

# William D. Altus, Psychology: Santa Barbara

1908-1986  
Professor

William D. Altus was born on May 28, 1908 in Burlington, Kansas. He attended Kansas State Teaching College, receiving the bachelor of science and bachelor of arts degree in 1930, and the master of science in 1932. After several years of teaching in the public schools, he returned to New York University to complete his Ph.D. degree in psychology in 1941. He then joined the faculty of Santa Barbara State College. His service to the College was interrupted by World War II during which time he served in the adjutant general's division, achieving the rank of captain.

At the end of the war, Professor Altus rejoined the College, and in the late 1940s and early 1950s, he played a major role in forming a psychology department. This occurred during the time period when Santa Barbara State College became a campus in the University of California system. Altus served as the first chairperson of the Department of Psychology of the University of California, Santa Barbara, from 1950-1955, and continued to play an active role until he attained emeritus status in 1975. He may aptly be described as the founding father of today's Psychology Department at UCSB.

Altus' major teaching and research interest centered on the measurement of individual differences in intelligence and personality, and the effects that these differences have upon human behavior. The courses for which he is especially remembered are "Conceptions of Intelligence" and "Biographical Psychology." In his own research, he was deeply involved in the study of a number of specific measures including the Terman Vocabulary Test, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), the Wechsler Intelligence Scale, the Army General Classification Test, the Individual and Group Rorschach Test, and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT).

Altus' most important contributions to the psychology of individual differences occurred during that period of his scholarly career when he launched a detailed investigation of the effects of children's ordinal birth position and their sex upon their subsequent dispositions and behaviors.

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Altus' work in this area was recognized by a number of eminent psychologists of this century, including Gordon Allport and Edwin G. Boring. Boring, in commenting to Altus upon his efforts in the area observed, "I should not have read you, did you not write so interestingly! And, of course, you are doing the essential thing in trying to push the problem along from the *what* to the *why*!" Altus was honored by his campus colleagues for his research on birth order when he was selected to be the seventh member of the faculty to deliver the annual Faculty Research Lecture.

Altus was a fellow of the American Psychological Association and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and was listed in *Who's Who in America*. He participated in the

Visiting Science Program of the American Psychological Association. He presented numerous addresses and papers at scholarly meetings, and served as a consultant to professional agencies at the local and national level.

In writing a letter of condolence to Grace Altus, Altus' wife, the senior members of the Psychology Department observed in regard to the legacy that he left the department, "In a fundamental sense, this department's increasing national and international eminence reflects Bill's early concern with excellence in both teaching and research." At the more general level, William Altus was fascinated with the quality of the human endeavor. He focused his career upon the study of the human intellect, attempting to find better ways to measure it, and to determine its sources and its relationship to human action. His efforts in these areas serve as his legacy to the intellectual community and to the world at large.

Robert Gottsdanker Robert Reynolds Charles McClintock