

A Brief History of the Von Grep Workshop in Economic and Entrepreneurial History

Spurred by a generous gift from Walter von Grep, the UCLA Department of Economics moved during the mid-1980s to expand its offerings in economic and entrepreneurial history. At the undergraduate level the Business Economics program introduced a course on the history of entrepreneurship and business organization in the American economy. Still offered by Professor Naomi Lamoreaux, this course focuses on the crucial importance of invention and innovation for economic growth and helps students develop a better understanding of the conditions and processes that gave rise to technological change and economic growth.

At the graduate level, the Von Grep Workshop in Economic History was inaugurated during the fall quarter of 1988 with Robert W. Fogel of the University of Chicago Business School—a Nobel Laureate in Economics in 1993—as the first speaker. The Von Grep Workshop has met on a weekly basis since then, first for two quarters a year and now three quarters. Workshop meetings are organized around presentations of research in progress by scholars or students in economic and entrepreneurial history, with manuscripts generally distributed beforehand for participants to read in preparation. It is expected and normal that all aspects of the research come under active discussion during the course of the presentation: the choice of research problem, the conduct of the research, and the implications of the findings. This particular organization is not unique to the Von Grep Workshop; indeed, it is common for leading economics departments to have graduate workshops in major fields such as industrial organization, labor economics, and international economics. These workshops serve several important functions. In addition to providing a forum for researchers to obtain valuable feedback, they also provide a regular institutional setting where all faculty and graduate students in a field of research come together to evaluate critically (and thus contribute to the progress of) work on the frontiers of knowledge. The Von Grep Workshop has greatly strengthened UCLA's graduate instruction in economic and entrepreneurial history, as is indicated by a series of excellent job placements (including academic posts at institutions such as Stanford and Washington University in St. Louis; government positions at institutions such as the U.S. Department of Justice, the Federal Trade Commission, and the Banco de Mexico; and international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund), as well as by the increasing number of students who come to UCLA to specialize in the field.

With the establishment of the Von Grep Workshop, UCLA joined a small number of leading universities with regular workshops in economic and entrepreneurial history, including Harvard, Stanford, Northwestern, Yale, Michigan, UC Berkeley, and the University of Chicago. At the time, UCLA had some promising young faculty, such as the just recently tenured Sokoloff, the newly hired assistant professor Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, and Mary Yeager (a business historian in the Department of History), but was relatively unknown in the field. Over the next couple of decades, however, UCLA has come to be widely viewed as a powerhouse in the field, with many outside observers ranking it now as the country's leading program in economic and entrepreneurial history.

Speakers at the Von Grep Workshop have included faculty from the following universities: Arizona, Brandeis, British Columbia, Brown, Cal Tech, Carnegie-Mellon, Case Western Reserve, Chicago, CIDE, Claremont McKenna, Colorado, Columbia, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, the European University Institute, Harvard, Illinois, INSEAD, ITAM, Johns Hopkins, LSE, Maryland, McGill, Michigan, MIT, North Carolina, Northwestern, NYU, Oxford, Pennsylvania, Princeton, Queen's, Rutgers, Seoul National, Stanford, Texas, Toronto, the University of Bristol, the University of Lund, the University of Massachusetts, the University of Washington, the University of Warwick, UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UC Irvine, UC Merced, UC Riverside, UC San Diego, UC Santa Barbara, Universidad de Alicante, USC, Utrecht, Vanderbilt, Virginia, Washington University in St. Louis, Wisconsin, Wellesley, Yale, and of course UCLA.