

## **Public Policy Centers**

We introduce this issue by letting you know that we are both directors of university-based public policy centers. Over the past few years we have talked with each other, and other directors as well, about projects that we've been working on, that involve our institutions and the communities within which they are located. During that time we've considered the challenges of directing such centers, and speculated about their patterns of interaction with public problems and university culture.

When the opportunity to edit this edition of *Metropolitan Universities* came up, it coincided with Rob's planned sabbatical leave and his desire to conduct what he believes to be the first systematic national survey of university-based public policy institutes and centers. For the purposes of this issue, we focus our attention on university-based centers that have an applied research and service mission. These are entities established by universities both to further the "citizenship" of the institution, its faculty, and its students, and to bring the resources of the university to bear on the most pressing issues facing the city, region, and/or state of which they are a part. We use the word "center" as a general term to stand for both institutes and centers sharing this fundamental mission.

Together we identified a number of centers and institutes across the country, some old and some new, and asked each director to develop a case study that focuses on the lessons they've learned. In particular, we were interested in discovering whether there were common features in their experience, especially with the often intricate juggling act needed to balance institutional realities with community expectations. There is a small but spirited literature on the role of public policy research and service centers in universities. Our desire was both to advance our understanding of what it means to direct, nurture, and sometimes defend one of these entities, and to provide access to case studies for those individuals and institutions contemplating their own next steps.

The articles that follow provide a good place to start. Melnick begins with a critical analysis of university-based centers and institutes and some of the key features of how they're organized and what they do. Each case study then provides an overview of the history and structure of a particular center, and the lessons learned during the course of its activities. While each of the centers tells its own unique story, five common themes emerge.

First, although there is often a stated desire to engage faculty in the work of the center, this frequently turns out to be difficult. Institutional reward structures, the demands of individual disciplines, and even the nature of intellectual freedom itself often work against the involvement of faculty in the work and evolution of centers. Consequently, the relationship of university-based centers to the main mission of most urban universities—teaching and research—is often elusive. This makes the operation of a

center and its connection to the university a balancing act, since, for many faculty and departments, centers play mainly an off-campus, invisible role and engage in activities that many academics do not recognize as being scholarly.

Tim Hodson, Executive Director of the Center for California Studies and associate professor of government and of public policy and administration at California State University, Sacramento, provides in his article an example of how this issue can play out when he writes: "...the university system does not generally consider research as meritorious unless it is published in a refereed journal. To illustrate, a department chair told a CSU faculty member who completed an excellent faculty research report on teen pregnancy that the report would not be included in her tenure file because it was done for a legislative committee. The provincialism of many academic reward systems obviously discourages many faculty from participating in Center projects."

Second, funding occurs through many different mechanisms. Almost all centers use a mix of sources, including internal university resources. The expectations that the community has for a center, and its ability to pick and choose the public issues it pursues, is significantly affected by the balance in its budget between direct public funding (usually via a state appropriation) and grants and contracts. The case of the University of Washington's Institute for Public Policy and Management provides an interesting example of a center that looks with ambivalence on its history with this balancing act. Betty Jane Narver, its director, puts it this way in her article: "...in the mid-1980s until the present, the Institute has never been blessed, or cursed, with a firm core of state-funded support."

Third, in more than one case, graduate students are essential to the operation of a center, not just because they are less expensive than faculty but also because they are more flexible in their interests. Tom Scott, Director of the University of Minnesota's Center for Urban and Regional Affairs and professor of political science, acknowledges the critical role of graduate students in the success of his center when he points out that "Without graduate students we could not begin to do what we do." And, although policy centers typically do not include teaching as an explicit part of their mission, there is ample evidence in the case studies that they provide important, real-world opportunities for graduate students to learn and apply social science research techniques and to engage in meaningful public service.

Fourth, the two mainstays of center activity could be described as facilitating dialogue and providing applied research services. Centers bring people together, create forums, provide data and contacts, disseminate research, and generally act as intermediaries on public issues in their communities. Such is the case for Portland State University's Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies. Director Ethan Seltzer writes that "...the Institute is the only civic organization with a metropolitan span of interest" and "...members of the Institute's Board report that one of the greatest satisfactions of serving is the opportunity to learn about the region and meet leaders from other communities." And, although few centers have a conscious community-building mission, they all engage in that activity in one form or another.

The case studies prove that in doing so, a serious tension can be created in centers when the inherent proclivity to provide a neutral, objective forum abuts the political

rough-and-tumble world that envelops any community issue of consequence. Objective facilitation and the provision of information that informs public discourse are very useful services, but the pressure is almost always there to become an advocate. This is one reason that Wim Wiewel, Dean of the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs, and Chancellor David Broski, both of the University of Illinois at Chicago, pose this question in their article: "In professions where the academic role and the citizen role are close together (such as in public policy and planning), what responsibility does an academic have to be objective when making public statements?"

Fifth, these centers play a unique role in the modern university's mission. As such, they are subject to a unique set of internal and external pressures. "The Center for California Studies," writes Tim Hodson, "...exists in a borderland between academe and state government; between public policy oriented think tanks and interdisciplinary studies; between graduate education and career training....Borderlands are those places where the rules, norms, expectations and structures of two or more cultures meet, sometimes in great synergistic creativity and sometimes in frustrating conflict and misunderstanding."

It seems that, on the one hand, centers help their universities respond to the increasing demand for the academy to become more relevant by applying their resources to developing timely and practical solutions for public problems. And, on the other hand, centers are expected to adhere to the same canons of scholarship as academic departments, even when this approach would cause their research products and analyses to be less timely and more technical than public decision-makers need.

Undoubtedly, there are other themes to extract from these cases. There are also a number of initiatives that readers of this journal might want to consider:

*Case studies.* There is certainly room for additional case study research of these centers and institutes. Those we present here suggest common themes and concerns. However, contextual, political, cultural, and disciplinary issues could and should receive significant additional attention. There has been a tremendous increase in the number of centers in the last three decades. This is an ideal time to promote the notion of reflective practice through the development of case studies that inform a broad audience.

*Faculty rewards.* The case studies point out a huge disconnect between the stated objective of most centers to seek faculty involvement and the reality that participation in center activities is often at the margin of faculty reward structures. This is an issue faced not only by centers, but by universities in general as they attempt to establish their identity and redefine their mission as urban universities. Additional work clearly needs to be done to develop new models for increasing center-based faculty scholarship and departmental reward systems that recognize faculty participation in applied, multidisciplinary efforts.

Mel Hill, former long-time Director of the Carl Vinson Institute of Government at the University of Georgia and currently Robert G. Stephens, Jr. Senior Fellow in Law and Government in the Institute for Higher Education at the university, provides in his article one such model (a matrix of teaching/research/service) as a point of departure for further research on this subject. And, in the absence of continued new thinking about this problem, analyses should be undertaken to determine the effect of eliminating this objective in the creation and management of these centers.

*Institutional citizenship.* Universities, particularly urban and metropolitan universities, encounter great challenges and great opportunities by seeking to align themselves more closely with community needs and objectives. Becoming an active community member carries with it serious responsibilities, pushes, and pulls. John DeGrove and M.J. Matthews describe the important role that the Joint Center has played in the growth issues faced by Florida. As Mel Hill puts it, "In terms of their public service mission, universities should be first and foremost in the business of building relationships with the people." Thus, understanding the roles that centers play in assisting their universities to become active citizens, and studying the citizenship of the centers themselves, hold promise for assisting the broader university with determining the contribution it should make to the community.

*Creating a learning community.* We've learned a tremendous amount from each other and from the authors of the cases presented here. However, much more could be learned from a face-to-face interaction with a larger group of the scholar-managers of these centers and institutes. An opportunity to share stories and explore "best practices" in depth would add significant value to the work these centers are doing in their respective universities and communities. We are contemplating the creation of a forum for centers and the people who make them work and would welcome your thoughts on this matter.

We are very grateful to our authors for the work they are doing in their universities, the contributions they are making to their communities, and the time they've put into sharing their stories and their insights. We'd like to hear from you, too. If you are interested in the stories and lessons presented here and have some ideas about what ought to follow, please contact either of us. We would be happy to share what we hear and what we know.