On April 4, 2008, Dr. William L. Duren passed away at the age of 102. A former Tulane student-athlete (A&S ’26) and professor, noted mathematician, brilliant innovator, and generous benefactor, Duren distinguished himself in every endeavor he undertook throughout his long life. Duren graduated from Tulane University in 1926. A standout in the classroom, he was also an accomplished athlete who played football and won the Southeastern Conference Championship in the high hurdles. After receiving his undergraduate degree, Duren continued his education at the University of Chicago, where he received his master’s degree and doctorate in mathematics in 1930. During World War II, Duren served in the Army Air Force as a civilian scientist. While stationed in Colorado Springs, he worked to improve the gunnery on B-17, B-24, and B-29 bombers. After working with some of the nation’s most brilliant mathematicians in the defense industry, Duren returned to Tulane as chair of the mathematics department.

In 1947 Duren was awarded a grant that allowed Tulane to establish a doctoral program in mathematics. Years later, he explained, “I realized that the loss of mathematicians in
war service, together with the new demand for applied mathematicians in government and industry, had drained our national resources at the Ph.D. level. There was both a need and an opportunity to get into graduate work to the doctorate. So our first postwar move was to establish a Ph.D. program in mathematics, Tulane’s first in arts and sciences.” The program became a model for similar programs subsequently established throughout the South. In 1955, Duren left Tulane for the University of Virginia (UVA), where he served as the Dean of Arts and Sciences and established himself as an innovator. Duren had a natural affinity for mathematics but developed a passion for university administration. One of his most significant accomplishments at UVA involved the restructuring of the admissions process. At the time, SATs were not required for prospective students, but those who did send in their scores were, on average, scoring below 500. Astonishingly, large numbers of these low-caliber students were receiving acceptances to the university. Duren realized this was a ploy to increase tuition-paying enrollment to a point that would allow the administration to cover the costs for new campus construction. Its unintended effect was to severely reduce the university’s graduation rate and harm the overall quality of education. To remedy this pattern, Duren blocked acceptance of transfer students with low grades, and required prospective students to take the SATs and demonstrate foreign language proficiency. Over time, UVA saw a significant improvement in its graduation rate.

Dr. Duren’s legacy lives on here at Tulane in a number of ways. Recently, the School of Science and Engineering created the Pendergraft William Larkin Duren Professorship, one of three Pendergraft Professorships in Mathematics. Dr. Peter Duren, William Duren’s son, visited Tulane’s campus in May to speak at the investitures of these three professorships. While in New Orleans, he was also a guest at a Newcomb-Tulane College breakfast reception that highlighted the William L. Duren Professorship Program.

“I discovered in my work in World War II that I had special talents as a generalist, combining the mathematical way of thinking with administrative duties and other disciplines.”

Years ago, the elder Duren established this program through a generous endowment. Tenured faculty in the liberal arts, sciences, and engineering departments
are eligible to apply to serve as Duren Professors. The Duren Professorship Program’s objective is to provide for an activity that is more oriented toward the principles of a well-rounded undergraduate education and less discipline-specific. Duren professors are offered maximum flexibility to develop and adopt distinctive pedagogies which are designed to encourage rewarding exchanges between professors and students. In essence, the program provides professors who have an interesting idea for a course or multi-disciplinary program the funding and the flexibility to fulfill their objectives. Recent Duren courses were led by Professors Gaurav Desai and Harry Howard (see sidebar on this page), whose students have appreciated the unique opportunities that Duren courses offer. Much of the program’s success can be attributed to the legacy of its founder.

**Duren Professorships Provide Unique Opportunities**

English professor Gaurav Desai focused his Duren course on African politics and culture. He encouraged his students to engage in a number of debates on ethnic and national identities, the relationship between Africa and its diaspora, and the other ways in which gender and class inflect political struggles on the continent. The resources provided by the Duren program allowed his class to make a bus trip to Jackson, Mississippi to visit the International Museum of Muslim Cultures. The museum’s exhibit on the “Legacy of Timbuktu” highlighted the history of the golden age of Timbuktu. Professor Desai was also able to meet with his students in small groups, allowing the Duren class to break down typical professor-student barriers and permit greater mentoring.

Another Duren course was conducted by linguistics and cognitive studies professor Harry Howard. His course introduced students to the principles of computer programming by allowing them to program their own small mobile robot in his robotics lab. Professor Howard explains that the lab’s goal is not the mechanical challenge of building robots, but rather the cognitive challenge of making robots do something interesting. With the demise of the computer science program, Howard realized that Tulane’s curriculum would no longer prepare students to collaborate with him in the lab, so he looked to the Duren professorship to provide an ideal venue for designing, testing, and introducing the programming of small mobile robots. The class used the Lego Mindstorms NXT robot and eventually advanced to the 3-D world of Webots.

An upcoming Duren course will be taught by psychology professor Michael Cunningham, who was recently named a Weiss Presidential Fellow for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching. His course, “New Orleans’ Youth: Resilience and Vulnerability in Tomorrow’s Leaders,” focuses on adolescent development in New Orleans and introduces students to the lives of public school adolescents. Cunningham plans on partnering with one of the local New Orleans schools to develop pamphlets and newsletters about resilience and vulnerability in New Orleans’ youth, which will then be distributed to parents, teachers, and community partners. He hopes his students will gain a greater understanding of why some students are successful, while others in the same classroom or neighborhood have more challenging experiences. In doing so, students will be able to critically examine empirical research and write scientific as well as translational commentaries.

More information about past and upcoming Duren courses is available online at http://college.tulane.edu/duren.htm.