

Where Converging Minds Freely Explore: Locating the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies

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THAT INSTITUTES for advanced study have in common the promotion of academic excellence, basic knowledge, and cutting edge ideas - and expectations of all that taking time, necessitating intellectual freedom, and requiring risk-taking - leads to particular challenges for them all. To be successful, the IAS have to meet the challenge of both maintaining academic integrity and independence and securing the core funding required to administer and operate over the long term. The former is often more difficult for university-based institutes to accomplish, particularly for the newly created ones, for they are more likely than the more established institutes to be expected to serve as flagships for their university hosts. Financial security, however, is usually more easily achieved for through university affiliation than as totally independent entities. Thus, we are seeing changes: two formerly “stand alone” institutes for advanced study have for financial reasons recently become university based: the Collegium Budapest - CEU Institute for Advanced Study and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford. One way or another, the scholarly reputation of most institutes for advanced study appears to benefit from the strength of reputation of the local university and its scholars and research centers, whether that university affiliation be formal, as in the case of the Radcliff Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard or the Technical University of Munich-Institute for Advanced Study, or only a matter of physical location (the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton comes to mind).

While most institutes for advanced study are university-based, one way or another, the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies, located at the University of British Columbia, is a unique example of a university-based institute for advanced study that is entirely endowment funded and named after an individual who is the sole external benefactor. That a local businessman would have the vision to fund an institute for advanced study is admirable and special, to be sure. But whatever the difficult challenges for maintaining the academic integrity and independence for institutes of advanced study mentioned above, being

beholden to a single donor (the University of British Columbia also provides an endowment but it has been shrinking to the point where financially it has little impact on the operation of the Wall Institute) presents its own challenges regarding independence.

Since its founding in 1991 with a large gift of shares in the Vancouver-based Wall Financial Corporation the Institute's mission has been to create collaborative, interdisciplinary, basic research programs for UBC scholars and research teams in all fields and at all stages of their career. A great deal of thought and research into the nature of institutes for advanced study on the part of the donor family and the university went into the planning process for the Wall Institute; the process lasted for several years. Not until 1996 was a permanent director appointed, and only in 1999 did the Institute find a permanent home for its programs and events. In addition to being fully endowment funded, the Wall Institute is governed by a deed of trust and its own board of trustees, and guided by an Academic Advisory Committee. From this funding base of periodic dividends on its share have flowed spaces for creative thinking and rare opportunities for UBC researchers and visiting scholars who are likely to make the breakthrough intellectual and scientific discoveries over the long term.

Like most IAS, the Wall Institute strives to be as different from a university as it is from the specialized research institutes that populate the university. With its mission to promote excellent, collaborative, interdisciplinary thinking and research across multiple disciplines, for scholars in all fields and at various stages of their career, the Wall Institute has become a successful magnet for outstanding scholars from across the university, and also their colleagues internationally, who desire to exchange ideas as and engage in unconstrained thinking. It remains today the only such institute in Canada inspired by the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, thus devoted to bringing together scholars for the free pursuit of learning and research at the highest levels.

At the Wall Institute these intellectual goals are accomplished through its inspiring location and facilities and its integrated program of talks, exploratory workshops, speakers' series, international partnership exchanges and colloquia abroad, and residential scholar programs. Through the events and research opportunities for individuals and teams at the Institute, short-term strategic alliances with on-campus research initiatives, and gala public talks given to the larger community, new groups and individuals at the university, the Wall Institute has quickly become the senior research institute at the university. The scale of its programs is relatively small, but the intimacy as a result seems to be one of the Wall Institute's real strengths. There are today thousands of researchers from around the world who have participated in events at the Wall Institute and close to 400 Wall Faculty Associates at the University of British Columbia, scholars who have achieved that status by virtue of being Principal Investigator on a Wall Institute award or a member of a Wall Institute committee.

At the Wall Institute we think that one can have the sorts of conversations that are often difficult to achieve under the current demand in the world for short-term pay-offs. University of British Columbia senior scholars who spend a year at the Institute under the Distinguished Scholar Program, for example, praise the enormous value of the physical, contemplative, and stimulating space it provides to focus on longer term projects and opportunities to network, complete books, hold workshops, host speakers series, write research and teaching and learning enhancement grants, file patents, produce artistic works, and develop new research collaborations and networks, among other things.

Many personal honors and distinctions have, as one might expect, flowed from the Wall Institute's residential programs, which are targeted at individual scholars. One former Distinguished Scholar in Residence in science has credited the Wall Institute with the critical support needed to finish a book, *The Ecology of Adaptive Radiation*, with Oxford University Press, he otherwise could never have; the publication turned out to be the most influential work he has ever produced, with over 1,500 citations over the years. Another senior residential scholar wrote and published a paper in *Science* based on the work undertaken at the Wall Institute, and also completed his new book, *Adaptive Diversification*, with Princeton University Press. These important scholarly accomplishments contributed to his nomination as a Fellow of the American Society for the Advancement of Science. There are many stories such as these, not only at the Wall Institute, but all institutes for advanced study, and the retelling of them here has a reinvigorating effect on one's hopes and dreams for the future of such institutes.

The Wall Theme Development program, which funds short and multi-day exploratory workshops, and multidisciplinary research teams for three-years, often prove to be as intellectually rewarding as our residential programs, though as always it is not expected that all the awards will lead to spectacular breakthroughs or further research and honors. It is enough in the case of the small grants to explore new topics or build new research agenda. More is expected of the larger workshops and multi-year research team grants to university researchers, which are required to involve top-level researchers external to the university as participants; the Major Thematic Grant is in addition expected to lead to the University of British Columbia becoming a center for research on the topic of the grant. One principal investigator on a Wall Exploratory Workshop award has spoken of how the research ideas and topic that began with receiving the workshop award was a formative influence in forming a major organization Canadian Prediction in Ungauged Basins (PUB), and PUB-related activities nationally and internationally, and the formation of a new, high-powered research network. The ideas formulated at the workshop eventually culminated in a breakthrough discovery and ground-breaking paper that was published in the top journal in the field of hydrology. Another notes that her three-day Exploratory

Workshop, “Arts-Based Methods in Health Research,” led within two years to a great burst of academic activity: a grant from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and from the UBC Teaching and Academic Growth fund, the preparation of three other applications for grants, three peer-reviewed publications and one artistic work, several conference presentations, and several workshops and seminars.

Even the Theme Development awards, which simply provide lunch and meeting space for a day to bring together University of British Columbia researchers around a theme, have from time to time produced significant material results: one scholar is, for example, co-editing a collection of essays for a book on the history of children and youth; the desire to produce such a book, she reports, arose directly from discussions at the one-day Wall Theme Development Workshop she led when she was a Wall Early Career Scholar. The programs are intended to mesh: to apply for a Wall Major Thematic Grant one must have held a Wall Exploratory Workshop, which may, in turn, have been preceded by holding a Theme Development Grant. Several Wall Early Career Scholars have later in their careers become Wall Distinguished Scholars in Residence. Neither the thematic nor the residential programs operate with pre-determined topics or questions in mind; rather, applicants are free to put forward their own topics, with the requirement that their projects involve interdisciplinary approaches. This “bottom up” practice in granting awards is not usual for most institutes of advanced study, but it fits well with the spirit of the Peter Wall Institute, with its promise to provide a place “where converging minds freely explore.”

The Wall Institute is unique in other important respects because it opted from the beginning to forego the usual (for institutes of advanced study) major program of inviting dozens of external distinguished scholars to spend up to a year at the Institute. Instead, the Wall Institute focuses on an integrated set of thematic and individual programs for UBC scholars and their international colleagues. In the past several years we have become increasingly interested in interacting more formally with the international community. We have, for example, introduced a modest program involving on average one invited Distinguished Visiting Professor a year to spend a short but extremely interactive time at the Institute, giving talks, workshops, and seminars, and interacting with interested faculty and graduate students across the campus and off-campus centers. Distinguished Visiting Professors to date have included Drs. Arif Dirlik, Historian, Duke University (who completed a book at the Institute and led a Wall Summer Institute on the Future of Agrarian Society that resulted in a field trip to China and an edited collection of papers); Roald Hoffman, Nobel Laureate in Chemistry, Cornell University (who among other things attended and spoke at the British Columbia début of his play at the university’s theatre); Barbara Grosz, Computer Science and Dean, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard; and, from the College de France, Paris: Alain Berthoz, Physiology

(who is returning to the institute for a month in 2011), Stanislas Dehaene, Experimental Cognitive Psychology, and Philippe Sansonetti, Microbiology and Infectious Disease.

A current strategic direction concerning internationalization at the Wall Institute is to create a small number of meaningful scholarly partnerships among the international network of institutes of advanced study and similar institutions in order to collaborate on and expand our mutual efforts of discovery and enlightenment. The Institute has forged dynamic partnerships with one of the forerunners of all institutes for advanced study, the Collège de France, established in 1530, and also with one of the newest, the Technical University of Munich -Institute for Advanced Study, founded in 2005. The Wall Institute served as a benchmark for the planners of TUM-IAS and is represented on its international Board of Trustees. The Wall Institute has also partnered with Africa's sole institute for advanced study, STIAS, in Stellenbosch, South Africa, founded a decade ago.

Under the four-year, renewable memoranda of understanding with our international partners, the Institute is able to welcome each year several outstanding professors from the Collège de France within the context of its invited Wall Distinguished Visiting Professor program, and in turn, the Collège can receive nominations for up to three senior Faculty Associates of the Institute for one month under the rubric of its International Exchanges program. The Stellenbosch Institute will appoint up to five senior Faculty Associates of the Wall Institute for fellowships of three months or longer. The Wall Institute's arrangement with TUM-IAS facilitates annual brief exchanges of small, interdisciplinary research clusters with interests in a common topic. Over the past three years, three reciprocal exchanges of senior faculty from the Peter Wall and the Collège de France have taken place, and two Wall Faculty Associates have held six month fellowships at STIAS.

All three international partner institutions have over the past three years co-sponsored and hosted Peter Wall Colloquia Abroad. The Colloquia Abroad is a new, unique program specifically directed at enhancing relations with our international partners, increasing the international reputation of the Wall Institute, and expanding opportunities for international research collaborations for Faculty Associates of the Institute. Like the Wall Exploratory Workshops held at the Institute, Wall Colloquia Abroad are international meetings directed by Wall Institute Faculty Associates to which scholars from a range of disciplines, from UBC and abroad, are brought together for a two to four days to develop and further research agendas on cutting edge topics. Holding Wall Institute meetings at institutes in other parts of the world have both created more lasting, institutional connections and enabled key researchers to attend who might otherwise not be able to do so. The importance of the topics for these international, interdisciplinary colloquia is evident from their titles: "Coherence and

Decoherence at Ultracold Temperatures”; “Multimodal and Sensorimotor Bionics”; “Many Voices One Song: Health-Promoting Schools: Evidence, Strategies, Challenges, and Prospects”; “The HIV-Exposed Infant: How Can Excess Morbidity and Mortality be Explained?”; “Commensal Microbiota: From Homeostasis to Disease”; “Continuity in Energy Regime: Failed Transition and the Persistence of Sustainability (discussing the energy situation in Europe over a 400-year period); and The Role of Gap Junction Proteins in Health and Disease (scheduled for 2012).

A second new strategic direction for the Wall Institute has a quite different aim: to reach out to the greater Vancouver community with a new downtown public lecture series called the Wall Exchange that brings prominent writers, researchers, and humanitarians to Vancouver. Inviting the public to “Join the Conversation,” The Wall Exchange has been planned as a community program to provide a public forum for the discussion of key issues which impact us all, including, for example, genomics, global security, and children at risk. Events are to be held each year in the Spring and Fall that are intended to feature a well-known public figure who has contributed new knowledge to the Arts, Sciences, or Humanities.

Launching The Wall Exchange series in May 2011 was an evening with the American pioneering scientific researcher, and one of the most influential individuals in the world, J. Craig Venter, sequencer of the human genome. Dr. Venter engaged an audience of over one-thousand, including hundreds of young people, with an illustrated talk on his new research endeavors: the construction of the first synthetic cell and the global ocean sampling expedition- sequencing and analyzing the DNA of the microorganisms living in these waters. The Wall Exchange for the fall of 2011 features Derek Gregory, a renowned political geographer who is also the newly-appointed Peter Wall Distinguished Professor. Dr. Gregory spoke on “The Everywhere War”- wars conducted in the shadows of 9/11 that have much to tell us about the future of violence, security, and everyday life. He argues that what he calls “the everywhere war” has changed the very nature of war in the early twenty-first century. The killing space still has a terrible intimacy, but we now live in a world where death can be delivered across vast distances and successive American administrations openly speculate about how to conduct “war in countries we are not at war with.” All this makes it hard to see where war ends and peace begins.

In closing, it is important to at least mention the importance of the quality of facilities to the work and success of the Wall Institute and all other institutes of advanced study. In order to move into Club, in 1999, Institute engaged in extensive renovations to create conference and other meeting rooms, scholars’ offices, and guest rooms for visiting researchers. Renovations large and small have been going on ever since to both improve amenities and accommodate changes in Institute programs. The Institute’s conference facilities are available

to the university community for research-related events, which brings many individuals and groups to the Wall Institute who might not otherwise learn about our programs and events. It is a strong advantage to the Institute to be located at the University of British Columbia, ranked by international survey among the world's top research universities, and on the prime site on the university campus: at the cultural heart of the place and overlooking the sea and the coastal mountain range. The university's prime location is in Vancouver, which is itself repeatedly cited as among the world's most livable cities.

Regardless of the attractiveness of its facilities and surrounding physical context, of course, it is in the end the quality of the individuals who engage with the Wall Institute, and of the adjudication process and committees that engage in selecting them, that creates the sort of institute for advanced study that most such institutes strive for. At the Wall Institute, a single, multidisciplinary committee evaluates applications for each program, regardless of the disciplinary backgrounds of applicants: theoretical physicists read proposals from English literature specialists; political scientists evaluate computer scientists. It all seems to work. The final decisions of each program committee, chaired in all cases by the Institute's director, are arrived at collaboratively and with unanimity. The most difficult aspect of the evaluation process seems to be one that perhaps we all, at institutes for advanced study everywhere, grapple with: standards. How does one strive for the highest standards of scholarly excellence when also faced with pressures to operate with equanimity? This issue of standards is, for the Wall Institute at least- as with all of our conversations- ongoing.

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