Carnegie Mellon University

Statistics & Data Science

Dietrich College of Humanities & Social Science

Special Invitation To

Stephen and Joyce Fienberg Memorial Lecture

Monday, April 22, 2019
McConomy Auditorium, Cohon University Center 4:00 to 5:30 pm.
Reception following the lecture: details TBA

We are pleased to welcome eminent statistician

Sir David Spiegelhalter

Chair, Winton Centre for Risk and Evidence Communication, University of Cambridge

Who will be delivering the lecture

‘‘Communicating statistics in an age of fragmented media and contested science”

Steve Fienberg had an extraordinary commitment to promoting the role of statistical science in public life. Never was such an influence needed more than now. Those who value quantitative and scientific evidence are faced with claims both of a reproducibility crisis in scientific publication, and of a “post-truth” society abounding in misinformation. Some scientists also exaggerate the importance of their work in order to gain publicity or advance an agenda. By considering the pipelines through which scientific and political evidence is propagated through the media, we will consider possible ways of improving both the trustworthiness of the statistical evidence being communicated, and the ability of audiences to assess the quality and reliability of what they are being told. Examples will include stories about the “risks” of burnt toast and coffee, and whether there is “no safe level of alcohol.”

RSVP by Wednesday, April 17, 2019 at [REGISTRATION]
Sir David J. Spiegelhalter is a British statistician with a background in Bayesian statistics. He jointly developed the Lauritzen-Spiegelhalter algorithm for exact evidence propagation in Bayesian networks, and then led the team behind the BUGS software for MCMC analysis of Bayesian models.

Formally Winton Professor for the Public Understanding of Risk, he is now Chair of the Winton Centre for Risk and Evidence Communication in the University of Cambridge, which aims to improve the way that statistical evidence is used by health professionals, patients, lawyers and judges, media, and policy-makers. He has contributed to many formal investigations, including the inquiries into Bristol children’s heart surgery, Harold Shipman’s murders, and the breast implant scandal.

He has over 200 refereed publications and is co-author of 6 textbooks, as well as The Norm Chronicles (with Michael Blastland), Sex by Numbers, and The Art of Statistics. He gives many presentations to schools and others, advises organisations and government agencies on risk communication, and is a regular commentator on current risk issues. He works extensively with the media, and presented the BBC4 documentaries “Tails you Win: the Science of Chance” and the award-winning “Climate Change by Numbers,” and in 2011 came 7th in an episode of Winter Wipeout on BBC1.

He was elected Fellow of the Royal Society in 2005, knighted in 2014 for services to medical statistics, and was President of the Royal Statistical Society for 2017-2018.

[Stephen (Steve) Fienberg] was born on Nov. 27, 1942, in Toronto. He earned his bachelor’s degree from the University of Toronto and his Master’s and Ph.D. in statistics at Harvard University, completing his studies in 1968. He and his wife, Joyce, met as undergraduates and got married in 1965. He came to CMU in 1980 after teaching at the universities of Chicago and Minnesota.

Steve brought his mastery of data analysis to bear on real-world problems such as law, education and criminal justice during a 36-year career at Carnegie Mellon University. He influenced policies nationwide in fields ranging from forensic science, to census-taking, to the prevention of scientific errors being published as fact. He wrote or edited scores of research papers and books. He co-wrote the well-regarded 1999 book “Who Counts?: The Politics of Census-Taking in Contemporary America.”

Steve was the only statistician serving on the National Commission on Forensic Science, which issued important recommendations on the uses, and limitations, of statistical and forensic claims in the criminal justice system.

Steve was a member of the National Academy of Science, where he oversaw numerous studies including a 2002 study that recommended against the use of lie-detector tests by intelligence agencies. He showed that polygraphs were far more likely to cast suspicion on the innocent than actually catch a would-be spy.

Steve Fienberg died on Dec. 14, 2016 after a long battle with cancer. He continued doing research and advising students throughout the course of his illness.
Steve’s wife, Joyce Fienberg, was a cherished presence in the Carnegie Mellon Department of Statistics & Data Science community, and a treasured friend to countless department members, visitors, students, and their families.

Born in Toronto, she earned a bachelor’s degree in social psychology at the University of Toronto. She joined the Pittsburgh Learning Research and Development Center as a research specialist in 1983, remaining in the job until her retirement in 2008. Her work included a variety of classroom-based research projects, examining - in part - what makes for effective explanations in a classroom setting and how teachers deliver them.

Joyce was a very generous and impressive woman. She made a memorable impression even on those who did not have the benefit of a long, close relationship with her.

While Steve worked tirelessly to bring out the best in his Ph.D. students, Joyce focused on making those students feel more than welcome, especially, in what, for some, was a strange and unknown land: Pittsburgh, PA.

Steve and Joyce traveled the world to various academic posts, conferences, research centers, and more. The couple also raised two sons, Anthony and Howard, and looked forward to visits from their grandchildren who often extended their stays for weeks with their doting grandparents.

Joyce was a dedicated member at the Tree of Life Synagogue, as well as doing volunteer work at organizations such as Family House, which assists patients and families who travel to Pittsburgh for medical care.

Joyce was one of the 11 victims at the Tree of Life mass shooting on Oct. 27, 2018.