Ethical Framework for Learning Research in Higher Education Released

PACIFIC GROVE, Calif., June 16, 2014—A group of educators, scientists, and legal/ethical scholars has issued an ethical framework to inform appropriate use of data and technology in learning research for higher education.

A convening at the Asilomar Conference Grounds on June 1-4 included over 50 participants from 26 US academic organizations, including large research universities, broad-access institutions, religiously affiliated schools and liberal arts colleges. Officials from the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (PCAST) and the National Science Foundation (NSF) also attended as observers.

The purpose of the convening was to specify the ethical challenges and obligations that accompany research on higher learning in the era of big data. It was modeled after a 1975 event at the same site, during which 140 biologists, lawyers and physicians met to write voluntary guidelines for ensuring the safety of recombinant DNA technology. Another precedent was a 1976 meeting at the Belmont Conference Center in Elkridge, Maryland, which produced a document informing ethical considerations of research with human subjects.

Deliberations at this month's Asilomar convening were guided by the [Chatham House Rule](#).

"Our goal was to develop first principles for doing science and sharing innovations at a pivotal moment in higher education history," said [Mitchell Stevens](#), Associate Professor of Education and Director of Digital Research and Planning at Stanford, who organized the convention with [Susan S. Silbey](#), the Leon and Anne Goldberg Professor of Humanities and Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at MIT. "We want to apply the highest ethical standards of prior generations in ways that facilitate the timely improvement of higher education while preserving the ethical integrity of learners in this new world of ubiquitous data." Silbey added, "We are learning from the past and from our shared norms for creating knowledge to build new knowledge for the future."

The two-page convention document affirms two tenets for learning research:

Advance the science of learning for the improvement of higher education. *The science of learning can improve higher education and should proceed through open, participatory, and transparent processes of data collection and analysis that provide empirical evidence for knowledge claims.*

Share. *Maximizing the benefits of learning research requires the sharing of data, discovery, and technology among a community of researchers and educational organizations committed, and accountable to, principles of ethical inquiry held in common.*

The document also outlines six principles to inform decisions about data use and knowledge sharing in the field: *Respect for the rights and dignity of learners; beneficence; justice; openness; the humanity of learning*; and *continuous consideration* of the ethical dimensions of learning research.

Full text of the convention is available at [asilomar-highered.info](#)

Media Contacts:

Mitchell L. Stevens, Stanford University, mitchell.stevens@stanford.edu
Susan S. Silbey, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, ssilbey@mit.edu