

John Odland

Professor of Geography

John's research interests are diverse, with a general interest in internal migration, labor market issues, and urban and regional economic geography unevenness and inequalities. But he always relies on strong empirical analyses to test his hypotheses and models. John's Ohio State mentors, Emilio Casetti, Leslie King, and Reginald Golledge, were at the forefront of the "quantitative revolution" in human geography. Following this lead, John became an outstanding spatial modeler, quantifier, and economic geographer, always producing "exemplars" in his analytical research and journal writing in categorical data analysis, longitudinal analyses of migration and mobility, labor market dynamics, statistical models of housing deterioration, and simulation models of spatio-temporal patterns, among other "firsts." And he would shoulder the challenge to educate cohorts of our department's graduate students in the methods of analysis that continue in quantitative human geography to this day.

John's mentoring of graduate students stands out as one of his most lasting and gratifying achievements, in large part because so many went on to be successful professors of geography elsewhere. They attribute their success to John's care, attention to detail, substantial analytical expertise, and knowledge of quantitative methodologies. John is an unabashed "empiricist," and he made sure his mentees knew what they were doing, where they were going with their modeling and analyses, and which high standards to set for their work, as he did for his own. He demanded a lot, but gave a lot. He also had a worldly side to his interactions with these budding proto-professors. For example, Adrian Bailey (Ph.D.1989), professor of migration studies in the School of Geography, University of Leeds, writes:

"Most of my memories of John are very positive, normally ironic, but suggestive of a tragically misunderstood figure. I think for new graduate students John could appear intimidating and, shall we say, classically academic in his theoretical and often downright abstract (but normally razor sharp) musings. Well, this was certainly my impression, and I wasn't disabused of this until just after Thanksgiving of my first year, when John suddenly and unexpectedly invited me around to his place, to help out with some yard work. As I was to discover, this was at least partly designed to support the always fragile graduate student cash economy, and indeed was very much appreciated at this and a more social level."

Dan Knudsen (Ph.D. 1984), IU professor of geography and director of the International Studies Program, remembers:

"One story comes immediately to mind from John's days as my mentor, and that was piling into his car once a month or so and driving over to Spencer for lunch at Chambers Smorgasbord. We would drive over there and consume, like, a year's worth of fat and then, since there was always someone new along, John would take us all on a tour of the town—the Art Deco National Guard

Armory, the geode mausoleum at the cemetery, and so on. And then we would all drive back to Bloomington and go back to work at Kirkwood Hall. To this day, whenever I have a foreign guest in town, I always take them to Spencer one afternoon of their stay. They have always loved it."

Mark Ellis (Ph.D. 1987), professor of geography at the University of Washington, says:

"Working with John on his grants, and on my own independent research projects guided by him, taught me research skills and practices I could never have picked up in a classroom setting. For example, I learned from John the value of simple analytical approaches and presentations over complex ones (even though getting to that simplicity was often hard work!), and I gained an awareness of how to recognize interesting and meaningful results and distinguish them from the mass of less useful information that research projects inevitably generate. While John paid close attention to analytic detail, he gave me (and others I think) a long leash for my own research. I greatly valued his willingness to let me run with my own ideas for a Ph.D. project and to let me come to him for advice as frequently—or infrequently—as I desired. In fact, I try to follow this mentoring practice (which is directly cribbed from John) with my own students—letting them run with their own projects, making them their own and not stamping too much of my own identity on them."

Towards the latter stages of his career, John increasingly used his analytical skills to help with the mentoring of junior faculty members, to the great benefit of the entire faculty in the Department of Geography. As chair of the department in the 1990s—and as a subsequent guide and friend throughout our careers—John was a remarkable mentor for the department's entire crop of full professors. If one needed a thorough assessment of a research proposal, a review of a tenure statement, or a peer evaluation of teaching, John was at the top of everyone's list. The reason is not because he is a "softy" who will offer up an exceedingly flattering review. The reason is that John assesses the strengths and weaknesses of ideas so quickly and concisely. Yet, he also can deliver the criticism in such an enlightening way that it could not possibly be taken personally. One is usually left with that "why didn't I see that?" feeling. It suffices to say that the benefits of this mentoring have been passed on to generations of graduate students and professors at IU and elsewhere. As a result, the professional and personal lives of many geographers have been made a great deal richer and more insightful due to John's leadership and mentoring.

Dennis Conway and Scott Robeson