



SCHOOL OF POLITICS & ECONOMICS

CONVERSATIONS THAT MATTER: CUTTING ACROSS TRADITIONAL ACADEMIC BOUNDARIES TO STUDY REGIONAL INTEGRATION **PROFESSOR TOM WILLETT**

While discussions of globalization are all the rage, it is often overlooked that much of the recent increase in globalization has taken place in various regional contexts across the globe. Not surprisingly, there has been considerable research undertaken on various aspects of regional economic and monetary integration. The lion's share of such research has been undertaken from a variety of narrow perspectives. In large part, this reflects the departmentalization of academia and increasing specialization within departments. As a result, while regional integration is dominated by political and economic interactions, most research is undertaken from the disciplinary perspective of economic or political science alone. Perhaps even more distressing, few political scientists and international relations experts study more than one geographic area.

One of our passions at SPE is cutting across artificial academic boundaries to analyze important real world issues. In our Claremont Colleges-wide program on Asian political economy funded by the Freeman Foundation, we had already begun to look at the issue of what could be learned from the European experience with integration that would be useful for Asia and Yi Feng, with his dissertation student Gaspare Genna had undertaken one of the first cross-regional empirical studies of

regional integration. With the help of major funding from the *Korean Institute of International Economic Policy*, a major think tank of the Korean government, we brought together leading economists, political scientists and area experts to stimulate a cross-discipline, cross-region dialogue in Claremont in the fall of 2004. [\(link\)](#)

It was one of the most successful conferences we have ever had. It generated numerous cross-cutting conversations that would not otherwise have taken place. A substantial number of our students participated in the conference and several made presentations discussing developments about the regional integration in Africa and the Middle East as well as issues in the measurement of integration. Faculty from four of the 5Cs also participated. One of the most important conclusions drawn by many participants was that rather than representing an almost automatic process toward ever greater regional integration, the European experience was heavily conditioned on a very special interpretation of the geopolitical lessons from World War II and that if a European monetary union were not already in place, efforts to create one today would likely fail. This has obvious implications for the current government and academic discussions about monetary integration in Asia. The importance of this lesson helped stimulate KIEP [\[LINK\]](#) to fund a follow-up workshop on Asian monetary cooperation held in Washington DC in the fall with our Claremont group organizer. This brought together officials from international organizations and research institutes to discuss their issues with economists from Asia and the United States.

The conversations started at the original Claremont conference have also stimulated or helped refine at least seven CGU dissertations, with still more likely to come. Several research papers stimulated by the conference have already been

completed and a number more are in progress. These have been presented at conferences and seminars in Asia, Canada, and Europe as well as the US. Some of the students who participated have or will be soon bringing the fruits of this dialogue directly to governments in the Middle East and Asia, one at the Central Bank of Oman, one at the Central Bank of Korea, and two at the Foreign Ministry in Thailand. Others have taken academic positions in Africa and Asia as well as the United States. A number of research papers have also been stimulated out of the conversations started at our conference.