

Nandini Kannan

Degree(s)

MS in statistics from Madras University, Madras, India (1985)

MS in mathematics from the University of Pittsburgh (1988)

PhD in statistics from The Pennsylvania State University (1992)

Employer

The University of Texas at San Antonio

Current Title

Professor of Statistics



What or who inspired you to be a statistician?

My father has a mathematics and statistics background, so I was introduced to the area quite early. I loved probability problems, so when I had to make a decision between mathematics and statistics, I chose to pursue a statistics degree. I also met C. R. Rao at a conference in India when I was a student and he asked if I would be interested in pursuing a PhD! I decided to come to the United States to work with him.

What is the hardest or most interesting thing about being a statistician?

The applications are so diverse and far-reaching. I've worked with biologists, engineers, and psychologists. Every problem is different. You have to listen, learn a new vocabulary, and that can be a real challenge. It is what makes being a statistician so fascinating. The hard part of being a statistician is explaining what you really do for a living. People always bring up the "lies, damned lies" quote and you have to change their perceptions. We need to raise awareness of the discipline, the critical issue of quantitative literacy, and address the impact on science and society!

What is the best career advice you were ever given?

As part of the doctoral program at Penn State, I took a statistical consulting course. We had to work with clients (typically graduate students from other areas) to assess appropriate methodology for their projects. Professor Rosenberger gave me some simple pointers:

(1) Listen to the client, do not lecture.

(2) Projects are not opportunities to show off how much you know, but to provide statistically sound solutions that are simple.

This is advice I give my students every day.

What is a skill you would like to learn to be better at your job?

I love teaching and am constantly looking for ways to improve my lectures and make statistics more relevant. In this information and data age, all students need to understand and critically evaluate information and data to make better decisions.

Name one or two favorite books you have read and would recommend to others.

The Man Who Knew Infinity: A Life of the Genius Ramanujan by Robert Kanigel

A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens

Given the current economy, would you recommend statistics as a profession to a student?

Absolutely! *The New York Times* did a recent piece on statistics as a career. There is a real demand for individuals with expertise in designing experiments and analyzing complex data sets using the latest advances in computing.

What do you enjoy doing in your free time?

When I do have the time, I love to go bird watching with the local chapter of the Audubon Society. I also love listening to music and reading.