

REMINISCENCES OF STEVE FIENBERG

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My professional relationship with Steve began in the early 1990s, when I came to NISS as Associate Director and he was a member of the Board of Trustees. We sometimes disagreed, or perhaps more accurately, I failed to grasp his wisdom. Something must have worked, though, because Steve also chaired the committee that selected me to be Director of NISS.

Our scientific collaboration arose in late 1990s, when I was PI, and he co-PI, on two grants from NSF's Digital Government initiative. These grants, as did the entire collaboration, stemmed from Steve's fervent belief that deep mathematics can be brought to bear on pressing personal and societal problems. The first had to do with web-based query systems now known as restricted data access systems (RDAS), and specifically with table servers. We were frontiersmen together in formulating and applying risk-utility frontiers, released table frontiers and unreleasable table frontiers.

With his usual prescience, Steve knew before data breaches were daily news that privacy and confidentiality are major concerns. We wrote only a few papers together, but we exchanged sometimes wildly complementary ideas for more than twenty years. I still remember a meeting with a number of federal statistical agencies at which what I proposed as a risk measure was exactly what Steve construed as a utility measure.

From the science grew a multi-year, multi-continent friendship that drew in Joyce and Senora as well. It mattered not whether the last encounter was three weeks or three years ago. Sadly, only one of the four of us now remains, but in keeping with the advice of Dr. Seuss, instead of crying because what ended, I smile because what happened.

Alan Karr

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