What’s the GHI all about?

The GHI is a centre of excellence in and for the promotion of historical research. As well as conducting its own research through its team, it provides a space for Americans who are interested in German and American history and for German and other European researchers working on issues in American and transatlantic history. In that sense, its work – its dual mission, if you like - is not all that dissimilar from that of the GEI. And the same is true of its aim to make its research accessible to decision-makers in politics and society, and to reach out to the general public.

How do you feel the GEI has evolved over the last few years; where do you feel you have been able to bring your influence to bear and create focal points?

I think the key change in this period has been that the GEI has been able to strengthen its research profile. The Institute has a long track record as a point of intersection and connection in the field and has been, in my view, indispensable in its coordinating function; our library and fellowship programme have been able to create particular international impact. I think, however, that the GEI had previously been a little too modest in its willingness to limit itself to a facilitating role rather than forging ahead with its own research. Over the last few years in particular, we have been pursuing and professionalising this research; as well as growing markedly in staff numbers, which has been a concomitant of our great success in creating new projects and securing funding for them, these activities have seen us developing new research directions.

We have been moving beyond conventional analysis of the textual and visual content of textbooks and have begun to concern ourselves a lot more closely with the issue of what actually happens with this content particularly in the classroom. We are paying a great deal more attention to all the diverse contexts in which textbooks exist, come into being and are used, going into classrooms to observe lessons and developing research approaches which, for instance, regard teachers as “translators” of textbook content. Our research has also acquired a new dimension in that our internationally-focused work on history textbooks, and history as a discipline, as pivotal to the creation of meaning and identity and as such susceptible to attempts to impose political influence, has been joined by historical analysis of educational media themselves.

I would also add at this point that we have been dynamically evolving the GEI’s research infrastructure, which is another of its traditional strengths; our aim is to be a research hub attractive to those working in the field all around the world. Part of our work involves systematically, and in accordance with up-to-the-minute standards in the field, collecting materials which we then supplement with information; we are increasingly carrying out these tasks using high-level digital information processing techniques. We have been able in recent years to realise pioneering developments in this area, which
has also meant taking an agenda-setting role within the Leibniz Association. On this note, I would comment that we are extremely grateful for the multiple benefits we have drawn from being part of the Association, with stability and the ability to plan for the future not least among them. And we have also contributed to the life of the Association by putting issues on the agenda which I consider to be of great importance, one of which has been the quality and innovative character of research infrastructures. Finally, I would like to mention the Institute’s interest and competencies in digital humanities, particularly digital history, as one of the new and innovative paths upon which it has embarked in recent years.

What have been the most exciting and most surprising things about your time at the head of the GEI?

One of the very best things for me has been the motivated way in which the Institute’s staff, in what, after all, has been a challenging period of reorientation, have tackled the tasks with which they have been faced, and the strength of their identification with the GEI. The way in which two groups of researchers and staff members in fairly divergent situations – those who have been at the Institute for a long time and the rather large numbers of those employed for fixed contract periods on projects funded from outside the Institute – have worked together, productively and with a shared aim at the forefront of all they do, has impressed me time and again.

What experiences and wisdom drawn from your time at the GEI will you be taking across the Atlantic to the GHI?

The reasons for my having been recruited to the post in Washington are intimately related to my work at the GEI, which has enabled me to attain a large treasury of experience in academic management and the creation of new research directions as well as working with people across a very broad range of areas. Our Institute’s core strength is in its academic diversity and the competencies that are at the heart of this diversity. One of the main things I will be taking to Washington with me is my awareness of the need to give all members of the institute, regardless of the areas in which they work and develop their potential, the respect and appreciation they deserve. I believe – and my time at the GEI only strengthened this belief - that an academic institute is a body which needs the capabilities and the input of all its members. I would assume that the commission that selected me for the GHI did so because of competencies, abilities and experiences I would not possess today without the GEI. I owe our Institute, and all the people who work here, a great deal.

If you could choose anyone in the world, who would you most like to welcome to the GHI?

My current favourite is Hillary Rodham Clinton. She is a highly intelligent person with extremely interesting life and career experiences and I would like to find out more about what kind of person she is and her thoughts, as a potential
candidate for the US presidency, on some of the issues we don’t get to hear about in the news. One of the issues I would be particularly keen to hear her discussing is the future of transatlantic relationships.

What are your hopes for the GEI for the next five years?

I hope that our Institute will be able to keep on working smoothly and benefiting from continuity without losing any of its dynamism. We have recently been able to recruit fantastic new heads of department and research areas who I am certain will contribute fresh ideas. I would like to see the GEI consolidating and expanding the research fields we have been developing over the last few years and achieving its strategic objectives. A good performance in the upcoming evaluation will be the key to this, because it will provide us with a framework for the years to come. I also leave in the certain hope that Eckhardt Fuchs will enjoy the confidence and support from which I have benefited at the GEI and which will be central to a productive and successful tenure as director. I will also, when I look across the Atlantic, feel satisfied when I see that the spirit of our Institute is continuing to grow and that the mutual respect between academic and non-academic staff which characterises our working atmosphere is maintained.

What will you miss when you start in Washington – and what are you looking forward to?

I’ve been very happy here in all respects. I will miss the collegial atmosphere of the GEI, the way we work here, the Institute’s rootedness in its academic and regional context, and the way it is valued in these arenas. I have also come to very much appreciate the communication and close cooperation that takes place within the Leibniz Association, particularly within the Humanities and Educational Research section of which we are a part. A lot of productive work has been done in the relatively short space of time in which we have been a member. I will miss that a lot.

What am I looking forward to?

Most of all to trying out something new, giving my work new emphases and being inspired with fresh ideas. I’m looking forward to the very high-level international atmosphere of Washington. And, after nine years in interdisciplinary contexts, I’m looking forward to five years of re-immersion in the world of historical research. Of course I will, in my role as director of the GHI, also have a lot of administrative and management issues to deal with and my own academic writing will be just one among many other duties. But right now is exactly the right time for me to return to a close focus on my original field as a historian and get up to date with the most recent developments therein. Having been offered this chance right now is just as exciting for me as is the opportunity to interact with the top researchers who come to the German Historical Institutes. I’m very much looking forward to all of this.