, 2015, in Minneapolis.

He was born on Jan. 1, 1941, in Chicago to Dietrich George Berthold and Margery Mayer. His father died when he was an infant, and in 1946 his mother married Navy veteran and musician Sigvart J. Steen, who adopted him.

After a year in Decorah, Iowa, the family moved to Staten Island, New York, where his father became chair of the music department at Wagner College and his mother, a contralto, sang with the New York City Opera.

Steen graduated from Luther College in 1961 with majors in mathematics and physics and a minor in philosophy; there he was also co-editor of the college newspaper with his future wife, Mary Frost. Steen credited the liberal education he received at Luther, particularly his work in philosophy, with preparing him for the writing work that would become a centerpiece of his career.

In 1965 he received his Ph.D. in mathematics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology at age 24; that year he joined the mathematics department at St. Olaf College. In 44 years on the St. Olaf faculty, Steen was instrumental in building St. Olaf's math program into one that receives national recognition for serving large numbers of majors, many of whom go on to doctoral programs. He worked with colleagues to make the department's curriculum more accessible to students with a broad range of interests and to involve undergraduates in research.

Steen's wide-ranging intellectual interests were reflected in the variety of courses he taught, including not only standard math classes like calculus and topology but also an introduction to computer science and a course called, "Down the Rabbit Hole: the Mathematical Excursions of Lewis Carroll." For a decade he and his wife Mary, who taught in St. Olaf's English department, co-taught a course on science writing. Early on, he envisioned and actively encouraged the use of computers across campus, seeing that they could do far more than monitor data sets and scientific experiments.

Seeking to broaden the audience for mathematics through his writing, in 1971 he published an article in *Scientific American* – the first of many articles on mathematics for the broader scientific community or the

general public. He wrote or edited scores of papers, books, and journal articles and was sought after as an expert consultant and lecturer.

Colleagues described him not only as a highly effective writer but also a much-appreciated leader in math education at the state, national, and international levels. He served as president of the Mathematical Association of America, chairman of the Council of Scientific Society Presidents, executive director of the Mathematical Sciences Education Board of the National Research Council, and Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Steen gave lectures to mathematical societies in more than a dozen countries, including Australia, South Africa, Switzerland, China, Russia and Hungary. He was an assistant leader on the U.S. Delegation on Mathematics Education to China in 1983.

One colleague remembered him as "warm-hearted, generous, and kind. His work ethic was legendary, as was his talent for getting his colleagues involved in projects." Another praised his example of "humble efficiency - not to mention brilliance."

"Steen consistently used his gifts to promote, to build, to stir the pot of ideas, ever striving to make his colleagues and St. Olaf a better place," said James May, former Provost at St. Olaf. He was "a veritable force in mathematics and science and math education in this country and around the world."

Lynn Arthur Steen is survived by his wife Mary; his brother, Richard Steen and wife Robin Cameron of New York; daughters Margaret Steen and husband David Webster of Los Altos, California, and Catherine Wille of Fergus Falls, Minnesota; grandsons Justin Helgeson, Jonathan Wille, Joshua Wille, Jacob Wille, Clark Webster, and Harrison Webster; and numerous sisters- and brothers-in-law, nieces, and nephews. He was preceded in death by his parents, Margery Mayer Voutsas, Dietrich George Berthold, and Sigvart J. Steen.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests that donations be made to the Lynn and Mary Steen Fellowship Fund at St. Olaf College; the Lynn Arthur and Mary Frost Steen Fellowship at Luther College; or Project NeXT at the Mathematical Association of America.

A memorial service will be held at 11:00A.M., Friday, June 26, 2015, at St. John's Lutheran Church in Northfield. Visitation will be one hour prior. A lunch reception will follow. [www.northfieldfuneral.com](http://www.northfieldfuneral.com)

Source: Northfield News  
<http://ads.southernminnmedia.com/southernminn-portal/listing/Lynn-Steen/W0011498.html>

See [Lynn Steen](#) in Wikipedia for more details on his background and activities