

## **The Summer Institute in Economic Geography**

Jamie Peck (University of British Columbia) and Kris Olds (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

October 2008

Since 2003, the Summer Institute in Economic Geography (SIEG) has been providing an opportunity for early-career economic geographers to gather, in a week-long residential workshop setting, to discuss and debate a range of theoretical, methodological, substantive, organizational, and professional-development concerns in the field. To date, the Summer Institute in Economic Geography has met on four occasions: in Madison, Wisconsin (USA) in 2003 and 2006, in Bristol (UK) in 2004, and in Manchester (UK) in 2008. Now a fixture on the economic geography calendar, the institute meets on a biannual cycle.

The proposal for an institute crystallized in discussions at the *Economic Geography* editorial board in 2002, having been initially explored by a group of economic geographers active in the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN). At the time, a number of concerns were circulating. Now that the field is not so singularly centered, as it was in the 1980s, on a series of nationally oriented projects of industrial geography, economic geography has become a restless discipline in which theoretical orthodoxies and methodological conventions are persistently exposed to searching critique and re-evaluation. While this restlessness has certainly contributed to the dynamism of the field, it can present instructional and training challenges for even the largest of graduate programs. It also represents a new and potentially difficult terrain for intellectual exchange and “community-building” within economic geography, particularly for researchers entering the field.

No single initiative could address all these issues, of course, but a summer institute that brought together an international group of early-career economic geographers seemed like a step in the right direction. Beginning with financial commitments from *Economic Geography* and the WUN, additional funding for an inaugural meeting in Madison was secured from the National Science Foundation (NSF). The initial call for applications in 2002, which was circulated as widely as possible, promised that the institute would:

provide an opportunity to investigate leading edge theoretical, methodological, and research-practice issues in the field of economic geography (broadly defined), along with a range of associated professional and career development matters. This international meeting will be specifically designed to meet the needs of new researchers in economic geography, taking the

form of an intensive, interactive workshop for 30-35 participants. It will include facilitated discussion groups, field trips, debates and panels, training and skills development modules, and plenary sessions.

The call for applications was targeted to doctoral students nearing completion of their studies, postdoctoral researchers inside and outside the university sector, and faculty/lecturing staff within the first three years of their initial appointment.

### ***The summer institutes in practice***

Early in the planning process, a commitment was made to ensure that the summer institute would not be just another conference. Rather, its distinctive goals called for a distinctive approach, anchored around relatively small-scale, intensive workshops, lasting a full week. Delegates would participate in a range of panels, small-group sessions, and facilitated discussions, addressing a wide range of substantive, conceptual, practical, and small-p political issues. Instead of focusing instrumentally on the outputs of economic geography, the tried-and-tested method of academic conferences, the approach was oriented to the diverse *processes and practices* of economic geography—from mentoring to proposal writing, from research ethics to structuring a curriculum, from journal publishing to job interviews. The summer institutes have included sessions on:

- ***Theoretical debates and developments***: What are the next frontiers for economic geography? Does/should economic geography have a theoretical canon? What have been the causes and consequences of the discipline's cultural and institutional turns?
- ***Research practice and methodology***, including issues like researcher positionality and values, establishing "rigor" in the use of qualitative methods, and the contribution of mixed methods
- ***Teaching and pedagogic practice***, for example, designing and deconstructing curricula, and attracting undergraduate students to economic geography
- ***Scholarly practice***, from "meet the editors" sessions to discussions of effective conference presentation strategies; from writing successful grant proposals to the pros and cons of research collaboration
- ***Personal and professional development*** topics, including getting an academic job and securing tenure; the practice of "real-world" economic geographies in consultancies, government agencies, NGOs, policy advocacy organizations, and think tanks; managing the balance between family and work life; and coping with departmental politics.

The social dimensions of the meetings have proved to be no less important than the formal elements of the program. Efforts were made to allow ample time, in and around the formal program, for social events, informal interactions, and relaxed lunches. In the middle of the week,

field-trip days have included factory tours, visits with community development and economic-regeneration agencies, and explorations of “cultural economies.”

The somewhat experimental program, which has evolved gradually since the first meeting in 2003, provides a framework for participants to explore these issues, drawing both on the collective experience of the group itself and on the expertise of a small group of internationally renowned faculty (see Table 1). The willingness of senior scholars to participate actively in all aspects of this week-long residential program is crucial to the summer institute atmosphere. They are not simply there to do their “star turns,” but also to mix and mingle, and to provide advice and mentorship.

**Table 1: The Summer Institutes in Economic Geography**

	<b>Madison 2003</b>	<b>Bristol 2004</b>	<b>Madison 2006</b>	<b>Manchester 2008</b>
<b>Featured contributors</b>	Linda McDowell, University College London, UK	Trevor Barnes, University of British Columbia, Canada	Ash Amin, University of Durham, UK	Harald Bathelt, University of Toronto, Canada
	Phillip O’Neill, University of Newcastle, Australia	Ray Hudson, University of Durham, UK	Meric Gertler, University of Toronto, Canada	Sue Roberts, University of Kentucky, UK
	Erica Schoenberger, Johns Hopkins University, USA	Amy Glasmeier, Pennsylvania State University, USA	Victoria Lawson, University of Washington, USA	Jane Wills, Queen Mary, University of London, UK
	Eric Sheppard, University of Minnesota, USA	Andrew Leyshon, University of Nottingham, UK	Jessie Poon, SUNY Buffalo, USA	Henry Yeung, National University of Singapore, Singapore
<b>Organizers</b>	Jamie Peck & Kris Olds, University of Wisconsin-Madison	Adam Tickell, University of Bristol & Adrian Smith, Queen Mary, University of London	Kris Olds & Jamie Peck, University of Wisconsin-Madison	Neil Coe & Kevin Ward, University of Manchester
<b>Sponsors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Antipode</i></li> <li>• <i>Economic Geography</i>,</li> <li>• National Science Foundation</li> <li>• University of Wisconsin-Madison</li> <li>• Worldwide Universities Network</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Antipode</i></li> <li>• Blackwell</li> <li>• Economic &amp; Social Research Council</li> <li>• <i>Economic Geography</i></li> <li>• <i>Geoforum</i></li> <li>• Sage</li> <li>• University of Bristol</li> <li>• Worldwide Universities Network</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Economic Geography</i></li> <li>• National Science Foundation</li> <li>• <i>Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography</i></li> <li>• University of Wisconsin-Madison</li> <li>• Worldwide Universities Network</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Economic Geography</i></li> <li>• University of Manchester</li> <li>• Worldwide Universities Network</li> </ul>

An analysis of the participant profile of the first three meetings reveals a relatively heterogeneous group (see Table 2). Although the majority of participants possess geography degrees and/or work in geography departments, they practice a wide array of economic geographies, from feminism through institutionalism to geographical economics. Likewise, the summer institutes have attracted participants from outside what might be called economic-geography proper, reaching into fields like anthropology, management, development studies, political science, urban & regional planning, economics, cultural studies, geographic information science, education, sociology, and environmental studies. The majority of participants have been graduate students (60 percent), though there has also been a significant presence of postdoctoral researchers (12 percent) and junior faculty (29 percent). Forty-five percent of the participants have been women, and 31 nationalities (by citizenship or institutional affiliation) have been represented. Competition for places at the summer institutes has been intense. On average, there have been three applications for every available place (the limited number of places is filled on the basis of evaluations by an international selection panel). It is clear that even a regular biannual meeting will not be adequate to accommodate the pool of well-qualified and deserving applicants.

Participants have evaluated the meetings extremely positively. The following comments, the first a senior graduate student and the second a junior faculty member, give some indication of the take-home impact of the event:

As a student just finishing my prelims [comprehensive examination], the institute was really helpful to think about professional development, to meet other students who are struggling through the same conceptual issues, ... and to have very informative and open discussions with senior faculty about career trajectories and their thoughts on the discipline. Also, discussions with junior faculty were helpful for considering what comes after the dissertation and how to prepare for it.

For me, the most valuable impacts of the institute relate to the development of professional networks and to the exposure to a range of perspectives that could enhance my teaching and research. The relaxed setting of the institute was conducive for developing networks and for establishing a basis for informal exchange, which could last beyond the week-long meetings. (Indeed, most of the [subsequent] exchanges that I have had with [summer institute] colleagues and mentors have been on an informal basis, as in cases where they have recommended a useful contact or an interesting set of papers—exchanges that are hard to quantify or measure, but are nonetheless an integral part of professional development.) The institute's focus on broader epistemological, methodological, and pedagogical issues has helped me to reflect on my own teaching and research practices, on where they are situated in the field and how they could be developed.

**Table 2: Participant profiles for the first three Summer Institutes**

	<b>Madison 2003</b>	<b>Bristol 2004</b>	<b>Madison 2006</b>	<b>Overall averages (%)*</b>
<b>Gender</b>				
Female	16	14	20	45
Male	20	25	17	55
<b>Status</b>				
Graduate student	21	22	25	60
Postdoc researcher	4	4	5	12
Faculty	13	13	7	29
<b>Country of birth (institutional affiliation)</b>				
Argentina	1			1
Australia	1(1)	(1)	1(1)	2(3)
Belgium		1		1
Brazil		1		1
Canada	2(3)	2(1)	4(5)	7(8)
China			1	1
Colombia			1	1
Czech Republic		2(2)		2(2)
Denmark	1(1)			1(1)
Germany	4(2)	1(1)	3	7(3)
India	2(1)	1	1	4(1)
Indonesia		1		1
Ireland		1	1(2)	2(2)
Italy	(1)	1	2	3(1)
Japan	1	(1)	(1)	1(2)
Macedonia	1			1
Malaysia			1	1
Netherlands	(1)	1(1)	2(1)	3(3)
New Zealand		2	1	3
Portugal		1		1
Romania		1		1
Singapore		(1)		(1)
South Africa	1	(1)		1(1)
South Korea	2	3(1)		4(1)
Spain	1		1	2
Sweden			1(1)	1(1)
Taiwan			1	1
Tanzania			1	1
Turkey			1	1
UK	3(6)	10(13)	6(9)	17(25)
USA	15(20)	10(15)	9(18)	30(53)

\* Totals will not sum to 100 due to rounding

One of the “more-than-a-conference” objectives of the summer institute has been to enable the kind of enduring connections and collaborations that build what might be termed the discipline’s social capital. There is at least anecdotal evidence of some success here. An informal survey of alumni revealed that a substantial group has participated in research (31 percent) or publishing

projects (38 percent) with other summer-institute participants, while many have worked together as session convenors and panelists for conferences (46 percent). Substantial proportions of alumni have received career-development advice and mentoring (61 percent), or inputs on teaching (53 percent), from summer-institute colleagues and senior faculty. Eighty-four percent reported shifts in emphasis in their own research as a result of the institute. It has been clear from several reunion events (usually during disciplinary meetings in the US and the UK) that many alumni have found enduring value in the collegial and professional networks established at the meeting. Our informal survey strongly confirmed this. One respondent remarked that “many people I now talk to at the AAG are connected with the [summer institute].” Another commented that the institute has played a role in “renewing the community of scholars” in economic geography.

In recent years, the field of economic geography has, amongst other things, demonstrated an increased propensity to self-reflection and autocritique, punctuated by occasional anxiety attacks about issues like social relevance, epistemological integrity, and positioning within the academic division of labor. Without taking a position on these debates, the Summer Institute in Economic Geography offers a space for the next generation of economic geographers to formulate their own responses as they begin to reshape the discipline.

#### *Acknowledgements*

Thanks to Yuko Aoyama, Sharmistha Bagchi-Sen, Kim Coulter, Amy Glasmeier, and numerous Summer Institute participants for comments and advice on an earlier draft of this report. We would also like to reiterate our gratitude to those organizations that have offered financial support for the Summer Institutes: *Antipode*, Blackwell, *Economic Geography*, the Economic and Social Research Council, *Geoforum*, the National Science Foundation, Sage, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, the University of Bristol, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the Worldwide Universities Network.