

ISTR Inaugural PhD Seminar

By Lesley Hustinx, Ghent University, Belgium and Chair of the 2012 PhD Taskforce

ISTR held its Inaugural PhD Seminar immediately prior to the 2012 conference in Siena. The seminar is part of the Society's mission to build the field of third sector research and focused on providing extensive intellectual and methodological advice on the participants' doctoral research, introducing students to the main theories and recent developments in the field, guiding reflection upon publication and career strategies, and providing a unique opportunity to network with junior and senior scholars within the international research community.

A PhD Task Force with 7 postdocs and junior Faculty from across all regions was installed to organize the Seminar, and a call for participation was launched in September 2011. The interest in the first Seminar was overwhelming: we received 81 applications from 29 countries, and had to decline a dozen more after the deadline. Based on a double peer review process, the 50 best-reviewed applicants were invited to the Seminar. A broad and inclusive group of 45 students from 21 countries eventually participated in the Seminar. Participants had to become members of ISTR and register to attend the general conference as well. Participants were covered by ISTR for two nights of accommodation as well as coffee breaks and meals during the Seminar.

The seminar consisted of both plenary sessions and parallel group sessions in which the participants had the opportunity to present and discuss their doctoral research with peers, junior and senior faculty. Participants were grouped thematically, but the groups' composition was heterogeneous in terms of concrete research topics, disciplinary background, research stage, method, and regional affiliation. The group sessions were structured in an egalitarian and informal style, assigning about 50 minutes to each student. Eleven faculty (from Australia, Belgium, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Israel, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Peru, Sweden, and the USA) were critical to providing guidance and focus for the discussions. Professor Steven Rathgeb Smith enhanced the program with his keynote address, "Government, Markets and the Third Sector." More practical workshops focused on publishing and writing, career strategies and the tension between fundamental and applied research.

Overall, the Seminar was a great success. After the Seminar, 40 students completed an evaluation form with the following results: on a scale from 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent), the following criteria obtained an average score of:

- Composition of the working group: 4.49
- Quality of working group discussion: 4.43
- Facilitation of working group by Faculty: 4.49
- Feedback you received on your PhD: 4.03
- Opportunity to network with other students in your field: 4.46

The welcome event, keynote lecture, and practical workshops received an average rating between 3.50 and 4.39. In general, 38 out of 40 students indicated their expectations were met. Points for improvement mainly related to the communication and information received preceding the conference, the time allocated to each student

(preferably 1 hour per student), the opportunity to get one-to-one feedback from faculty, and the possibility of participating in more than one workshop.

A debriefing with the participating Faculty revealed that also for them, the Seminar has been a very rewarding experience. All faculty were interested in participating again, pointing out that the Seminar added great depth to the experience of the conference. To be engaged in the Seminar was considered a very meaningful engagement. Through participating, Faculty gained a unique insight into what research questions are interesting to young scholars, and what the future of the ISTR and the scholarship in this field is going to be. It was also very rewarding to be able to help developing the field by making these students get along. To have two faculty in each working group was appreciated, because it allowed a dialogue and complementary of perspectives, to look from different angles and learn from it. In this way it also was a true learning experience for the faculty.

The ISTR PhD Seminar will be a recurring event that takes place bi-annually in conjunction with the international conference. It is open to all doctoral students in the field of third sector and civil society research, across the different regions in the world and at all stages of their doctoral research.

Quotes from the evaluation forms:

It was wonderful to have so many opportunities to talk with other students. Often, conferences/workshops can be too packed--the scheduling of this workshop felt just right--starting and ending times, breaks, length. Wonderful idea to have it catered by a co-op and great location first night for our meeting and dinner. Overall, very friendly, inviting environment--it felt relaxed and interesting; not overwhelming, nor intimidating.

The quality and engagement of the faculty was outstanding.

The social outings helped build networks and friendships. The workshops were well facilitated. The organizers need to be recognized not just for leading the first workshop, but for keeping so many of us together and providing opportunities that built academic and professional development. All faculty who participated were also engaged with the whole experience. Thank you!

I think it was the best conference/seminar that I've attended so far concerning organization/structure and especially the general idea/structure of working in small groups discussing our projects and getting feedback from other students and professors!

I think in general it has been the great event. The transdisciplinarity of all papers and possibilities to meet researchers with different background is an interesting opportunity to broaden the horizons. When you are affiliated mostly with one discipline it really helps to extend the perspectives on civil society. I really like how the groups are composed--all the papers and presentations were really interesting and I may say relevant to my own research too. I have learned a lot not only from the feedback I got for my project but also from the presentations of the others and a fruitful discussion we had.

The moderators were fantastic; they had a lot of knowledge and knew when to listen and speak.

I loved our group! I think it is very important to organize by topic because I rarely get to interact with people who have expertise on the same substantive issue. I also really liked the facilitators. They established a rapport of equality, shared their expertise but did not dominate like many faculty. This has been a really excellent experience.

The grouping of PhD topics, in my case, NP Governance, was an excellently focused idea, creating a forum for understanding of various aspects of governance. The attitude of both faculty members was extremely accommodating and beneficial in my view. Overall, as my second PhD seminar experience, it met and exceeded my expectations.

I found the chance to discuss my research informally and with a group of people with new perspectives invaluable.

ISTR Inaugural PhD Seminar: Experiences and Impressions

By Shani Horowitz – Rozen, PhD candidate in the School of Communication, Bar Ilan University, Israel

On a warm Sunday evening, some 40 doctoral students from around the world gathered in Siena, Italy. Speaking many languages but sharing common research interests, these students study and research philanthropy and the third sector. As more and more welcoming faces assembled at the hotel's lobby, it was clear that the third sector is a growing international research field among young and promising scholars from all over the world. As the ice broke between participants, we found many common dilemmas and issues concerning our studies and research, such as methodological difficulties, acquiring writing techniques and planning our academic careers.

The PhD seminar was a unique opportunity to meet international fellow doctoral students and to learn from experienced scholars in the fields of philanthropy and the third sector. Our group discussions, moderated by Prof. Annette Zimmer and Prof. Mark Sidel, were stimulating and inspiring. The moderators gave insightful advice and thoughtfully navigated the discussion through the different research focal points and international perspectives. I believe our added value from the seminar, besides the critique over the research itself, was the experience to discuss our research topics and the important lesson of peer reviewing and sharing advice.

Meeting fellow students coming from different schools of thought and presenting various concepts to the research of philanthropy and the third sector was enlightening. Moreover, the assembling of students in various stages of research allowed us to consult and receive practical advice, encouragement and support, both from our moderators and fellow students.

The organization, social activities and orientation were excellent greatly due to the efforts made by ISTR staff and volunteers. We enjoyed very much our lovely afternoon activities and had many opportunities to become friends and not only fellow researchers.

I'm confident my thoughts represent the impressions of many of the ISTR participants, who see this seminar as leverage for improving our research and learning different approaches. We can only hope to keep in touch and create our long term network through ISTR moderation, such as PhD students' active mailing list. Although we speak many languages, we share the aspiration and challenge to write a dissertation about philanthropy and the third sector!