Student Demographers Present Projects as Posters

August 18, 2006 — Instead of taking a final exam on the last day of class, students in the ICPSR Summer Program’s historical demography course presented their group projects during a poster session much like those that take place at professional association meetings. A sense of accomplishment and comraderie was evident as students discussed their work with each other, their instructors, and ICPSR staff. “They accomplished a great deal in a relatively short timeframe,” said Professor Myron Gutmann, an instructor in the intensive four-week course.

Students worked in groups to prepare and analyze well-known demographic data from the 17th–19th centuries from France, Germany, and Belgium. Their task was to formulate research questions, generate testable hypotheses, analyze the data, and write individual final reports.

According to Ola Claësson, a graduate student studying economic history, “The work with the poster was really exciting because it made us go through all the different parts from scratch, sometimes almost fighting, but most often collaborating and discussing about how the question could best be answered with the prerequisites of the data.” Students attended the course from many countries around the world: United States, Mexico, England, Norway, Italy, Belgium, Romania, Spain, Taiwan, Poland, Austria, Sweden, and Japan.

Course organizers plan to submit the posters to a professional conference in the coming year. Students whose posters are accepted for presentation at conference poster sessions will have the opportunity to share their work with the broader scholarly community.

The course was structured so that in the mornings, Professors Myron Gutmann, Katherine Lynch, J. David Hacker, and James Lee took turns delivering lectures on substantive topics, while Professors Glenn Deane, Ken Smith, and Cameron Campbell taught statistical methods. The afternoons were devoted to hands-on computer lab work for the students with instruction and demonstrations offered by Professor George Alter and Dr. Susan Leonard and teaching assistance by Dr. Kristine Witkowski.

When they weren’t in class or studying, students often gathered for evening outings or weekend picnics. “This class gives students an opportunity to learn historical demography and to network. Some students were talking about writing grant proposals to do research together in the future,” noted Dr. Leonard.

Supported by the National Institutes of Health and ICPSR’s Summer Program, the Longitudinal Analysis of Historical Demographic Data course will be offered again July 23–August 17, 2007.

For more details on this and other Summer Program courses, watch for an announcement of the 2007 Program on the ICPSR Web site at www.icpsr.umich.edu/sumprog.