

In Memoriam: Dr. Walter M. Burnett (1937-2025)

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Walter Burnett



Walter Burnett (right) and Gaylord Cummins

It is with deep sadness that we share the passing of Dr. Walter Mucklow Burnett, a visionary leader, beloved teacher, and the founding chair of what is now the [Department of Health Policy and Management](#) at Tulane University's [Celia Scott Weatherhead School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine](#). Dr. Burnett passed away on June 8, 2025, following a cancer diagnosis the previous month. His legacy endures through generations of alumni, colleagues, and the transformative program he helped build from the ground up.

Dr. Burnett arrived at Tulane in 1968, recruited to launch a pioneering program in health services administration made possible by a W.K. Kellogg Foundation grant. At a time when Medicare and Medicaid were still in their infancy and hospital management remained largely unprofessionalized, Dr. Burnett envisioned something bold: a program that would integrate the principles of business and management with the mission of public health. By the fall of 1969, Tulane welcomed its first MPH class in Health Services & Hospital Administration—a program shaped by his innovative ideas and collaborative leadership.

Rather than follow traditional models that focused solely on hospital operations, Dr. Burnett championed an interdisciplinary approach. He forged a groundbreaking partnership with Tulane's School of Business, inviting faculty to teach finance, marketing, and accounting to future public health leaders. That decision not only differentiated Tulane's program from others across the country but also laid the

foundation for what would become one of the most respected and enduring health administration programs in the U.S. Today, the department boasts over 4,500 alumni working in health systems, policymaking, and leadership roles around the world—each one touched by Dr. Burnett’s legacy.

His influence extended well beyond Tulane. From 1975 to 1976, he served as chair of the Association of University Programs in Health Administration (AUPHA), where he helped shape national standards for health administration education. Those who worked with Dr. Burnett remember him as a deeply intelligent, forward-thinking scholar who never lost sight of the real-world impact of academic programs. In a 2018 article, Dr. Hugh Long, a Tulane faculty colleague who has since also passed away, remarked, “Walter Burnett wanted the hospital administration program to be different. At the time, it was a radical idea. But it worked.”

Dr. Burnett’s commitment to public service was just as profound as his academic contributions. During his time in New Orleans, he served as chair of the New Orleans Library Board, became the first male member of the local League of Women Voters, and supported numerous civic causes including the Urban League and Planned Parenthood. A skilled early adopter of technology, he used computerized databases to help local political candidates strategize and connect with voters.

Born in Schenectady, NY, in 1937, Dr. Burnett graduated with honors in history from Wesleyan University in 1959 and earned his Ph.D. from the University of Iowa in 1965 in an interdisciplinary program blending history, sociology, political science, and medical care administration.

Walter was also a global traveler and a devoted family man. He visited all 50 U.S. states and all but one continent, with professional and personal trips taking him to Colombia, Armenia, India, Scotland, South Africa, and beyond. Yet nothing brought him more joy than time spent with his children and grandsons—whether hiking in the Smoky Mountains, tending gardens in North Carolina, or researching family genealogy to preserve their history for future generations.

Through his graduate education, all of his Tulane faculty career, and his travel and civic adventures, he was supported by his beloved wife of 49 years, Harriet Falls Burnett, who passed away in 2008.

Dr. Burnett is survived by his children, Karen and Laird; daughter-in-law Susan; grandsons Jack and Ben; and the extended family of his late brother Robert.

In keeping with his and his family's wishes, memorial gifts may be directed to the Harriet and Walter Burnett Scholarship Fund at Tulane University:
giving.tulane.edu/burnett.

Dr. Walter Burnett was a builder—institutionally, intellectually, and personally. He helped shape the field of health administration as we know it and left behind not just a program, but a philosophy of education rooted in purpose, progress, and public good. He will be deeply missed, but his legacy continues in the work we do and the lives we touch.