

Not So Lazy Days: Psychology Summer Institutes

September 30, 2013

This year I was fortunate to have the opportunity to participate in the Summer Institute in Social and Personality Psychology (SISPP), one of the many summer institutes in psychology that have emerged in recent years. As graduate students, many of us look forward to a relatively commitment-free summer, allowing us to catch up on writing and tie up loose ends before we dive back into another semester. But as the spring term was coming to a close, I began the task of reading and digesting a lengthy reading list in preparation for my intensive two-week summer institute course. Given the lustrous appeal of a summer free of the typical academic responsibilities, many graduate students may cringe at the idea of taking on additional responsibilities. However, the freedom offered by summer also provides a great opportunity to engage in some valuable enrichment.

Summer institute programs are available across multiple areas of psychology, lasting anywhere from a few days up to a few weeks. Likewise, the experiences offered and the financial investment to participate can vary widely. There are many things for graduate students to consider when they are in the process of deciding if and when to participate in an institute program. This article was written to articulate some of the many benefits that can be gleaned from participating in a psychology summer institute, including: advanced training, access to experts, and collaboration and networking opportunities. Moreover, summer institute programs serve a collective purpose of advancing high-quality collaborative psychological science — which ultimately has the potential to take our field to the next level.

Advanced Training

One of the most obvious reasons for participating in a summer institute is to gain training or exposure to an area of research not available on your home campus. This may involve practical training in new methodological and analytical approaches or a seminar-styled discussion of theoretical considerations. Practical training programs open doors for students who hope to advance their research by integrating new methodologies. For example, an institute in statistics can provide advanced quantitative training for students who would like to supplement the statistical instruction offered at their home institutions. Other programs provide advanced training and skills in burgeoning areas of methodology and design, such as neuroimaging technology or computer programming. More theoretically oriented institutes afford students the opportunity to learn about the current and future directions of the field from those at the forefront. These seminar-styled programs can provide students with a front row seat to ongoing theoretical debates in the field. Furthermore, by participating in summer institute programs, graduate students can develop valuable knowledge and skills that can be shared with faculty and students at their home institutions.

Access to Expertise

It is not uncommon for graduate students to explore a theory, methodology, or statistical issue beyond

the expertise of their graduate advisors. Participation in a relevant institute program can provide an opportunity for students to engage in discussion with faculty (and students) who do have such expertise. Beyond the structured training offered, students are surrounded by the bright minds of faculty and fellow students who are often more than happy to talk about research. Participants have likely run into some of the same roadblocks in conducting research, thus casual conversations can provide fruitful opportunities for swapping methodological solutions and generating new troubleshooting strategies. Faculty instructors are often willing to provide some individual mentorship and advice based on their expertise. Furthermore, some summer institute programs appropriate time for individual meetings between faculty and graduate students to discuss specific research questions. Initiating a research-related discussion with faculty (especially if you have a particularly compelling proposal) has the added potential to lead to longer-term mentorship or future collaboration.

Collaboration

In the intellectually ripe environment of psychology summer institute programs, it makes sense that new research collaborations might be inspired. In addition, many programs include a proposal or project portion that requires students to synthesize their new knowledge into the development of a new collaborative idea. This can be a great opportunity to implement newly acquired knowledge and obtain critical feedback on ideas from faculty experts and peers. Furthermore, developing a project in collaboration with institute peers lays the groundwork for future collaborations. It is not unheard of for students to follow through with their project proposals and maintain collaborative relationships with peers that last long after the summer has ended.

Networking

Another benefit of participating in psychology summer institute programs is the opportunity to connect and network with fellow graduate students at other universities (in the United States and around the world). In a highly collaborative science like psychology the value of networking with other psychologists (and future psychologists) cannot be overstated. Having other professionals in the field of psychology acquainted with you and your work can be an incredible asset when it comes to searching for jobs, post docs, or even publication opportunities. More than that, integrating yourself into a sphere of related researchers will help keep you abreast of the latest findings and new directions in the field, ultimately making you a better researcher.

The Makings of a Better Science

Clearly, the professional benefits of participating in summer institute programs are numerous. Students have the opportunity to gain technical knowledge, access professional expertise, and develop collaborative and networking relationships. Perhaps more important than any of these individual benefits is the value of these programs in building a thriving collaborative science. Summer institute programs unite top scholars with the leading academics of the next generation in a definitively collaborative environment. Recent analyses have shown that collaborative scientific research papers (across numerous scientific domains) are more widely cited and have a larger impact on the direction of the field (Wuchty, Jones, & Uzzi, 2007).

Moreover, within the field of psychological science there has been a call for increased value and emphasis to be placed on the development of collaborative research (Cacioppo, 2007; Carpenter, 2004). Institute programs often bring together faculty and graduate students from around the world, which has the added benefit of increasing cross-talk among psychologists globally. The value of such international communication and collaboration has been promoted by APS initiatives aimed at fostering the development of psychological science that is not limited by geographical boundaries (APS *Observer*, 2009; Carpenter, 2004). In an era where the true value of collaborative psychological science has yet to be fully recognized, I submit that psychology summer institutes are on the cutting edge of this movement, providing an example of collaborative science at its best. Ideas are shared freely, teamwork abounds, and collaboration across institutions (or even continents) is encouraged. I challenge you to come up with a more worthy use of your summer.

References

- APS *Observer* (2009). European Federations and APS unite to advance psychological science. *APS Observer*, 22, 22–23.
- Cacioppo, J. T. (2007). The rise in collaborative psychological science. *APS Observer*, 20, 1–3.
- Carpenter, S. (2004). Global impact: How international collaborations strengthen science. *APS Observer*, 17, 16–25.
- Wuchty, S., Jones, B.F., & Uzzi, B. (2007). The increasing dominance of teams in production of knowledge. *Science*, 316, 1036–1039.