© Journal of Public Service & Outreach, Volume 5, Number 2, pp. 39 -47 (2000)

Academic Centers: Moving Beyond the Periphery

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Bringing institutes [centers] into the university, making them of the university and not merely at it, is a genuine organizational dilemma
— Ikenberry & Friedman, 1972, p. 3

In the United States, academic centers or institutes have become an important mechanism through which higher education can become more responsive to the communities it serves and move beyond the boundaries and traditions that often constrain departments. Academic centers tend to be boundary-spanning organizations — facilitating the flow of information between the university and its environment. Centers are flexible organizations and often not bound by the policies, practices, and traditions of departments. Centers can respond quickly to the needs and requirements of research patrons and sponsors (Stahler & Tash 1994). Thus, centers may change their staffing, their programs, perhaps even their mission, in response to social demands for new knowledge (Geiger 1990). With this flexibility, however, comes what Sharp-Pucci et al. (1994) describe as an "atmosphere of impermanence" about centers because staff, programs, funding support, and other resources are likely to be in flux.

This paper examines how centers, particularly community — vs. technology — focused centers, can become more permanent or sustainable parts of their institutions while maintaining their positive distinction of flexibility and responsiveness to external communities. It focuses on two key attributes of sustainability identified by Larson (1996) and supported by Young (1996) — institutional stability and academic credibility. *Institutional stability* refers to a center's ability to sustain itself as an organization within the university. *Academic credibility* relates to the center's ability to meet faculty and disciplinary expectations. It is not coincidental that these two attributes parallel the core administrative and academic functions and traditions associated with higher-education institutions. This paper suggests ways centers can become both more institutionally stable and academically credible in order to be a more permanent

part of the organizational landscape — to move beyond the periphery to the "cores" of the institution.

Institutional Stability

For centers, which fall outside of traditional lines, it is critical...to have sufficient resources, leadership, and legitimacy.
— Center Director (in Larson 1996, p. 11)

This paper suggests ways centers can become both more institutionally stable and academically credible in order to be more a permanent part of the organizational landscape — to move beyond the periphery to the "cores" of the institution.

Academic centers are organizations within larger institutions. Accordingly, they must ensure that their place in the institution is stable. Concern for the *institutional stability* of academic centers and institutes, in general, is not new. In the late nineteenth century universities developed the first centers, observatories and museums, which were funded primarily through private donations — a funding source university administrators considered unstable (Geiger 1990). Requisite conditions for institutional stability for nonprofit management centers appear to be stable funding, organizational fit, and community connections.

Funding

A critical component of institutional stability is financial stability. Many centers and departments are funded through a mix of internal and external funds. Centers may receive internal funds from the university's general operating budget, directly from student tuition and fees, or through waivers of overhead costs or in-kind contributions such as faculty and secretarial time. Most centers require an investment in internal funds before they can generate support from federal and state agencies and foundations. Yet, even when external funds are received, it is unlikely that most centers will ever be completely self-sufficient and operate without internal funds (Wodarski 1995). Many sources of external funding are predicated on some level of internal support. Simply put, some ongoing commitment of internal funding appears to be necessary if a center is to be institutionally stable.

External funding for centers may come from foundations, private donations from individuals or organizations, state or federal

agencies, or through the sale of products or services to external constituencies. While the quest for external dollars is often necessary to financially sustain an academic center (Wodarski 1995) and (Stahler & Tash 1994) caution centers against "chasing dollars." In such a game, a center may respond to a funding source where the funders' expectations are a poor fit with the center's mission (Young 1996). This can lead to an erosion of the center's mission that, in turn, may lead to a weakening of internal support. Academic centers, then, need to develop relationships with funding agencies to encourage them to support the mission or vision of the center (Wodarski 1995) or to write grants such that the mission or vision is the primary emphasis.

Simply put, some ongoing commitment of internal funding appears to be necessary if a center is to be institutionally stable.

In addition, the funding of centers may have a symbolic component (Larson 1996). In a study of nonprofit management centers, staff commented that internal funding encourages others in the university to have expectations of the center and that external funding is a form of external validation and a way to improve the center's prestige.

Organizational Fit

Adequate funding, especially a stable commitment of internal funds, is necessary for institutional stability but it may not be sufficient; centers also need to "fit" within the organizational structure. Organizational fit refers both to the center's location within the organization's hierarchy and the center's interconnectedness with other units on campus.

Regarding organizational hierarchy, the higher the reporting authority of a center, the more central administrators may consider the center to be a university priority (Stahler & Tash 1994). Thus, a center that reports to a dean, provost, or president may be more of a central priority to the institution than a center that reports to a department chair. Centers that are more centrally located within the formal organizational structure are more likely to receive higher levels of external and internal financial support (Stahler & Tash 1994), and to be perceived as an administrative and programmatic commitment by higher administration (Friedman & Friedman 1984).

The institutional stability of a center also may be a function of how and to whom centers are interconnected — that is, how they network or link with other units on campus. Ebata (1996) states that collaboratives such as centers can be connected through "lines" and "boxes" on an organizational chart, but the success of a center may depend on the links among people and the kinds of relationships they establish. This statement is consonant with Wodarski's (1995)

comment that for a research center to be viable it must maintain linkages with other educational units. These linkages enable the center to draw on the expertise of other departments for collaboration on grant development and proposal preparation. Informal linkages with university administration, such as involvement in governance and university committees, are also important to maintain (Stahler & Tash 1994).

Centers need to show how they fit within the organization. They need to publicize and make their work visible. Publications should be forwarded to administrators and departments, and media on campus should be used to disseminate center work (Wodarski 1995).

Centers need to disseminate and market their achievements in fund procurement, scholarly publications, community programs, clinical outcomes, and even management style. Centers that have been successful have taken the proactive approach to visibility, attention, and accountability (Sharp-Pucci et al. 1994). Such efforts also serve to inform the local community of the center's activities and to promote future relationships with constituent groups.

Community Connections

Nonprofit centers frequently interact and work with constituents or community groups. These connections or interactions take place in a variety of ways.

Centers may offer executive education or certificate programs for community professionals, they may use practitioners as course instructors, and they may work directly with organizations or community groups. These types of connections with the community may contribute to the center's institutional stability (Larson 1996).

Community connections may result in external funding of programs or increases in internal funding from student tuition and fees as community groups encourage employee involvement in educational programs provided by centers. A center's connection with the community may also be a way to garner administration support within the institution.

An academic center may be one of the few ways that a university reaches out to the public and is, therefore, important to the image of university held by the community. Community connections may, then, enhance a center's fit within their institution.

We suggest that centers are more likely to be institutionally stable when (a) they have a stable internal budget, (b) external funding matches the mission or vision of the center, (c) centers are high on or central to the organizational chart of the university, (d) they have extensive linkages with other units on campus, (e) they engage in self-promotion, and (f) they are connected with community or constituent groups.

Academic Credibility

Finance is not the significant barrier to sustainability. Infiltrating degree structures, faculty structures, permeating the culture — these are the significant barriers.

— Center Director (in Larson 1996, p. 15)

The comment above, and many like it, indicated that center sustainability requires more than institutional stability — it requires recognition by and intellectual association with the academic core of the institution. The need for centers to be academically credible should not be surprising, given they are located on university campuses and most are directed by academicians. As stated earlier, academic credibility concerns the center's ability to meet faculty disciplinary and institutional expectations. We link a center's academic credibility to the centrality of its mission to the university's mission and to the involvement of faculty members in the activities of the center.

Mission

Most universities define their mission as comprising research, teaching, and service. Each university, however, interprets this mission differently, either explicitly or implicitly. Some universities may stress one function over another. A university may focus its attention more on research activities than on service activities. In practice, one function may be more highly valued by faculty in the tenure and promotion process, as often is the case with research. Furthermore, universities often emphasize specific research areas within their mission. For university administration and faculty to view a center as academically credible, its mission must be consistent with the university's mission and goals and it must represent a logical initiative within the university's overall research program (Friedman & Friedman 1984; Stahler & Tash 1994). In addition, the mission of the center needs to be conceptually stable — that is, while programs may change to reflect opportunities or needs external to the center, the mission or central purpose of the center must not change if the center is to be viewed as academically credible (Wodarski 1995).

Faculty and Staff

The academic core of the university is composed of faculty members. If centers want to be part of the academic core — that is, if they want to be academically credible — they must work with and include faculty members in their work. Faculty involvement with centers varies. Faculty may instruct courses for a jointly offered degree, conduct research, or provide technical assistance. How faculty are employed by centers also varies. Some faculty may be adjuncts who are paid for teaching a single course. Other faculty may

be university faculty who have a portion of their time supported by a center while their academic department continues to be their organizational home. Some centers hire their own faculty or specialists (who often have comparable qualifications to faculty). These latter positions are often largely dependent on "soft" or contract moneys and are usually not tenure-track positions. Regardless of how faculty are employed or involved with a center, their inclusion in center activities is critical if the center is to be viewed as academically credible (Larson 1996).

Many faculty members are attracted to the problem focus and interdisciplinary nature of centers. These faculty members may see their involvement in center activities as part of their research, teaching, or service responsibilities. They may also find affiliation with a center to have certain advantages not necessarily found in departments. For example, through involvement with a center, faculty may gain access to community groups, collaborative projects, external funding opportunities, and grant-development assistance. Many faculty view centers as a means to gain access to research data. A center's relationships with outside constituencies increase applied-research opportunities, that may be limited in most academic departments. The service relationship between the center and the constituent group generally encourages constituents to participate in and access applied research. Affiliation with a center may also provide valuable experiences in working with more seasoned researchers and access to better research support (Stahler & Tash 1994) .

Regardless of how faculty are employed or involved with a nonprofit management center, their inclusion in center activities is critical if the center is to be viewed as academically credible.

However, faculty involvement in centers frequently results in a cost to faculty. For one, individual faculty members identify strongly with their disciplinary colleagues both within the institution and elsewhere. And, for tenure track faculty, involvement in a center may alienate them from their disciplinary colleagues (Dooris & Fairweather 1992) or at least limit the time available to build relationships with departmental or disciplinary collaborators. Faculty may also find it difficult to maintain personal contact with state or local agencies because of the time involved in isolating funding opportunities and engaging in personal relationships necessary to maintain liaison activities (Wodarski 1995).

Arguably, the most pervasive barrier for faculty involvement in centers is the academic reward system. Faculty involvement in interdisciplinary-center research may limit or at least challenge their

ability to receive tenure or promotion (Sharp-Pucci et al. 1995; Stahler & Tash 1994; Wodarski 1995; Dooris & Fairweather 1992). Faculties within departments, acting as a group, typically control tenure and promotion. Their decision to tenure or promote are often made on the basis of single-author, peer-reviewed publications. However, the product line of a center is more complex; it consists of peer-reviewed publications, technology transfer, multicenter collaboration, governmental reports, review panels, and industry consulting. Sharp-Pucci and colleagues' (1994) evaluation of a center's members solely on the basis of single-author, peer-reviewed publications is neither valid nor accurate.

As long as the university reward system is based on the departmental structure, it is possible that faculty seeking tenure or promotion in the department will find involvement in centers to be disadvantageous. To offset this disadvantage, faculty who work in centers, and center directors, must be mindful of the expectations set forth by the faculty member's discipline and department and work to fulfill these expectations (Friedman & Friedman 1984; Dooris & Fairweather 1992; Wodarski 1995). There is also an opportunity, over time, to work toward increasing the level of acceptance of center "products" as credible scholarship in the promotion and tenure process.

Faculty members are not the only staff who can add academic credibility to the center. Friedman and Friedman (1984) state that the leader or director should possess valid scholarly credentials and have a reputation commensurate with that of the ranking senior members of the departments or departments from which the center hopes to draw faculty members. A center, because of the hierarchical nature of the unit, usually succeeds or fails as a result of the director's leadership. Changes in the leadership of a center may change the character of a center more markedly than would be true for any comparable change in a department (Stahler & Tash 1994).

We suggest an academic center is more likely to be academically stable when (a) its mission is consistent with the university's mission, (b) the center's initiatives fit within the university's overall research program, (c) the center's mission is stable over time, (d) faculty work with or in the center, (e) faculty working in the center maintain ties to their disciplinary departments, (f) faculty meet department/disciplinary expectations, especially regarding the writing and publishing of peer-reviewed papers, (g) the center director is a senior scholar, and (h) the leadership of the center does not change on a regular basis.

Conclusion

This paper assumes centers seek sustainability; thus, it proposes how centers might become sustainable. However, it is important to note that not all centers want to, or should be sustained. Some centers may choose to be phased out because their work is complete. Such centers represent a mechanism through which universities can be more responsive to changing needs and interests of various

external communities and constituencies. Other centers may wish to integrate their programs into other academic units. Still other centers may aim for a different status — to become academic departments or schools. Sharp-Pucci et al. (1994) state that multidisciplinary centers must be considered temporary organizational units. Ultimately, they either dissolve or progress in modes similar to that of a department or school. Eventually, having defined a new field of knowledge, centers may seek to position themselves among the university's departments and schools. Alpert (1985) says the departmental structure is so "natural" that cross-disciplinary fields (or centers) that originate at the boundaries soon become formalized as new departments. ■

Author's Note - Although this paper does not directly speak to whether or not academic centers could, or should, become schools or departments; it seems logical that being institutionally stable and academically credible are necessary antecedents to such goals. More importantly, this paper suggests that more stable and credible centers are better able to preserve their missions and serve their constituencies.

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Dr. Larson (Ph.D., Michigan State University) is director and principal researcher of Applied Research, a consulting firm dedicated to the improvement of practice through research and evaluation. Applied Research assists organizations in planning, implementing, and evaluating projects. Larson is the lead cluster evaluator for the W. K. Kellogg Foundation's Building Bridges Initiative, and co-principal investigator for the W. K. Kellogg Foundation's Comprehensive Community Health Models Initiative. She also oversees the evaluation and assists in the development of an interest-based negotiation program sponsored by the Graduate School at Michigan State University. Previously, Larson consulted with the Michigan Department of Community Health, interned with the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, and worked in the Office of Planning and Budgets at Michigan State University. Larson has been an adjunct assistant professor in the Graduate School at Michigan State University and has been an instructor for the Department of Communication at Michigan State University.

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