

## D. Ransom Whitney

1915-2007



Donald Ransom Whitney is best known for the famous Mann-Whitney U Statistic.

He was born in East Cleveland, Ohio and held a BA from Oberlin College, an MA in Mathematics from Princeton University, and a PhD in Mathematics from the The Ohio State University.

After graduating from Princeton in 1939, he began his teaching career at Mary Washington College and then joined the U.S. Navy, serving from 1942 to 1946. While in the Navy he taught celestial navigation at Princeton, trained at Bell Labs, and served on the USS Atlanta in the Pacific.

Upon discharge from the Navy he came to Ohio State, received his PhD in 1946, and immediately joined the Mathematics faculty. There he established a working relationship with [Henry Mann](#), and together in 1947 they published their world-famous paper introducing the Mann-Whitney U Statistic. It soon became the most widely used non-parametric statistic for two-sample tests. It is reportedly the most widely cited paper in the statistics literature.

Whitney believed that statistics was an applied branch of mathematics and was meant to be used to help scientists in their research. Thus, in his first years at OSU, he established the Statistics Laboratory to provide consultation and assistance to faculty and students across the university. He personally assisted hundreds of scientists in many departments and colleges over the years. He published dozens of papers with them and became widely known and respected by faculty colleagues. Moreover, by his example and under his direction, statistics faculty members have similarly served in the Statistics Lab. Perhaps equally important was his belief that statistics should be taught to be used, and the Stat Lab has been the vehicle for graduate students in the department to experience an apprenticeship in consulting under faculty guidance. As a result the students have done very well in both the corporate and university job market.

While in the OSU Mathematics Department, Whitney served as Acting Chairman during a difficult time for that department, and he was instrumental in causing the university to act to turn the fortunes of that department around. [Arnold Ross](#) was hired to chair the Department in 1963, with Whitney serving as Assistant Chairman.

By 1970 Whitney had gathered together a critical mass of faculty members in mathematical statistics, and they had established a full range of statistics courses as well as a graduate degree program. The group then separated from Mathematics to form a Division and later a Department of Statistics. Whitney served as Chairman of

Statistics for the first eight years of the department's existence, and continued in the Department until retirement.

Professor Whitney served as a consultant to a number of corporations, especially testifying as an expert witness in utility rate cases. He was author or coauthor of three textbooks in mathematics and statistics. He was named a fellow in the American Statistical Association and the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

*Thomas Hern*  
*April 24, 2013.*

[This article is adapted from a tribute to Dr. Whitney upon his death in 2007 by his student and coworker, Thomas Willke.]

## References

"On a test of whether one of two random variables is stochastically larger than the other", *Ann. Math. Stat.* 18 (1947), 50-60.

Thomas Willke, "[Interview with D. Ransom Whitney.](#)"