**Ten Challenges in Creating and Running an Academic Center – Research or Otherwise**

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I have been associated with Academic Centers most of my career. I worked with Seymour Sudman and Robert Ferber at the University of Illinois Survey Research Center and did my dissertation under Seymour with a NSF Grant through the National Opinion Center at the University of Chicago. Additionally, at the University of South Florida, I started a live-in Servant Leadership House (a 30-person residence hall) and a leadership center. While at Jacksonville University, I was hired as the Founding Director of the Davis Leadership Center, funded by the Winn Dixie family. Recently, as Dean at Loyola University New Orleans, the college started a Center for Entrepreneurship and Community Development.

**What is an Academic Center?**

Centers come in all shapes and sizes with varying missions. Some centers earn national and international reputations while others tend to have only local recognition. My experience as Dean leads me to believe that, more often than not, the general public and most university stakeholders do not understand the concept of a center within a university. I would get questions like: Does the center grant degrees? Where is it housed in the university? What does it do?

As I noted, centers come in all shapes and sizes. The best and simplest way I found to describe a center was to use the metaphor of a “retail store’ sponsored by a department, college, or university. This metaphor helps people differentiate the center as a “store front” with a particular mission and identity. Most centers are authorized by a college or university and have a specific mission aimed at a particular internal or external stakeholder group. No matter the size, shape, or direction, Center Directors encounter and must effectively respond to at least ten challenges on a regular basis.

**Challenge #1 - Beware of the Seduction of the Center Concept**

It is human nature to want to do your own thing – to make a difference, a contribution to some cause. The center concept can be seductive, as there is a sense of innovation and excitement associated with a center devoted to teaching and/or research and which has passionate followers. Consider any number of topics across a university that might gain traction. For business colleges, centers of neuroscience or artificial intelligence come to mind. Starting a center might, on the surface, look like the opportunity of a lifetime, BUT—there are many challenges which may, over time, dampen one’s enthusiasm.

**Challenge #2 - Beware of Resources being Drawn into a Black Expense Hole**

Initial and continued funding sources are the lifeblood for any center to survive. Be careful of the classic lines “build it and they will come” and “as director, you can raise the funds.” It takes time and effort to run a center without taking on the task of keeping it financially afloat.

**Challenge #3 - Beware/Avoid the Hamster in a Wheel Syndrome**

Academic center directors/co-directors wear many hats: professor, researcher, ambassador, staff manager, faculty colleague, program developer, trainer, and marketer to name a few. With all of these expectations, it is easy to fall in the hamster wheel – running continuously and getting nowhere. Having a staff is a MUST. Without staff, the job of starting or running a center is next to impossible.

**Challenge #4 - Nail Down the Center Mission and Scope**

Make sure the mission is well framed and do not accept a mission where the center is “all things to all people.” Questions like “What does this center do?” and “What does it *not* do?” are fundamental to guiding behaviors. It also is important to have answers to these two questions in writing and signed off by the appropriate authorities.

In any center, you have to be mindful of the various stakeholders and their expectations. Some centers are started with a lax or fuzzy charter and, therefore, suffer from the Rorschach effect. Rorschach inkblot tests are projective methods used by psychologists which allow subjects to describe images and feelings based on their perception of an inkblot flashcard. If not careful, the success of a center may be viewed differently by various groups, each with their own projection or perception of what the success of any one center looks like.

**Challenge #5 - Have a Complete Strategic Plan Early and Publish it for Circulation**

The plan should include mission and vision statements, a swot analysis, strategic initiatives, action plans over a time horizon, and annual budgets. The plan should include milestones so that there is no confusion regarding the center’s progress. Be sure to get agreement on the strategic plan and budget from “the powers that be” to make things happen.

**Challenge #6 - Beware of the Slow Loris Effect**

The center will need staff – a strong staff who are proactive. The Slow Loris is a nocturnal primate that moves very slowly in all it does. It is an attractive little animal with big eyes and humanlike hands. It is endearing but moves very slowly. A Slow Loris staff will be detrimental to the success of the center. In the center, there must be a sense of, for lack of a better word, URGENCY. So, hire wisely and staff the center with people who possess a record of strong accomplishments.

**Challenge #7 - Get the Locus of Control**

If the director is going to stand responsible for a center’s performance, then it is imperative that he/she has the authority to be proactive without being micromanaged from above. A micromanager will dampen human initiative and steer the center down the path to failure.

**Challenge #8 - Remember Academic Amnesia (no pun intended)**

If you are a tenure-earning faculty member, then you must be mindful of promotion requirements. If you are off on your own in the “retail store,” then you may be out of sight from your tenure-voting colleagues. In this case, it may be that “absence does not make the heart grow fonder.” You may be subject to a “What have you done for the department?” type question from the tenure faculty committee.

**Challenge #9 - Beware of the Corn!!**

If you are at a university in the middle of, let’s say, Illinois or Iowa, surrounded by beautiful corn fields, you may be isolated from donors, from companies that send executives to your training programs, or from guest speakers who would otherwise visit the center. Physical distance from metro areas can make things difficult for a center director. Get your Dean or department head involved in external relations and fundraising.

**Challenge # 10 - Protect your Flanks**

As a center starts to become successful, other departments or divisions may try to hire your staff away. If this happens, you will lose that person’s external contacts and organizational memory. One solution, if starting a sales center, is to hire a semi-retired sales executive as a co-director to build external relationships. In this case, a sales executive will be viewed externally as “one of us” by his industry colleagues and speak their language.

**Final Note**

The above 10 challenges should be viewed as cautions – not limitations. Centers are a wonderful way to bring real world experiences to your students, to enhance research projects, and to help launch successful careers. If you get the opportunity to create a center, my advice is to GO FOR IT. However, plan your center with these 10 challenges in mind and don’t jump into anything haphazardly.