Workshop on Data Ethics
Submitted to: Alliance to Advance Liberal Arts Colleges (AALAC)
By: Grinnell, Haverford, Macalaster, Pomona, Wellesley

Description

Rationale and Intended Audience:
This workshop explores the societal issues associated with life in a data-driven world where automated forms of information processing affect people's lives in a growing range of ways. Credit card companies, for example, use personal data on purchases for fraud detection. Companies such as Predpol are using past crime data for crime prediction in order to help police departments decide where police should patrol. Schools, employers, and doctors are turning to data-driven systems to shape the future of education, the economy, and healthcare.

That said, it seems likely that our technical capacities have outstripped both contemporary regulatory regimes and public understanding of issues related to privacy, anonymity, bias, and discrimination in data-driven decision making. Looking ahead, technological innovation must be coupled with cultural and historical knowledge to understand the powerful tools we are developing to collect and process information. Liberal arts colleges provide an ideal environment for discussing this complex, interdisciplinary topic.

This workshop will bring together researchers working on the technical and cultural aspects of data analytics to consider key questions related to automated forms of data mining such as: How does access to large data sets and powerful forms of data analytics exacerbate power imbalances? Who is empowered and who disadvantaged? What are the benefits and drawbacks of new forms of social sorting? What forms of regulation might increase accountability and transparency of decision making in the era of big-data?

The hope is that attendees will leave with ideas about how to incorporate material from other disciplines into their teaching and/or their research. This might mean a computer scientist talking more knowledgeably about ethics in a machine learning class, or it might mean a class co-taught by a statistician and a political scientist. It might mean research projects that look at new and emerging forms of data collection, storing, and processing in order to critically evaluate data-driven forms of decision-making.

The co-organizers of this workshop include faculty from 5 AALAC colleges and from 5 departments (media studies, politics, philosophy, women's and gender studies, and computer science). The workshop will be held at Pomona College, where Mark Andrejevic is a media studies scholar who has written on the social, cultural, and theoretical implications of data mining and predictive analytics and Yi Chen is a computer scientist interested in algorithms and complex networks. The organizers will invite faculty from across the humanities, arts, social sciences and STEM fields to participate in the workshop. We will also incorporate participation from local participants at the Claremont Colleges and have allocated slots for both local and national participants in the proposed budget.

Schedule and Format:
The workshop will be a 1.5-day workshop in early 2017 that will be structured around two keynote speakers and 2 or 3 sessions on individual themes selected from: data driven discrimination and algorithmic bias; data mining for democracy: the politics of big data; frontiers of data-driven decision making; predictive analytics: the goal of pre-emption in security and commerce; the fate of privacy and anonymity. Each session will consider its topic from a variety of angles that might include: technical advances, social and ethical questions, possible research agendas, and pedagogical approaches to the topic.

Follow up:
Participants will fill out a written evaluation of the workshop on the final day and outline potential projects for future collaboration, including opportunities for co-teaching and for funded collaborative research. We will create a mailing list of all attendees and contact them during the Fall and Spring semesters of 2017-2018 to inquire about teaching and/or research outcomes from the workshop.

Workshop co-leaders and co-organizers
    Mark Andrejevic, Professor of Media Studies, Pomona College
    Tzu-Yi Chen, Professor of Computer Science, Pomona College
    Sorelle Friedler, Assistant Professor of Computer Science, Haverford College
    Diane Michelfelder, Professor of Philosophy, Macalester College
    Eni Mustafaraj, Assistant Professor of Computer Science, Wellesley College
    Jennifer Musto, Assistant Professor of Women's and Gender Studies, Wellesley College
    Barbara Trish, Professor of Political Science, Grinnell College