

Ram Gnanadesikan wins 2009 Sacks Award



Ram Gnanadesikan, formerly with Bell Laboratories and Bellcore, was presented the Sacks Award at JSM 2009 in Washington, DC for "his pioneering work in multivariate data analysis, and for helping people to recognize the importance and the central role of data in statistics". Gnanadesikan was among a small group of statisticians who, along with Sacks, Ingram Olkin and others, pushed for creation of a statistical institute focusing on cross-disciplinary issues, leading directly to the establishment of NISS in 1990.

Ram's response to winning this prestigious award:

"I was very surprised to hear that I had been selected to receive the Jerome Sacks Award for Cross-Disciplinary Research in 2009. I am deeply honored to join the group of outstanding people who have received this award in past years. I regret that I am unable to be present at the ceremony to receive the award in person.

Unlike the previous awardees, whose careers were in academia, I spent my long career at Bell Telephone Laboratories and Bellcore, where cross-disciplinary research was cherished and nourished. In that environment, there were rich opportunities to interact with other research scientists and engineers, who were involved in exciting and often path-breaking research and projects. I started my career at Bell Labs in a department that was headed by John Tukey, who was certainly a role model for his wide cross-disciplinary interests and contributions.

Statistical science, by its very nature, provides rich opportunities for getting involved in a wide variety of cross-disciplinary activities. Qualitative and quantitative data abound in almost every scientific and technological pursuit. Large volumes of high-dimensional data are becoming more and more common. From collection of data to the analyses of it and interpretation of the results, statisticians can and do play a valuable role as members of teams that include subject matter specialists. In my view, the role of a statistician in cross-disciplinary research is different from consulting in that it requires a much deeper immersion in the subject matter field. Such a role is

exciting, with at least two resulting benefits. The first is the knowledge gained by the immersion in the subject matter fields in question. The second is the feedback from the applications into developing appropriate modifications of existent statistical methodology and, quite often, new techniques.

This award is particularly meaningful to me since I have known Jerry Sacks from his early career days as a faculty member at Columbia University in the late 1950s. His cross-disciplinary interests and significant contributions are well known and easily identified from his publications. One of these is the report of a panel co-chaired by Jerry and Ingram Olkin in 1988 entitled, "Cross-Disciplinary Research in the Statistical Sciences". Stimulated by this report, I became involved with a group of people, including Barbara Bailar, Janet Norwood and Ingram, in conceiving and planning for a national institute with a mission to emphasize the role of statistics in cross-disciplinary research. These plans ultimately led to the formation of NISS. It was very fitting that Jerry was chosen to be the first Director of NISS in 1991. From its early start, under his leadership and that of Alan Karr (who served as the first Associate Director and is the current Director), NISS has now become an established center embodying the original mission of nurturing and implementing the role of the statistical sciences in a wide variety of cross-disciplinary research. This too makes the award a very special one to me.

Thanks again to NISS."