

# Centers bridge fields of study and forge creative partnerships

BY JO ANN DEASY

*In 2021, a group of center directors at universities gathered to discuss common work and share their wisdom. Several learnings were shared during their conversation about creating and sustaining the work of centers.*

## **Centers are not easy to define**

Centers vary greatly in size, mission, leadership, funding, and governance. They are not academic departments governed by faculty consensus, nor are they individual research agendas directed by a single faculty member's interest and expertise. It is important for a school to define just what type of center it is starting. What is its purpose? How will it be governed? How will it be resourced?

## **Centers are places of convergence and creativity**

Centers are often the "sandbox" where people, ideas, resources, research, and relationships all meet and engage in experimental and enriching work. They extend academic work and thinking beyond the norms of disciplines, furthering lines of inquiry. They produce outputs that go beyond traditional forums of academic presses and peer review journals. They use new media, write popular articles, and build smart phone apps. They extend teaching to new audiences using more experimental formats.

Centers are often the institutional embodiment of interdisciplinarity. They have the capacity to bridge fields of



The Martin Marty Center for the Public Understanding of Religion is housed in Swift Hall at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

study and forge creative partnerships that blur lines and divisions.

## **Centers take the mission of a school out into the world**

Centers often sit at the intersection of the academy and the church or the broader public. In this space, centers can highlight core aspects of a school's mission and make them more visible to the public. They can offer a space for critical engagement with questions being posed by their constituents. They can also create space for conversations that highlight the importance of a school's work and mission.

As a result, center directors often have more opportunity for public engagement that may bring media attention, external funding, and opportunities for travel.

## **Center directors need multiple leadership skills**

Directing a center requires multiple layers of leadership competencies including management, relationship

building, fundraising, communications, institutional negotiation, and creativity. This is often in addition to their expertise in a particular academic discipline.

### **Center directors often feel like “outsiders”**

Leading a center can be challenging. Center directors often describe themselves as “outsiders” who have not found fulfillment in traditional academic structures either by choice or by circumstance. Their work often runs on a different schedule than the rest of the institution. Those who are faculty may find their focus shifting from academic publishing to other markers of success. Those who are non-traditional academics may find themselves professionally homeless—representing both academy and community but not wholly a part of either one.

Additionally, the public aspect of their work, with media attention and funding, is often quite different from that of their colleagues. They can be subject to professional envy and further marginalized for their more public-facing role.

### **Centers need sustainable funding structures**

Centers are often upheld as models of external funding that create revenue rather than draw on resources. It is true that centers may be better able to apply for and steward external funding in ways that academic departments cannot. However, they also require an investment of capital and resources from their home institutions. Centers cannot simply be a patchwork collection of grant-funded activity. This creates instability and leaves exploratory work and novel learning on the table as organizations move from one grant cycle to the next.

An investment is needed in the particularities of centers so they can build locations for excellence in research, teaching, and programming in a sustained way over time.

### **What can you do to create and support centers and their directors?**

Make sure your center is clearly aligned with the mission and vision of your institution. Include it in your strategic

planning and budget. Talk about its value within the institution and how it contributes to mission. Publicize its work both internally and externally.

Begin thinking about the sustainability of your center now. Is your center a new experiment? How will you assess its effectiveness and decide next steps? Is your center grant-funded? What are the plans for long-term financial support? Is your center designed as a revenue stream? Is that a realistic expectation? Does this expectation support or hinder potential for the center to fulfill its mission?

Help your center director find a mentor and/or a community of peers. Look for others leading centers in your area or within your institutional networks. Many ATS schools have well-established centers.

Reach out to a school or to ATS staff

to help you get connected. Consider connecting your center director to a professional organization such as the Association of Leaders in Lifelong Learning for Ministry or the Global Network for Public Theology.

*The center directors who gathered for this conversation included: Jacqueline Bussie, Collegeville Institute; David Horn, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary; Brie Loskota, University of Chicago; Jeremy Meyers, Augsburg University; and Melissa Wiginton, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. They are grateful to Wabash College for funding this conversation as part of the coordination program for Lilly Endowment’s Early Career Pastoral Leadership Development Initiative.*

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