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Starting a Center for Teaching and Learning

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A center for teaching and learning (CTL) can provide crucial leadership for creating a rich teaching and learning culture on a campus (Haras, Taylor, Sorcinelli, & van Hoene, 2017). Starting a CTL is an exciting but complex endeavor, requiring a strong awareness of institutional culture and needs. Administrators, faculty, and other stakeholders can support the starting (or restarting) of a CTL through both practical and symbolic efforts that signal the importance of the new CTL to the institution.

The nature of a CTL—what work it undertakes and how it approaches its work—is highly context-dependent. The authors of this piece represent a number of different institutions and institutional types. The specifics of what our centers do and how they do it vary: for instance, in an institution with a high volume of online courses, the CTL is heavily involved in training and certification around online teaching; in an institution that is part of a highly integrated state university system, the CTL helps to facilitate teaching conversations between the institution and the system; in a small liberal arts college, the CTL director has direct connections with a high percentage of faculty and academic administrators on campus in a way that a CTL at a large research university, even with a much larger center staff, cannot replicate in the same way (Cook & Kaplan, 2011; D'Avanzo, 2009). As varied as we are as a group of authors, we represent only a fraction of the specific roles CTLs play in their institutions.

Nevertheless, across our varied experiences, we share a sense of the questions, frameworks, and possibilities that any institution should consider when starting or restarting a CTL. The support and collaboration of key campus stakeholders can be most beneficial at this broader level, helping to position the new center for the greatest impact and success.

Why have a center? What can one do for an institution?

CTLs provide resources and support in areas where faculty are expected to perform but are often unevenly prepared with the tools and training they need to succeed. Through a variety of services and initiatives, CTLs tangibly support faculty to meet the multiple and rigorous expectations of the institution. More importantly, they foster a generative teaching and learning culture and supportive community for faculty. A CTL

can serve a strong symbolic function, representing to faculty that the institution is committed to their growth and celebrates their continued success and the success of their students. The link between faculty success and student success is strong, and there is compelling evidence that educational development leads to improved student learning (Condon, Iverson, Manduca, Rutz, & Willett, 2016; Wright, Horii, Felten, Sorcinelli, & Kaplan, 2018).

CTLs are committed to informing and advancing the institution as a whole. They can play a leadership role in organizational change and contribute to an institution becoming a true learning organization, one that upholds learning as an ongoing, collective effort (Diamond, 2004; Kezar, 2011; Senge, 2006). Many institutions are facing significant changes in areas such as demographics and funding models, and in these contexts getting educators excited about meaningful change is crucial. Campus stakeholders can support the deep impact of their CTL by ensuring a seat at the leadership table and by integrating the CTL's work into the heart of the institutional mission (Schroeder, 2012). In turn, the CTL staff work to advance the institution's strategic mission and to motivate and empower faculty to do the same (Beach, Sorcinelli, Austin, & Rivard, 2016).

CTLs can serve an integrative function, bringing together groups of faculty, staff, and administrators from across an institution. A CTL can serve as a collaborative hub "through which problems, solutions and participants flow… to channel the various different flows of people and information in intentional and meaningful ways" (Cruz, 2018, n.p.). Often, educational developers have come to this work through faculty ranks and/or through conventional academic pathways (Little & Green, 2016). They understand faculty priorities, stances, and language; faculty and CTL staff therefore find themselves natural allies (a relationship meaningfully facilitated by CTL confidentiality policies). On the other hand, educational developers also work for the greater good of the institution, supporting long-range, strategic innovations even if these can, at times, lead to challenges that are painful, contested, or misunderstood. The CTL and its staff can work between different stakeholder groups to facilitate change and provide constructive and collaborative pathways toward common teaching and learning goals (Cohen, 2010).

What do centers do? What can stakeholders do to support the work of a center?

CTLs have many possible roles, structures, and practices based on the unique challenges and conditions that arise in a variety of institutional contexts (Kelley, Cruz, & Fire, 2017). Large institutions may have CTLs with a substantial and varied staff, whereas smaller institutions sometimes have a director and no additional staff. Many CTLs focus their work on teaching and learning, but others engage with

faculty on all forms of development, including research and service. Some CTLs also include the institution's instructional technology staff, and in institutions that offer many online courses, the CTL often has staff and programming specifically devoted to supporting this work. Additionally, CTLs may collaborate with other units on campus (including but not limited to IT, libraries, institutional assessment, writing and/or math centers, and student learning support centers) to realize shared goals. Yet even within the same broad institutional type, cultures and priorities vary widely; this specific institutional culture should play the largest role in shaping the nature of the CTL and the scope of its work.

Building a new CTL is not a matter of emulating a set of best practices or slate of programs developed at other institutions. The scope, structure, and role of the CTL reflects the campus culture and complements other systems in place to support faculty and student success (Gray & Shadle, 2009). For these reasons, it is useful to emphasize not particular services or programming, but rather processes by which educational developers and supportive campus stakeholders can work together to adapt knowledge from evidence-based practice to the goals in a specific institutional context (Cruz, Parker, Smentkowski & Smitherman, 2019; Kezar & Eckel, 2011). These processes may include those with tangible outcomes, such as strategic planning, but also those that are harder to quantify, such as building relationships or influencing campus norms and values (Wright, Lohe, Pinder-Grover, & Ortquist-Ahrens, 2018).

Once the role and scope of the CTL is defined according to institutional culture and needs, the administration must consider support around budget, personnel, space, and reporting. The budget allotted to the CTL should allow it independently to fund programming initiatives and other services. The number and configuration of staff, including whether the director and other CTL personnel have faculty or staff appointments, will depend upon the center's scope and priorities. In terms of space, the CTL should be located in a central and respected location on campus, even in contexts where size and budget constraints mean that the center consists only of an office for the director (Sorcinelli, 2002). The physical space, in addition to serving the practical function of hosting consultations, collaborations, workshops, and other services, can signal to faculty the degree of institutional support for the new CTL.

The reporting structure of the CTL can also make a big difference to its success. In small institutions it can be useful for the CTL director to report directly to the provost; in larger institutions, it may be more logical for the CTL to report to the member of the provost's team who can best support the work of the center and ensure it is integrally connected to teaching and learning endeavors across the institution. Ideally, the

CTL staff will have a voice in key committees and task forces related to teaching and learning, something the reporting structure can help to facilitate (Siering, Tapp, Lohe, & Logan, 2015). Prioritizing these aspects of CTL structure and management ensures that the institutional mission and the development of faculty are prominent and visible to the entire campus community (Frantz, Beebe, Horvath, Canales, & Swee, 2004).

Another essential aspect of CTL organization and function involves confidentiality and independence in interactions with faculty. In order to gain the trust of the faculty they serve, CTLs must exist outside the evaluation, tenure, and promotion apparatus. This may be confusing to administrators since elements such teaching observations and gathering and analyzing student feedback may be part of CTL services and independently part of faculty evaluation. But the separation is essential: confidentiality is important not only for instructors themselves but also for a CTL's commitment to formative feedback with the sole purpose of improving faculty teaching and student learning. If a center's role is potentially punitive or is perceived as such, faculty will be less likely to seek the open-ended, evidence-driven, and innovative interactions that a CTL can provide.

Conclusion

We have focused here on starting or restarting a CTL, but it is useful to remember that both new and established centers go through iterative stages. Stage one, where a new center may start, is primarily focused on education and advocacy; stage two is about capacity building, including developing a slate of programs, initiatives, and plans; stage three is about maintaining and finding appropriate balance; and stage four is about reflection and making way for the cycle to renew again (Cruz et al., 2019). All of these stages are undergirded by continuous assessment to determine what is working effectively and what could be improved. Therefore, even if a CTL is not new, it can undergo multiple periods of renewal as it grows and adapts to institutional culture. An emphasis on these stages can be encouraging to those who worry about getting everything "right" from the beginning: not only is it a process, but through this process, the positive contributions of the CTL to the work of the institution can be sustained.

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