



New Fellow Spotlight

Francine Berman

Francine Berman is the Edward P. Hamilton Distinguished Professor in Computer Science at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 2019-2020 Katherine Hampson Bessel Fellow at the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University, and former Director of the San Diego Supercomputer Center. In 2009, Fran was the inaugural recipient of the ACM/IEEE-CS Ken Kennedy Award for "influential leadership in the design, development, and deployment of national-scale cyberinfrastructure." She was nominated by President Obama and confirmed by the U.S. Senate in 2015 to become a member of the National Council on the Humanities, and elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2019. Fran is a data scientist whose work focuses on the social and environmental impacts of information technology. Her interests are in the broad area of Public Interest Technology and focus on strategies that promote technology as a tool to advance society. Berman is a founder and inaugural U.S. Chair of the Research Data Alliance (RDA), a community-driven international organization of over 10,000 members created to promote data sharing and data innovation world-wide.

Fran is currently a member of the Board of Trustees of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, Council Member on the National Endowment for the Humanities, and Faculty Associate at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University.

She previously served as VP for Research at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, as co-Chair of the National Academies Board on Research Data and Information, as co-Chair of the National Science Foundation Computer and Information Science and Engineering Advisory Council, and as Chair of the Information, Computing and Communication Section of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, among other positions. From 2001 to 2009, she led the San Diego Supercomputer as the organization pioneered new data cyberinfrastructure to serve the national community of U.S. scientists and researchers.

What are you most looking forward to as a NAPA Fellow?

I'm honored to be elected a NAPA Fellow and am looking forward to working with the organization on issues at the interface of information technology and public policy. I think that there is a strong role for the public sector to play in ensuring that we get both the best out of today's amazing information technologies, and minimize their risks to the public and personal privacy.

What inspires you during these challenging times?

I've been inspired by the innovation of the creative community and businesses that have found a way to move on-site activities (dance, dining, gatherings) to on-line. It takes a tremendous amount of work to keep an on-site community going in cyberspace and I've been really impressed with those who have pulled this off.

What is your favorite class you have ever taught and why?

I'm really enjoying the current class I'm teaching – Data and Society – at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. We cover current topics -- data and COVID, data and the elections, data and discrimination, data and privacy, etc. The material is timely and the students are both engaged and thoughtful. It's been a great experience.

Who or what inspired you to work in public service?

As an academic who has collaborated with many agencies and colleagues in the public sector, I am inspired by the staff I've met who have dedicated their lives to the public good. It's hard when appointed leadership changes and I know many people at NSF, NIH, NEH, the Library of Congress, and other agencies who work tirelessly and through transitions to promote the public interest.

Which of the Academy's Grand Challenges resonate most with you?

Actually, all of them resonate with me and they all have strong technology components. The Challenges focusing on Data Privacy and Security and Social Equity are probably closest to the work I'm involved with these days.

What advice can you give to folks beginning careers in public service?

Probably the same advice I give to folks beginning careers in information technology: cultivate resilience, strategic thinking, and integrity. Do what you care about and invest in both your own success and the advancement of society.

Give generously to your community. Have fun.

What is the first concert you attended?

It might be "The Doors"! They were a "local" band in southern California when I was growing up and used to play around town. Jim Morrison was, well, as you would expect Jim Morrison to be... They were great in concert.