Robert Denno, a world-renowned professor in the university’s entomology department, died at the age of 62 on Saturday.

Denno, known by many as the backbone of his department, died of a sudden heart attack while conducting entomology field research on Sapelo Island, Ga. An energetic and brilliant man known for his “Dennoisms,” his passion was his field and his students, his colleagues and friends said.

Thanks to Denno’s work over the past three decades, the university has risen to national prominence as a public research facility, colleagues added.

“He was the single strongest influence in making the university what it is today,” said Charles Mitter, chair of the entomology department. Through his charisma, energy and commitment to entomology and science in its purity, Denno “exemplified how the university has risen in stature to become an outstanding university with higher standards of excellence,” Mitter added.

Biology professor David Inouye said Denno’s outstanding work as a researcher helped him obtain substantial funding from the National Science Foundation for graduate and undergraduate research at the university, specifically in biology, ecology and entomology.

Denno was also known internationally. He wrote countless articles for science journals and, before his death, was working on editing the widely used textbook *Insect Ecology* with famous ecologist Peter Price. Denno was invited to speak at symposia all over the world, ranging from Sweden to the Philippines, mainly because he was “without a doubt one of the greatest entomologists, ecologists, and evolutionary biologists there were,” said Douglas Gill, a biology professor and close friend of Denno for over 30 years.

“[He was] a star whose cheerful brilliance will be greatly missed by all who knew him,” Gill added.
But what made him more than just a successful scientist was his energy, curiosity and thoughtful demeanor, friends said. He was often seen running through the halls of the Plant Sciences building, going from room to room, meeting strangers and greeting his fellow faculty members with a hearty handshake and a “Hey, dude!” said longtime colleague and professor emeritus Galen Dively.

His mannerisms, known affectionately as "Dennoisms," included an extensive vocabulary of words for insects as "drizzly" or "jazzy."

Alumnus John Carlson once asked Denno what the point was of the frustrating, dirty and tedious job of ecology, and recalls Denno said it was "because of the jazz." The "jazz" is "when you figure something out, when you discover one small part of how life works on this planet," Carlson said.

Denno started searching for the jazz at a young age. Born April 28, 1945 in Queens, NY, he moved to California where he "spent most of his time as a butterfly geek collecting insects," says Dively. He married his wife Barbara on August 14, 1965. After receiving his Bachelors of Science and later his doctorate in 1973 at the University of California-Davis, he worked at Rutgers University as an assistant professor.

He left Rutgers in 1976, as this university was reforming its entomology department, Mitter said. Denno joined the department and began recruiting top students and faculty; from then on, his work and friendly attitude impacted thousands, colleagues said.

Mitter said Denno "spent his last full day on earth collecting butterflies, doing what he wanted to do all his life."

An on-campus memorial service is being planned, with invitations spanning the world. His former and present graduate students have made a Google group in his honor, complete with pictures, stories and Dennoisms.

Denno is survived by his wife in Clarksville. He also leaves behind two sons, Erik, a graphic artist who lives in Manhattan, and Alex, a software engineer who lives in Virginia Beach with Denno's two grandchildren.

abloom@umd.edu