OTPR All-Time High Attendance at Annual Conference

The Office of Tax Policy Research was proud to be so well represented at this year’s National Tax Association Annual Meeting. We had the largest group of current and former OTPR-affiliated students attending — 49 in all — as seen below at the OTPR Annual Alumni Dinner.

Professor Joel Slemrod—25 Years at the Helm of OTPR

At the dinner, many of us took the opportunity to “Roast or Toast” Joel on our experiences of working with him during the past 25 years at Michigan. We heard from many people, such as current students David Cashin and Yulia Paramonova; former students David Agrawal, Jon Bakija, Naomi Feldman, Laura Kalambokidis, Sara LaLumia, Lillian Mills, Jim Sallee, and Caroline Weber; and finally, a few others who are OTPR-affiliated but not students such as David Albouy, Mary Ceccanese, Jim Hines, and Tom Neubig. The stories shared were funny and serious, but the most important part was that they all shared a deep admiration and appreciation for Joel.
2012 Daniel M. Holland Award Winner — Joel Slemrod

All of us in attendance were delighted to watch as Joel received the Daniel M. Holland Award for his outstanding contributions to the study and practice of public finance. Jon Bakija emceed the event as Len Burman, Bill Gale, and Wojtek Kopciech paid tribute to Joel. However, none of us will ever forget that incredibly creative video crafted by the able hands of Jim Hines and Rosanne Altshuler. Just in case you don’t have the link, we are including it here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXr9ZvbTAHU&feature=youtu.be
The current OTPR students who attended the NTA were asked to provide comments regarding their experience. They have some great insight and we wanted to share some of their thoughts with everyone.

“"One thing I noticed was how broad the interest in tax research was, across a fairly wide spectrum. In addition to academics, there were a variety of government agencies represented, in addition to lawyers or other people practicing in industry. [This] S[s]poke to the breadth and perceived value in the research.”

“I had a good conversation with Sebastian and Estelle there and we decided to work together on a research project. So I found a new research agenda by attending the conference.”

“I really enjoyed seeing the semi-final research product, in many cases it seemed very attainable (the more brilliant ideas less so, but still followed a similar investigative format). I also really benefited from talking to older graduate and recent grads, who were able to tell me about their research agendas and career trajectories. It was informative to hear how it all comes together for other people in my position, especially this early on in my graduate experience when I can maximally benefit from their advice. Thank you!”

"First, attending the conference helps with current research. Giving your 2-minute elevator speech to countless other economists sharpens your delivery and forces you to understand the intuition behind your project. More importantly, conference attendees often draw your attention to related papers in the field and can quickly apply your specific finding to general areas of interest or your general finding to nuanced and particular events in history.

Second, the Annual Meeting is an idea-generating machine. In each of the last two years, I have walked away from the conference with 3 or 4 really exciting and new questions which are fodder for future research projects. Furthermore, having already learned a little about the general research landscape where the new question resides and which researchers are interested in it can accelerate the research process.

Third, the meeting is a great place to make connections. It is simply fun to put faces with the names that you have read on papers for the last 3 years. More importantly, these people are all potential co-authors, collaborators, editors, and employers! I’ve had a lot of fun conversations at the Annual Meeting these last two years with some really important people and I am guessing and hoping that some of these conversations may result in future opportunities.

Finally, the Annual Meeting is inspirational in a couple of different ways. Everyone is excited to talk about new research. Senior and junior researchers alike are enthusiastic and encouraging when you describe your newest silly little idea. Upon hearing positive feedback you feel your little idea grow into a grand and important project that must be understood for the good of humanity!

It is also inspirational to hear people like Larry Summers and Peter Diamond talk and to see people like Joel and Alan Auerbach be honored. Most of us will never achieve such great heights, but being in the presence of such accomplished and approachable role models gives us all something we can strive towards.

Although the final impact is still being realized, I truly believe that attending these two conferences has altered and improved the trajectory of my studies in economics and taxation.”

OTPR

OFFICE OF TAX POLICY RESEARCH
Why Attend the Annual Conference? OTPR Students Offer Advice to New Attendees

In addition, we asked these same students what advice they would give to someone who had never been to an NTA meeting before. Below are some of their thoughts.

I would recommend anybody who has an interest in public finance but is unsure of the particular direction of his/her fit with the subject, to go to NTA, because the variety of topics and the engaging nature of the presentations really give a very good introduction to the field and all its exciting extensions. It is a completely different experience than sitting in a classroom and learning from a lecturer, however knowledgeable and articulate. The NTA affords one the opportunity to have a very broad perspective and at the same time the possibility of focusing on a strand of particular issues that one becomes interested by. By sampling widely early on, I became interested in optimal taxation halfway through the conference and started going intensively to those in the area of optimal taxation. I realized very quickly that I was seeing and understanding the research being done on the frontier, which was really exciting. I have dug deeper into that subject since getting back from a conference. If I end up eventually doing my dissertation/research on this subject, I would definitely attribute it to the NTA.

Students should go to NTA because there are people at NTA working on what you (might) want to work on, and you can learn from their work, whether it is strong or weak, what you can do better. You can also meet people who wrote the papers you admire, which humanizes the process and helps you to realize that it’s not such a god-like feat to write great papers, even for a young economist. Finally, networking matters, not just because it might help you get a job someday but also because it makes you a better researcher to talk with as many people as possible about economics.

Suggestion: take a look at the program in advance and try to get familiar with the work of some of the authors whose sessions you intend on seeing. This makes it much easier to introduce yourself and engage in conversation.

I would recommend someone attend the NTA for the first time as a way of getting a broad perspective on the current state of tax research, and how disparate fields (legal, accounting, etc.) come at problems differently than economists. It helps one think outside of the box.

The mingling is a very important aspect of this opportunity and I have learned two important aspects of this. First, despite the awkwardness, you have to introduce yourself to people. Take every opportunity, people sitting next to you at breakout sessions, session speakers, and people at receptions. Second, get in and get out. Most people are happy to meet new and excited graduate students but leave them wanting more. Do not wait for the conversation to get awkward. Thank them and move on.

The NTA conference is a great opportunity to get exposure to all of the current areas of research in public finance. No matter how early you are in your research career, make sure that you go ready to talk about your research interests/where you hope your research will go, you never know when you’ll meet someone who has similar interests/can help you along the way. Generally speaking, people want to help, so don’t be afraid to talk about ideas, even if they’re under-developed.

I would tell someone who has never been to the conference, who is a 2nd or 3rd year just starting out with research (that’s all I can speak to at this point), that the conference is really useful for thinking about various career choices. The tax community is quite broad including government and private business so it’s interesting to see the breadth of employers who do tax research. It’s also useful to see a wide range of presentations both in quality and topic. The discussants are particularly helpful in picking out the problems with the paper, and I think that was really useful for me to learn more about the research process, as well as learning about presentation skills.
Special Note to Our Alumni

We are always open to hearing about any ideas you may have regarding projects and/or conferences you think that OTPR might organize or sponsor. We can’t guarantee that you will get credit for the idea – as you heard at the dinner, the process is as follows: it will be your idea for a week, then Mary’s idea for a week, and finally Joel’s idea from then on😊!!!

—Joel & Mary

Donating to OTPR

Lastly, if you would like to make a contribution to OTPR, please donate through the following link: http://giving.umich.edu/give/bus-corporate. Although the page includes the text “Corporate Affiliates – 303334” and not Office of Tax Policy Research, but that is our University account for receiving funds. Thanks for considering contributing to our efforts.

The Office of Tax Policy Research, established at the University of Michigan Business School in 1987, has two missions. The first is to encourage and facilitate joint research on the tax system by economists and scholars of other disciplines. The second is to serve as a liaison on tax issues among the academic, business, and policymaking tax communities. The Office draws on the substantial data resources and expertise already existing at the University of Michigan in these fields, and also involves scholars from outside the University.

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