

Confluentcenter for Creative Inquiry - Program Review

Review Committee

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Introduction

Our external review committee was convened April 19-21, 2017 at the University of Arizona to provide a Periodic Review for the Confluentcenter for Creative Inquiry. This center is one of many interdisciplinary research centers managed through the Office of Research, Development and Innovation. Our charge was to provide a comprehensive review of the center's recent activities, assessing its successes and challenges, and identifying opportunities for growth and improvement.

During our visit, we met with faculty collaboration grantees, members of the center's Advisory Board, faculty affiliates, community stakeholders, graduate fellows, center staff and leadership, and academic leaders from the colleges of Humanities, Fine Arts and Social & Behavioral Sciences. We presented our initial findings to Dr. Kim Espy, Senior Vice President for Research, Dr. Brooks Jeffery, Associate Vice President of Research, and Javier Duran, Director of the Confluentcenter.

Our final report will consist of our general observations, our response to directed questions provided us by Dr. Espy, some other observations, and a review and extension of our recommendations.

General Observations

The Confluentcenter for Creative Inquiry is a remarkable asset to the university, and the university should take pride in this innovative resource that is at the forefront of interdisciplinary research practice in the arts and humanities. The scholarship being created through the Confluentcenter's support or leadership has been transformative to the participating faculty and students, along with the communities in which outreach has been active.

Under the extraordinary leadership of Dr. Duran, the center has established itself as a successful facilitator of interdisciplinary activities, grants and scholarship, despite inadvertent structural and financial limitations. It's nimble and flexible administration has enabled unique interactions and activities that can be challenging for traditional disciplinary research structures.

We are convinced that the center can and should become a model for expansion of interdisciplinary research activities across the broader university, either as inspiration to other units or as the locus of that expansion.

Directed Questions

1. *Consider and assess the overall impact of Confluentcenter activities and programs on success in external research funding, impactful scholarship, faculty recruiting, training and outreach, and note any particularly distinctive contributions that have ensued.*

The Confluentcenter has had a very strong impact on scholarship and creative activities in the three founding colleges and across campus. Its particular strengths have been in programs of public engagement, facilitating interdisciplinary collaborations (both on and off campus), and providing deep and meaningful engagement with underserved communities (on and off campus, local and national).

The transformative impact on participating faculty and graduate students has been profound. We heard many stories of the impact the center's seed grants have had, especially for those in disciplines not typically driven by grant-funded research. One graduate student credited her recent university job offer directly to the support and financial assistance of Confluentcenter and its staff.

Although direct external funding to the center has been limited, and not part of the institutional culture, there is strong anecdotal evidence that the center's seed grants and speculative research projects have led to successful extramural grant proposals. But because the center's unique impact upon campus research projects is often at the very first stages of development, when staff encourage and facilitate the early interdisciplinary conversations, its broader impact is masked due to limited follow-up tracking of cohort proposals.

2. *Does Confluentcenter's identified strategic research direction align well with founder priorities and member strengths? Given the strengths of its investigators and the UA research infrastructure, are any areas of external funding opportunity missing? Conversely, are there any areas stated that seem less likely to succeed? If so, please recommend any additional tactics that might improve success.*

The center has developed a rich and diverse collection of interdisciplinary expertise through their internal grant and fellowship programs. But the center itself does not have a clear strategic research direction beyond interdisciplinary research writ large.

We recommend that:

- A faculty task force should be created to develop clear research themes that leverage faculty expertise, and
- the task force should include targeted faculty, administration and community stakeholders (Latino and Native American constituents).

We also suggest that new opportunities can be found in medical-, technology- and engineering-themed collaborations with arts/humanities/social science disciplines, where the University of Arizona has great strengths.

3. *Consider how Confluentcenter has facilitated collaboration across the university, and make recommendations how to build additional institutional interdisciplinary research activity and capacity in order to realize new levels of external funding success.*

The center is extremely successful in building collaborative coalitions among faculty. However, the center is beyond capacity in facilitating any additional activities, including coordinating events, growing community engagements, and providing grant development and post-award management.

We recommend that the center consider strategies identifying and applying for center-directed research, as well as other fee-supported services that faculty cohorts could use on individual extramural proposals as direct costs. To address center-led research, faculty should identify core research themes around which projects could be developed.

4. *Consider how Confluentcenter has facilitated collaborations with industry and/or other external organizations, and make recommendations on areas of opportunity for additional partnerships and tactics that might be effectively pursued.*

The center has been outstanding in establishing collaborations with community organizations, especially in areas of underserved populations and economic zones. This has created a positive reflection on the center and the university at large. We see opportunities for growth with community engagement in Native American communities both inside and outside of the city proper.

5. *The linking of research into our communities to drive innovation and public benefit, as well as promote broader economic development has been an increasing role for URICs. Where does Confluentcenter have additional opportunities for fostering innovation through community linkages, as well as advance economic development?*

The center's use of downtown venues has had a profound impact on regional economic development. Continued engagement with local business, especially in underserved communities can be further leveraged to great benefit. This engagement brings new audiences to university

research and scholarship, and can be a model for other entities wishing to expand their public outreach.

6. *Are there additional goals and/or actions that Confluentcenter should consider adding to its 5-year research plan to augment and strengthen its contribution to the university's research portfolio, external funding portfolio and impact? Please make recommendations on how to advance the visibility and reputation for excellence of Confluentcenter's research in connection to the university's research profile.*

We believe that the unique nature of the center requires more hands-on management in order to reach any growth targets for external funding, community outreach, and university impact. We also believe that the center can serve as a service unit to assist other projects with outreach and community building. To this end, we recommend the following actions:

- Increase director's FTE to 50%
- Work to include the center's resources for research, engagement and programming alongside community partners part of the portfolio offered in other university grant proposals and public communication.

7. *Advise what changes, if any, should be considered to its administrative organization, staffing, space assignment, and/or physical facilities that would enhance its contribution to the university's research strategy, outcomes and success.*

The review committee understands the need for uniformity and consistency across University Research Institutes and Centers (URIC). And while there are some specific needs unique to the community building mission of Confluentcenter, we agree that it should have administrative and financial autonomy comparable to the other URICs in the ORDI portfolio. We heard several accounts of unnecessary administrative roadblocks put forth by staff outside of the center. We recognize that this runs contrary to the wishes of the VPR and that good communication between relevant parties should address this issue.

We see an opportunity to add an associate director who could be tasked with helping the director interact with staff, as well as take charge of new community activities in the Native American community. The right person could help grow the center's reach and impact.

In reviewing the center's budget, we noticed that the recently hired grant writer was supported in part from the center's budget. We believe this was an oversight and artifact of the origins of the center. Releasing this salary line from the center could enable additional support for the director, associate director or center programs.

8. *The ORDI recently has added research support services such as research development, strategic business initiatives, global research alliances, and private philanthropy. Please*

make recommendations of how Confluentcenter might optimally utilize these services to increase their research capacity, external funding and success.

We were unable to meet with Kim Nicolini, who is part of ORDI's support services team, to discuss her interactions with the center. But we met her by teleconference the following week. She spoke of several center-led workshops which ultimately led to successful extramural funding. And although her responsibilities extend across the entire Arts, Humanities, and Social Science faculty, she has worked diligently to engage the center with opportunities for funding and proposal development.

That said, there appears to be a disconnect between the research development services and the center. The center believed that because 50% of Ms. Nicolini's salary line was in their accounts that she should provide 50% of her attention to the center. Ms. Nicolini's charge from the VPR was clearly for broader support, and communication between her and the center leadership has been poor.

We also see the need and opportunity for philanthropic giving to a unit like Confluentcenter. Typically, humanities research centers depend on philanthropic giving to underwrite some of their activities, and we met with two community leaders who demonstrated that there could be opportunities in from both businesses and individuals.

To address these issues, we recommend the following:

- Create strong and regular communication channels between ORDI leadership, the ORDI support services and the center to make sure there is clear understanding of everyone's roles and responsibilities.
- Identify and address research-driven grants and philanthropic gifts for Confluentcenter with naming opportunities, targeted investments and identified projects.
- Offer the publicity, mediation and public engagement capacity of the center to URIC and faculty extramural proposals with direct charge activities that can underwrite the center's staff.

Other Observations

We identified a few additional activities that would be useful in helping administration and future external reviewers understand the full impact of the center. This includes:

- Tracking funded projects as well as development of new proposals based upon the center's seed grants and graduate fellowships.
- Tracking the accomplishments of graduate and undergraduate students who have been supported by the center. This could include admission to graduate programs, academic job placement and additional grants.

- The Confluentcenter’s mission, current and future activities would be better served in a space that could facilitate research collaborations, including transient/visitor office space, collaborative lounges, meeting rooms and event spaces.

Recommendations

We summarize and extend our recommendations for the center under the following cohesive themes: Institutional Initiatives, Fundraising, and Faculty/Students.

Institutional Initiatives

We believe the Confluentcenter for Creative Inquiry meets the expectations and programmatic targets for reauthorization. In order to grow and sustain the center’s activities, we recommend the following actions:

- Increase Director’s effort to 50%
- Hire a faculty member to serve as Associate Director
- Assure administrative autonomy for the center, particularly related to resolving budgetary issues and inquiries.
- Explore the opportunities and priorities of a larger and more centrally located space to house the Center.

Some additional recommendations that would help establish better connections with faculty and center cohorts:

- Work with the ORDI leadership and faculty to develop a new strategic plan that includes organizational needs, research foci, and community engagement. This should include exploring options for expanding the colleges involved with the center, which would enable broader interdisciplinary activities and projects. Strong consideration should be given to the colleges of Architecture, Journalism, Science, Law, Nursing and Medicine.
- Develop one time special initiative with the University marketing department to publicize the public engagement work of the Center.
- Engage center leadership and the Faculty Advisory Committee to meet annually and separately with each sponsoring Dean for a lunch or breakfast meeting.

Fundraising

Make philanthropic development a priority for the ORDI support staff, including a strategic approach for creating named gift opportunities at the center. This could include public events, scholarships and fellowships, on-campus lecture series, and internships for community engagement. Long-term, explore the opportunities of a major gift naming opportunity for the Center. Finally, ORDI should assist in the establishment of an external advisory committee charged with providing advice and counsel to the center in fundraising, community engagement and national impact.

Faculty and Students

The center has focused most of its on-campus activities on faculty and students. We recommend the following actions:

- Identify new funding streams to support the Graduate Student Fellowship Program. We found this to be one of the very best activities the center has pursued.
- Enable the Center to develop and manage off campus learning opportunities for students wishing to pursue inter-disciplinary community-based research initiatives.
- Develop a “Resident Scholar” program that could bring faculty from member colleges to serve a semester or academic year residency at the center. The Resident Scholar could be responsible with overseeing the community-based course, provide an annual lecture and create a special research initiative or project in her or his area of interest.
- The center should work with the Faculty Advisory Committee to develop a more formal connection or identity for faculty fellows after the term of their grant has expired. As well, we recommend creating programs and communication channels that reinforce the annual faculty cohort.