

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



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The Awards Committee
The University of Minnesota Alumni Association
Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost
c/o Department of Geography
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Dear Members of the Award Committee,

One day in late September, 1991, John S. Adams took a short break, stepped out of his office, and walked down the short corridor of the third floor of the Social Sciences Tower to discuss a minor record-keeping issue with one of his teaching assistants. The person in question wasn't around when John poked his head into the graduate students' suitably chaotic and crowded office, but I happened to be there. We struck up a conversation that gave me an unexpected but overdue opportunity to meet him. John had been on leave when I first entered the graduate program in Geography at Minnesota, and I had yet to get up the nerve to make an appointment to go see "JSA." And I was intimidated. As an undergraduate at Penn State in the late 1980s, I was fortunate to work with Peter Gould, who had co-authored *Spatial Organization: The Geographer's View of the World*, a landmark of our discipline's "Quantitative Revolution" that had, as with so many other revolutions, become the target for new generations of intellectual and political challenge. I was a bit shy in the face of all of these paradigmatic struggles, and my experience at Minnesota up to that point was the paradoxical, paralyzing blend that is familiar to so many new graduate students in the humanities and social sciences: a blend of unbounded energy and equally limitless naiveté, of the unfocused sort that earns instant membership in the Thesis Topic of the Month Club. I needed direction, or at least a good kick in the pants.

On that otherwise unremarkable September day in 1991, John and I fell into a casual conversation about my interests, which involved a search for some way to synthesize the divergent currents of the discipline that were influencing me: critical structuralist and post-structuralist perspectives on social inequality, and a suite of methodological traditions that had come to be regarded as

epistemologically orthodox and ‘old school.’ I’m not sure if the things I said to John that day made any sense, but I do remember how the conversation made me feel. John took an immediate, genuine interest in what I was trying to do, found the kernel of valuable insight in otherwise diffuse thinking, and challenged me to clarify my theories, principles, and methods. And he challenged me to deliver. *Choose a clear direction, but always remain open to new paths. The scholarship doesn’t exist until it’s written down. If you don’t feel a little bit nervous when you’re putting it out there, then you’ve probably waited too long to try. Triple all time estimates, and then get to work.* It was precisely what my scattered and yet passionate geographical imagination needed: not long after that, I asked him to be my adviser, and I had the good fortune to work with him for four years, through my M.A. (1992) and Ph.D. (1995).

John is a selfless and demanding scholar who has worked to strengthen graduate education in many ways. He pursues constant and energetic innovation in graduate teaching, always striving to balance the uncertain risks and possibilities of new theoretical currents with the enduring strengths of established scholarly traditions. He maintains a tireless commitment to the development and vitality of graduate programs, and he has always worked to maintain the productive tensions between pure, theoretical inquiry and the applied missions of professional

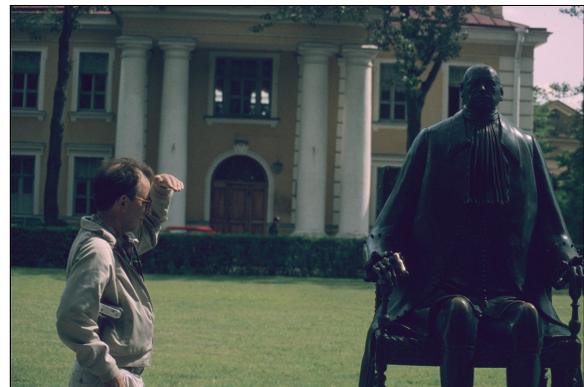


Warsaw, June 1992

programs in planning, public affairs, and the geographical information sciences. He nurtures students in research, scholarship, and professional development in ways that impart lasting lessons of practice for a new generation, encouraging us to renew our commitment to the responsibilities of the engaged public intellectual. He sets the gold standard for supportive and respectful graduate advising, and has helped mentor students who are now working in the academy, the public sector, and private corporations across the globe.

I feel privileged to be part of the large, diffuse community of those who have worked with John at various points in his distinguished career. When I put the finishing touches on the preface to my doctoral dissertation in 1995, I wrote, “John S. Adams, my advisor, has given me more than I can possibly acknowledge. John’s patience and wisdom helped me to learn and grow in my years of graduate study, and working with him has been my most valuable professional experience. In the seminar room, on the streets of Chicago, and on

St. Petersburg, July 1992

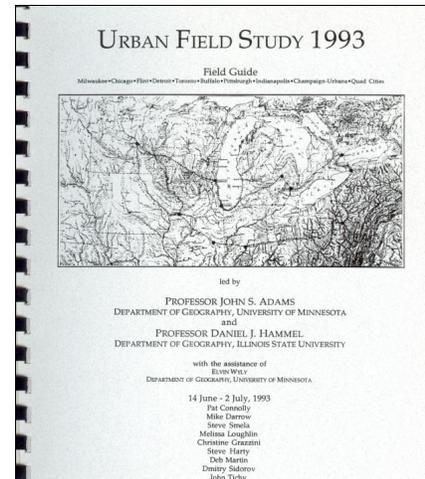


the buses of Kirovsk, John showed me how to study, how to really *see* the rich tapestry of the city. John maintains a tireless commitment to his students, and his brand of leadership in the University and the community is all too rare these days.” I now find myself in the academy as well, called upon to make my own contributions to graduate education. Every time I work with a graduate student, I draw on the deep well of insight, principle, guidance, and standards I learned from John. I’ll never feel that I have any chance of measuring up; but that recognition is what drives me to work harder to improve the graduate experience in any way that I can.

John has made many contributions to graduate and professional education over the years, and of course these are summarized by the scores of administrative and committee leadership positions he’s held. But two elements of John’s commitment merit special consideration. First, John established a legendary tradition of integrating theoretical and scholastic rigor with on-the-streets field experiences that captured the very finest heritage of human geography (and urban sociology and related fields as well). By the time I arrived at Minnesota, John’s field courses were widely recognized as the gems of the graduate program. Typically, about a dozen graduate

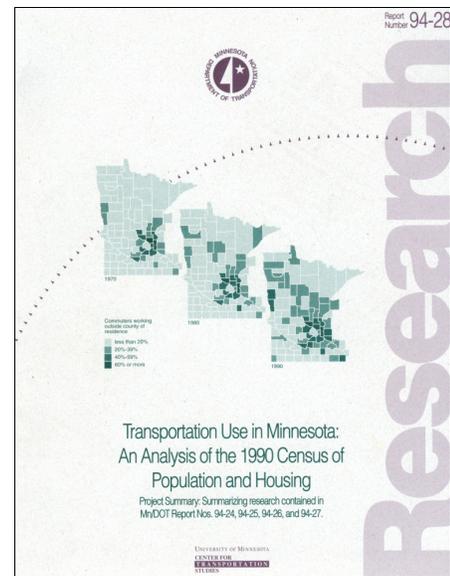
students (and perhaps a few outstanding undergraduates) participated in a demanding, exciting seminar in the Spring; everyone would dive into intensive reading of theoretical, empirical, and policy literatures chosen to highlight key debates relevant to particular urban settings; everyone would contribute to a field guide with chapters for each site along a field tour itinerary; and each student would take responsibility for establishing initial contacts for each stop on the trip. Going into the field in the early summer, then, offered a particularly rich, visceral, and vivid experience: M.A. and Ph.D. students gained a deep appreciation for the contextual variation of broad social forces portrayed in the academic literature; and they gained insight into the local dilemmas as seen by local scholars and policy-makers working in particular contexts under specific constraints. I’ve lost count of how many of these field expeditions John designed and led.

What I do know is that the enterprise is an enormous contribution to the graduate school experience in Geography at Minnesota, and that the job is a thankless one. So many of the structural incentives of the academy work against this kind of graduate teaching and mentoring. I had the privilege of joining two of John’s field expeditions in the early 1990s: one examined



urban and industrial restructuring in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, taking us through Poland, Belarus, and Russia in June, 1992; another focused on urban and regional restructuring in the aftermath of recession in the North American rustbelt, in June, 1993.

Second, John undertakes research that engages students in intellectual development and policy relevance in ways that represent the very best ambitions of the public university. My own experience involved research assistantship work for John on a series of studies of regional growth, transport and commuting trends, and labor market inequalities in the Twin Cities and across the State of Minnesota. I began working with John on a research contract he had secured with the Minnesota Department of Transportation, and over the next few years he guided me through the many opportunities and constraints of sponsored research. The principles that guided John's work on those projects, and his careful advice and supervision, taught me how to pursue basic theoretical inquiry while also responding to the more applied questions of public officials and planners. This balance has always been a difficult negotiation between the dangers of politicized or policy-driven inquiry and the stereotypical attacks on the isolated, elite ivory tower. For many years, John has sought out research projects to highlight this balance between relevance and theoretical rigor, and he has worked closely with M.A. and Ph.D. students to deliver high-quality research on time and according to budget. Students who come through this experience gain a rare and valuable perspective on the central mission of the public, land-grant university in the United States. They learn about deliverables,¹ fully-burdened rates, indirect cost return, and all the other



¹ In the case of my research assistance work with John, our deliverables included a series of reports published by the Minnesota Department of Transportation: John S. Adams and Elvin K. Wyly (1994), *Commuter Linkages Among Counties in the Twin Cities and Greater Minnesota* (Report No. 94-02); John S. Adams, Melissa J. Loughlin, and Elvin K. Wyly (1994), *Long-Distance Commuting in Minnesota* (Report No. 94-24); *Transportation-Based Classifications of Minnesota's Counties and Metropolitan Area Tracts* (Report No. 94-25); *Data Sources for Travel Behavior Research: A Case Study of Reverse Commuting Among Low-Income Minneapolis Residents* (Report No. 94-26); and Elvin K. Wyly (1994), *Modeling Commuter Flows Among Minnesota's Local Labor Markets, 1970-1990* (Report No. 94-27). We also published our work in Elvin K. Wyly and John S. Adams (1994). "Growth on the Fringe: Commuter Links in the Twin Cities and Beyond." *CURA Reporter* 24(3), November, 1-5; John S. Adams, Barbara J. VanDrasek, and Elvin K. Wyly (1996). *Minnesota's Housing: Shaping Community in the 1990s*. Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota (excerpted in the *CURA Reporter* and reprinted in *Equal Eyes: Journal of the Minnesota Association of Assessing Officers* 19(70), Fall 1996, 10-18). Some of this research subsequently contributed to John's later publications in our field's flagship journal, the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. My experience working with John on sponsored research of this type taught me how to deliver a great deal of research on a very small budget, a lesson that in later years has come back to haunt me (since many administrators are concerned with maximizing the dollar value of the budget coming into the university). John also taught me that long discursive footnotes and heavy self-citations such as this footnote are unforgivably self-indulgent, and yet essential in the increasingly competitive climate of the academic arms race.

painful minutiae of legally-binding contracts; but they also learn the deep scholarly responsibilities of the choice of theory and method that will inform a particular policy. They learn how to undertake clearly-delimited research on a schedule that yields carefully-specified deliverables. But of course they also learn from John's graduate seminars that such a formulaic approach can be dangerous: the academy is best when scholars are encouraged to pursue genuine, risky innovation, far beyond the boundaries of easily-defined policy questions that might be rendered irrelevant within only a few years.

I hope these comments are helpful as you evaluate nominations for the Award for Outstanding Contributions to Postbaccalaureate, Graduate, and Professional Education. I could write much more about John's hard work during the years in which I was fortunate to work with him, but I really don't have the time. We are in the crescendo of the semester. Undergraduates have the deer-in-the-headlights look that I remember all too well. Master's students are just emerging from the shock to the system otherwise known as their first term in residence at UBC. Doctoral students are preparing for qualifying exams, which in normal translation means that they are reading, not sleeping. I have to meet with a few of my students in an hour. I'm in awe of the unbounded possibilities of their brilliance, passion, and commitment to advance knowledge, policy, and practice in the years ahead. But they are under pressure, and they need guidance, support, and a measure of respectful dissent and disagreement. John sets the gold standard on how to provide these things. I'll spend the rest of my career trying to measure up, and so my students are in debt to John almost as much as I am.

Sincerely,

Elvin K. Wyly, Ph.D.
Associate Professor