



OFFICE OF THE CHANCELLOR

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

April 20, 2016

Dear Members of our Campus Community,

I am deeply saddened to share with you the news that our respected colleague and friend Professor Walter Kohn passed away late last night. His wife, Mara, and other loved ones were at his side in his final days and at the time of his passing. My wife, Dilling, and I were able to visit with Mara at her home this morning and extend our deepest condolences in person.

Walter first joined our faculty in 1979, when he came to UC Santa Barbara to serve as the founding director of our Institute for Theoretical Physics — now the Kavli Institute for Theoretical Physics. The Institute brings together leading scientists from throughout the world to work on major problems in theoretical physics and related fields. Under his leadership, it quickly developed into one of the leading research centers in physics, and has since been widely emulated internationally. Our campus is so proud that the building that houses KITP is named Kohn Hall in Walter's honor.

Previously, Dr. Kohn worked at Bell Laboratories in the early 1950s as an assistant to the group that developed the transistor. From 1950 to 1960, he taught at Carnegie Mellon University, after working at the Niels Bohr Institute in Copenhagen as a National Research Council of Canada post-doctoral fellow. He then joined UC San Diego's Department of Physics, holding a term as department chair, and remained until coming to UC Santa Barbara. Walter, who was born in Austria and became a U.S. citizen in 1957, received his bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Toronto, and his Ph.D. in Physics from Harvard.

The highlight of Walter's career came on October 13, 1998, when he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for his development of the density functional theory. Proudly, this made him the first of six Nobel Laureates at UC Santa Barbara since 1998. A condensed matter theorist who made seminal contributions to the understanding of the electronic structure of materials, he revolutionized scientists' approach to the electronic structure of atoms, molecules, and solid materials in physics, chemistry, and materials science. With the advent of supercomputers, density functional theory has become an essential tool for electronic materials science. About half of all publications in quantum chemistry make reference to his theory. Professor Kohn also made major contributions to the physics of semiconductors, superconductivity, surface physics, and catalysis.

He has received numerous other prestigious awards including the National Medal of Science, the Oliver Buckley Prize in Solid State Physics, the Davisson-Germer Prize in Surface Physics, the Feenberg Medal in Many-Body Physics, the Niels Bohr/UNESCO Gold Medal, and the Richard E. Prange Prize. He served as a member of the Department of Energy's Basic Energy Science Advisory Committee and as a consultant with the National Renewable Energy Laboratory. In 2005, he and fellow Nobel Laureate Alan Heeger produced a documentary on solar power entitled "The Power of the Sun," which was narrated by actor John Cleese and distributed worldwide in multiple languages. More recently, he had been working on macular degeneration, renewable energies, and global warming.

Beyond his research, Walter was deeply engaged in matters spiritual and societal. In 2001, he was the inaugural speaker for the Templeton Research Lectures on Science, Religion, and the Human Experience, sponsored by the Templeton Foundation and hosted by UC Santa Barbara. He spoke about the interaction between science and religion, and about how science and technology pose both great promises and great threats to mankind in this global age.

Professor Kohn was a mentor and role model for colleagues and students alike. Many have been inspired by his incredible life story and his work to promote tolerance and world peace. The tremendous impact of his life and work are beyond anything I can describe. As he put it, "Physics isn't what I do; it is what I am."

Professor Kohn will be dearly missed by our entire UC Santa Barbara family. Our hearts and thoughts go out to Walter's wife, Mara, his entire family, and his wide circle of friends. A public funeral service is planned for Tuesday, April 26, at 2 p.m. at Congregation B'nai B'rith, 1000 San Antonio Creek Road. We have been asked to encourage attendees to please carpool, as parking is limited. We are also planning to hold a campus memorial to celebrate Walter's life and to pay tribute to the remarkable depth and breadth of his contributions to our university, our community, and our world. Our campus flag will be lowered tomorrow in his memory.

Sincerely,

Henry T. Yang
Chancellor