

Summer Institute in Economic Geography 2016, Kentucky: report to the Expeditions Fund

Thanks to funding from the Expeditions Fund, I was able to travel to the University of Kentucky, in Lexington, to take part in the Summer Institute for Economic Geography. This five-day event brought several leading academics together with around 50 people who are just beginning their research careers. Most of us came from the UK and North America, reflecting the roots of geography, but the group also included people from Tanzania, China and other parts of Europe. The aim is to engage with key debates in the field and to get to know each other, creating a lasting community of researchers.



Some of the architecture in Lexington, Kentucky

In recent years, as economic geography has become more diverse, researchers have done much soul-searching about what defines the discipline. My thoughts on this were unexpectedly put to the test when the border official asked me, “What is economic geography?” Groping for a short answer under pressure, I replied: “It’s why some places are rich and why some places are poor.” She shot back: “And why is that?” By the end of the trip, I still didn’t have a simple answer – which is why we do this research!

But I did have a much clearer sense of how the field has developed over the years, moving from a ‘spatial science’ or a fairly narrow focus on deindustrialisation, to a much broader set of questions, influenced by feminist and postcolonial thinking, among many other ideas. Over the course of the week, we discussed a wide array of themes including:

- Financial crisis and inequality
- Diasporas, development and migrant labour
- Global firms and markets in energy and natural resources

A particularly helpful aspect of the event was sharing experiences and advice on building an academic career, and how to teach economic geography in engaging ways. We discussed how and where to publish our research, and to get people to read it. People shared tips on funding sources and how to make an application stand out among the hundreds being reviewed. I also learned about the recruitment process in the US, and people spoke openly about some of the challenges of moving around to take on short-term roles in the early part of an academic career. This created a really warm, supportive environment and bonds that will last long after the event.



The group outside the Toyota factory

We also got to see the local economy at work on several trips around the region. Kentucky is famed for horse racing, and we went to a horse farm. There we learned in great detail about how their most valuable stallion earns \$100,000 a day as a player in a global market for thoroughbreds. Later in the week, we visited the Toyota factory, which employs 11,000 people who take less than 24 hours to produce a car. This was a fascinating combination of labour-intensive production lines and futuristic robotic technology. And as committed economic geographers, we couldn't miss a crucial part of the Kentucky economy – the bourbon distillery. I stayed in Lexington for the weekend after the Summer Institute, and a trip to the university's arboretum showed me the plants and trees native to different regions of the state. I also had the chance to see close-up more of the beautiful countryside and wildlife such as vultures and turtles, on a canoeing trip. All in all, it was a brilliant opportunity to experience a new part of the world, think through my work in relation to wider research, and to get to know friends and perhaps future colleagues.



Staff member Gabriel showed us a \$15 million race horse