

Centers and Institutes Learning Exchange

“No Better Time” Conference
July 8 – July 11, 2009 The University of New Hampshire, Durham, N.H.

July 10, Friday, 9:00 a.m.- 11:45 a.m.

Exchange Leaders:

Martin Carcasson, Colorado State University

Molly Mead, Amherst University

Robert Jones, Florida State University

Session Description: Centers and institutes: What they do and how to create and sustain one
Centers for civic engagement, public deliberation, collaborative governance, community mediation... These are only a few examples of the kinds of structures on campuses designed to serve as partners with local communities. What do they do, and more importantly, what do communities want them to do? What are some strategies for creating a center or institute as valuable partners in a community? How can they address the challenges of limited resources, changing staff and students, the academic calendar, academic culture, unsupportive peers, and more?

A. INTRODUCTIONS AND OVERVIEW

Each of the Exchange leaders offered brief descriptions of their centers at Colorado State University, Amherst University and Florida State University making the following initial points:

- Institutionalization is critical. Addressing the lack of time to do this work and the limited resources to support it will be critical for the movement.
- Work is not easy- challenges and barriers are significant. The more we the work, the lower the barriers and we change our universities while doing our work. We need more tenure track faculty doing this work. Have to work within the culture and change the culture
- More communication needed and sharing of lessons across campus.
- Centers need to cultivate the ability to deal with changes in support.
- Centers housed in private universities rely primarily on alumni funding.
- The development of advisory councils or boards has been critical in two of the three programs' success.
- Programs that are able to sustain themselves over the longer term (more than 5 years) will find that their focus may change, their name will change, but their principles and purpose will continue to guide them strategically.
- Opportunistic tactics and reliance on champions may be needed to help sustain centers through crisis and challenge.

The participants introduced themselves and briefly described their center or efforts to create a center.

Key points from the Exchange participants' introductions included:

- Many centers began as projects or as classes.

- Longer standing centers have gone through multiple changes in focus and name due to changing sponsors, funding sources, “fads” and practice lessons (volunteerism, service learning, community or civic engagement, coordination, conflict resolution, extension etc).
- Several are considering or planning to create engagement centers and are interested in scope and focus questions (e.g. tie to service learning, or focus on graduate students, or leadership, or collaboration, or civic engagement or other issues?)
- Centers struggle to integrate within the university given that their service activities are focused on the community.
- Centers are struggling to deal with the current budget climate around the country.
- Sources of funding cited included; university contributions; federal; state; local; foundation grants; private donors; and fee for service.
- Challenges are presented in the often intensive nature of good community engagement work
- A sustainability question relates to how centers can “bank” resources that can be drawn upon later for mission central work.

B. LEARNING EXCHANGE QUESTIONS

1. What is your mission? What does the community or key stakeholders want you to do?

- Missions vary in scope- civic engagement, student leadership, service learning, community problem solving. Public deliberation may be a subset of that. Some take on social justice issues, race, and other social dialogue issues.
- Civic engagement and deliberative democracy- three metaphors- 1) Rules of Engagement- how to engage in order to enhance control (from a military approach); 2) Gears Engaging- coordination is the key, service learning, etc.; 3) Community Engagement--collaboration and problem solving including reciprocal partnerships.
- Acknowledge the faculty love/hate relationship with centers. Tension exists between faculty and centers. Value academic freedom- and ability to “walk away.” This tension may get heightened in the current budget environment.
- Universities are the last functioning mediating institutions in society. Like democracy, it is very difficult but better than the alternatives.
- This is a paradigm shift that is taking place- while some in North American higher education are resting on their laurels, signs are that we are undergoing a major systemic changes in higher education.
- The Carnegie classification for community engagement is the most convincing hood for university administrators for the value of our work.
- Is there a danger of the “silo” proliferation of centers? Traditionally centers started as entrepreneurial, innovative efforts. Today this may not be the case.
- Note that as state budget decrease, university centers are being cut back.
- Those considering new centers need to do an assessment of the tradeoffs and note the culture of the institution will be key in this assessment.
- In terms of growth, scope and accountability, a key question for centers is “who do you report to?”
- Silos and communication across the campus is the challenge.

- Connect your capacity directly to the University's mission? This may open doors for financial strategies.
- Service rhetoric is there- in mission and in the strategic plan. Centers and would be centers should use this language in proposals for creating centers.
- Look for opportunities to apply and secure awards for community engagement, etc. These are very influential with administrators.
- Can centers insulate themselves from college administrators who come and go?
- How can centers use advisory boards effectively? They can help with fundraising, with strategic advice, with amplifying the message through media. These board need to correspond to the center mission in terms of their composition. They require "care and feeding" for them to serve their purpose.

2. What are the most important lessons learned from your challenges and successes?

- Acknowledge and manage the dependency of centers on individuals- leaders.
- Consider strategies to overcome centers as silos cut off from other university activities.
- How the community views the center is an important issue and contributes or detracts from the ability to get buy in and trust from the community.
- Using advisory boards effectively may be key to the sustainability of centers.
- For established centers, utilize director's interest in developing a continued legacy and engaging in succession planning.
- Critical to build networks with people and champions both inside and outside the university.
- Position of "director" in the budget is helpful for this and especially if the position is defined as "faculty" position.
- Will need to demonstrate whether the informed strategy is to initially develop presence off campus vs. a presence on campus?
- Interdisciplinary efforts are challenging for collaborations.
- Lessons learned: over time, centers change- their names change. Start as a project and may evolve into a center. May Start in on one topic, develop others.
- Has there been Backlash "resource envy" against successful/sustainable centers?
- E.g. "Understanding each other suppers"- faculty, administrators, students. Evaluation from students having casual conversation about race in an informal environment. Some faculty were very critical of the lack of connection to academic study. How were the faculty introduced to this?
- Reference the AACNU Liberal Education report.
http://www.aacu.org/advocacy/pdfs/LEAP_Report_FINAL.pdf This report suggested that students with liberal arts degree express needs for education in their professional training.

3. Is it worth it? Are Centers and Institutes the way to go for Deliberative Democracy work?

- Is the arrow pointing more toward them? Still ambivalent- as we get more people involved. 2 years working on creating an institute for community engagement. The

institute would pair up to help in the community with university resources. The amount of time to create new centers is daunting.

- Conducted planning for 5 years through 2 administrations. While difficult, we learned to distinguish more clearly what we are good at and how to distinguish from and collaborate with other centers. There are 10 centers involved.
- Under what conditions should we establish centers? The criteria may be: 1) Will a center or institute facilitate the work you want to do or get in the way? 2) Will it be able to get funding for the work? 3) How much of your time is spent administrating vs. doing your mission. 4) Do you have a public

4. Do centers and institutes help us move from diffuse democratic experiments to more just, comprehensive democratic systems?

- Yes, however sustainability for these centers is an ongoing challenge.
- This move towards “systems” is comparable to the progression noted from the classroom and projects to the creation of centers.

5. Are centers and institutes vehicles for “educating and preparing citizens to be more effective participants in a just and deliberative democracy?”

- This question seems too narrowly framed. We know that students are looking for degree, income, satisfying professional and personal lives. The skills we are focused on can help in every aspect of life, not just as a “citizen” but also in terms of professional life.
- In the academy, “democracy” is thought of as political science’s concern. It must be the work of all of us and be understood as inter-disciplinary concept.
- We need to do better in demonstrating (to faculty, students and administrators) how this civic engagement/deliberative democracy belief system and skills set operate within and across disciplines/professions.
- We should broaden our argument for the relevance of the work we do. All professions and walks of life must be concerned and address democracy and ethics.

6. How can we help each other going forward?

- Take advantage of and connect with some of the existing professional practitioner and organizational networks that are participating at this conference (e.g. The Democracy Imperative, University Network for Collaborative Governance,
- Email and share the documents in the conversation.

