

New Laboratory Dedicated to Advancing Knowledge on Decision Science

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By Doug Gavel, Harvard Kennedy School Communications Office

The emerging field of decision science now has a permanent anchor at Harvard Kennedy School. The Harvard Decision Science Laboratory – a cutting edge research facility dedicated to examining the factors affecting judgment and decision making – opened its doors with a gala ribbon-cutting ceremony and series of lab tours on Friday, Dec. 5.

Lab director Jennifer Lerner, professor of public policy and management, delivered opening remarks, explaining how the facility will serve three primary purposes – research, teaching, and outreach.

“These are difficult times, and the lab can make an important contribution as we develop the science for the quantification and assessment of risk and uncertainty,” she said.

Harvard Kennedy School Dean David T. Ellwood also delivered remarks, saying that while decision science is in its infancy, researchers can now “actually look at a systematic way at the factors that lead people to make different kinds of decisions, and ultimately to find ways in which people will make better decisions.”

As for its grounding at the Kennedy School, Ellwood said, “This is a decision sciences lab in a university setting that is about how to advance the public interest, how to make better decisions for a better world.”



Dean David T. Ellwood (R) at podium during ribbon-cutting ceremony. Lab director Jennifer Lerner (L) stands behind.

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Harvard University Provost Steven E. Hyman explained how the Lab will help advance knowledge in a burgeoning academic discipline that is questioning much of the conventional wisdom about decision making.

“We are very fond of our rational consciousness, but it’s a limited serial processor of a certain kind,” he said. “A lot of the business end of decision making is made unconsciously, and we often rationalize it, but I really hope that some of the people who are nostalgic for the days of when pure rationality was seen as the way we operate will come here and perhaps begin to understand some of the other processes that contribute to the way human beings actually behave.”



Staff member Eric Mattison sitting at laboratory control board.

The Harvard Decision Science Laboratory features 36 cubicles and three interview rooms. Removable partitions offer researchers the opportunity to run up to 12, 24, or 36 subjects at one time. Iris Bohnet, Kennedy School professor of public policy, and David Laibson, professor of economics at Harvard College, serve as the lab's associate directors. The laboratory space is available to Harvard researchers at the start of spring semester 2009.