



## Learning from the Urban Institute, Washington, DC, USA

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I spent Summer 2010 on academic leave in the capital of the United States (US) as a Visiting Fellow at the Center for Labor, Human Services and Population at the Urban Institute (UI). I chose UI because of its similarity to IPS and the relevance of its research topics to Singapore.

UI is non-profit, non-partisan Institution set up in 1968. Like IPS, UI was set up following a political leader's (in this case, President Lyndon Johnson's) expression of a need for "independent non-partisan analysis of the problems facing America's cities and their residents". The ultimate goal of UI (tagline: Research of Record) is to conduct high quality research and programme evaluation using state of the art technology to "foster sound public policy and effective government" and "improve social, civic, and economic well-being". In this regard, UI's output is shared with policy makers and the public through reports<sup>1</sup>, books, newsletters, commentaries, fact sheets and public forums. Researchers also share their insights in "Five Questions" interviews published by the Institute<sup>2</sup>. A reading of the Institute's record of its top 42 accomplishments (in the 42 years of its existence) shows that it has, among other things, contributed to the adoption of comprehensive evaluation of social programmes by cabinet-level agencies; created indicators and models that are used at national, state and local levels to monitor progress, test and evaluate policy proposals and Institute reforms. UI researchers are also invited to give testimonies in the US Congress.

Much like IPS' research clusters, UI researchers are clustered into eight policy centres. Nearly 100 experts of the rank of Research Associate and higher (this number excludes Research Assistants) are distributed variously among these eight centres. UI also draws on scholars and other experts from the community. Researchers often work across centre boundaries in collaborative projects. I was impressed by the cross-flow of research personnel between the Institute to government or academia and back. This enables not only the researcher but also their colleagues to gain insight of how "the other side" works.

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<sup>1</sup> Available online at [www.urban.org](http://www.urban.org)

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, <http://www.urban.org/toolkit/fivequestions/KMartinson.cfm>

UI's research covers the range of policy areas, from education and health policies to tax and welfare policies, policies on housing and on non-profit organisations and philanthropy. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, UI attracted me with its work on a range of topics that are currently highly relevant to Singapore. A sampling of these topics includes the following:

- Employment of low-wage workers
- Safety nets for low income working families (including asset building)
- Children of immigrants
- Health insurance and healthcare reform
- Performance and governance of non-profit organisations and trends in charitable giving and volunteerism
- Poverty and poverty alleviation measures
- Gender and racial disparities
- Retirement, Social Security, and employment of older workers
- Public safety nets and initiatives to bolster work support and help families gain a stable financial footing
- Responsible fatherhood initiatives
- Cultural vitality

It is interesting to learn that many of the recommendations for poverty alleviation are already being implemented in Singapore. These include promotion of work, education and training for skills upgrading; and saving and asset building (an idea developed and promoted worldwide by Michael Sherraden, at the George Warren Brown School of Social Work, George Washington University in St Louis, USA).

There could be greater exchange between UI and IPS on topics of common interests in both countries. It is my hope that IPS would one day grow to be of the size and stature of UI in the sphere of public policy.

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