

December 12, 2008

## **Cleveland State University**

### **Campus Roundtable on Centers of Excellence**

A campus roundtable consisting of some thirty participants, including faculty members, deans, and members of the central administration took place at the Cole Center of Cleveland State University (CSU) on October 29-30, 2008. As part of the University's response to the Ohio Board of Regents charge that each of the state's public universities identifies specific Centers of Excellence, the roundtable's task was to consider the proposal of the Provost's Task Force on Excellence and Engagement to establish two such Centers, one focusing on health and the other on civic life. The roundtable was convened by CSU Provost, Mary Jane Saunders, as a means to foster reflection and dialogue among a range of people across the University about Centers of Excellence. The discussion was facilitated by Robert Zemsky of The Learning Alliance for Higher Education with the assistance of his Learning Alliance colleagues, Joan S. Girgus and Gregory Wegner. This document recounts major themes that emerged during the roundtable as its participants reflected on the concept of Centers of Excellence in general and considered the two specific Centers, which had been proposed.

#### **Impressions of CSU**

Following initial introductions in the evening gathering of October 29, Bob Zemsky gave a presentation summarizing results from individual interviews that members of the Learning Alliance had conducted with all roundtable participants in the weeks preceding the roundtable. When asked to describe CSU in a series of single words or succinct phrases, most members of the roundtable had chosen words that reflected growing strength and capacity for change. There were far fewer responses with a negative cast, and these characterizations clustered around themes of being challenged, undervalued, and troubled. The overall impression conveyed through these interviews was of a University that understands its strengths and perceives itself to be on the move. Some cautioned that this particular group may not be representative of the University as a whole, though in general it was thought that CSU's sense of internal momentum and progress is widespread.

The roundtable's deliberations began with a frank discussion of the dilemma of the University's location. On the one hand, the well-being of the University is linked to that of the City of which it is part, and it is a challenge to be an institution located in a city with a growing variety of short- and long-term problems. At the same time, there was a sense around the table that CSU is not fully understood or valued by the community of which it is part. Roundtable participants readily affirmed that the University's challenge is to continue its trajectory in building distinctive strengths, drawing on the opportunities available in Cleveland without being

limited by the City's own progress. It was thought that in pursuing its unique strengths and opportunities, CSU would also make its strongest contribution to the vitality of Cleveland itself.

Further discussion indicated other challenges that the University faces, including the tendency to become engaged in disciplinary or programmatic silos, low staff morale in some cases, and the difficulty of retaining faculty members in competitive fields. At times the discussion focused on the possibility that not all the University's colleges would see themselves participating equally in a limited number of designated Centers of Excellence, and on the concern that a decided shift toward Centers of Excellence could result in a dangerous pattern of winners and losers in which the latter would become little more than service departments. In the initial discussion of Centers of Excellence, several people emphasized that a clustering of energy and focus on any such Centers should not result in a diminution of CSU's identity as a comprehensive public university. Just as important, participants stressed that CSU Centers of Excellence should be designed to promote student engagement. The University should not seek to introduce a pair of mega-research centers in which most students and indeed many faculty would see themselves as outsiders or barely tolerated guests.

### **Centers of Excellence: Key Components**

The roundtable began Thursday morning with a discussion of what elements should characterize a CSU Center of Excellence. The exchanges affirmed that a Center of this kind would be different in scale and impact from many organizational units currently denoted as centers across the University. A Center of Excellence would be more than a name on a letterhead designating a small set of faculty members aligning to compete for external research grants. Centers of Excellence should be comprehensive in scope with a well-defined and effective administrative structure. In seeking to define how a Center of Excellence might be best described, the roundtable came to focus on a Center of Excellence as *a domain of interrelated expertise* that reaches out to rather than separates itself from the rest of the University.

In the course of discussion several concepts or models emerged as ways of characterizing Centers of Excellence. Centers of this type would be organic (drawn from areas of existing strength and promise); they would function as thematic umbrellas (providing an encompassing framework that imparts coherence and interaction among related departments and faculty members); they would be collaborative (drawing together strands of initiative from different departments and colleges to create approaches exceeding the boundaries of a single discipline); they would serve as instigators (capable of seeking and providing resources to undertake work in areas of focus); and they would constitute linked investments for the purpose of conjoining strengths in areas that are structurally separate within the University. The goals that were identified for a Center of Excellence included: increasing the public profile for the University; serving students better; doing things that cannot be done in an existing department or school operating alone; and making it easier to do business across departments and schools.

A Center of Excellence should have a well-defined scope that makes it possible to determine what areas do and do not fit its mission. Roundtable participants observed that while

the concept of a Center of Excellence lends itself readily to definition in the abstract, conflicts could begin to emerge as the development of such Centers enters the tunnel of specificity.

Part of the morning's discussion concerned the question of how Centers of Excellence would be funded. It was asked whether Centers of Excellence would come about with funds that are currently allocated to existing operations within the University. Could CSU expect the Chancellor to provide the additional funding to establish and sustain Centers of Excellence within the University? Discussion indicated that the Board of Regents' Strategic Plan places a strong emphasis on mission differentiation among Ohio's public universities; in encouraging higher education institutions to develop Centers of Excellence, the Chancellor seeks to foster a process through which each Ohio university identifies and pursues areas of particular strength that distinguish it from others. In addition, the Board of Regents' strategic plan conceives that Centers of Excellence should be a central means by which public universities contribute to the economic vitality of the state and its regions. The funding model that has been developed thus far gives substantial discretion to the Chancellor and Board of Regents in allocating funds to individual institutions. In effect, this model may cause Ohio's public universities to work more aggressively, possibly in competition with each other, to receive a level of financial support that was accorded as base funding for instruction in the past. While there may not be a substantial infusion of new funds to develop Centers of Excellence, the vitality and impact of such Centers will likely become key factors in Ohio's funding of its public universities.

There was a significant amount of discussion about the Biomedical and Health Institute (BAHI) and no real agreement on why it closed. Some of the participants felt that the University shouldn't repeat the mistakes of BAHI with these new Centers. Some observations suggested that BAHI had simply ceased to be a priority. It was also noted that BAHI did begin with some strengths – one of which was its developing web presence. It was suggested that the web presence might be a way to begin to conceptualize how the new Centers would look and who would be involved. A web presence would also give faculty a chance to see who was doing what to foster collaboration.

### **Center of Excellence in Health**

Next the roundtable came to focus on the first of two Centers proposed by the Provost's Task Force on Excellence and Engagement: A Center of Excellence in Health. Participants affirmed that a Center of this kind would be based on an area of existing strength for the University – a strength that is recognized within the University, across the region, and by the Chancellor and Board of Regents. Considering a Center in this domain helped draw attention to the more particular aspects of any Center of Excellence that CSU might establish. One of the first questions asked focused on the boundaries of a Center of Excellence in Health. For example, could an engineering project concerned with water quality be included in a Center of this type? What about courses or projects that study health issues in a historical context, for example, by focusing on major plagues? These and other questions underscored the need for any such Center to have a clear definition of boundaries. In delineating the nature of such Centers, it was proposed that the group address the academic domain in which it would be based; major goals it would pursue; structure; and metrics of progress.

One set of concerns centered on the structure of a Center of Excellence in Health: including its size, the nature of its leadership, and the relation of individual schools and departments to the operation of a Center. Should the University undertake a search for one or more major donors to establish a Center on a major scale – or should it start at a more modest level? Should a leader for a Center in this area be recruited through a national search or drawn from within the University? How would the decisions be made about what does and does not belong in the Center?

In the course of these exchanges a consensus emerged that a Center of Excellence should begin modestly. Several suggested that in the initial stages it would seem reasonable to seek a director from the formal or informal leadership of CSU's current faculty – a leader who knows and understands the strengths and potential of many academic units within the University. The leader should have the ability to inspire faculty members of energy and talent to contribute to the Center's initiatives. Starting on a more modest scale would provide a starting point or center of reference from which different ideas could emanate in different though related directions. It was suggested that the relation of individual pockets of excellence to the Center would be analogous to spokes of a wheel in relation to a hub; each spoke should be thought of as contributing to the strength of the Center and helping sustain its momentum.

Another school of thought within the roundtable was that the director should be an outsider, paid well, and brought in for his or her ability to generate energy and organize – this point of view was never reconciled with the point of view of hiring an existing faculty member.

It was thought that decisions about what would be included in a Center would depend on the goals a Center of Health established: biomedicine molecular basis of disease, health care, health science, health careers, and health policy were offered initially as natural areas of emphasis. Participants affirmed the importance of a Center of Excellence being strategic in setting goals, attracting the participation of individual departments and faculty members in the University, and seeking external funding to achieve those goals. In addition to having an effective leader, it would be important for a Center of Excellence in this area to have an advisory board consisting of faculty, administrators, and working professionals who would ensure that the Center remains attuned to developments in the field and addresses the needs of the constituencies a Center would serve.

The problem of getting an advisory board that could actually commit time was touched on but not discussed at length.

The concurrence among roundtable participants was that a Center of Excellence in Health would be well defined, embedded in research of several disciplines across the University, national and international in scope, capable of drawing energy and initiative from across institutional boundaries, beneficial to the economic and social well-being of the City and region, and measureable in its impact. It seemed reasonable to assume that the first year's budget of a Center of Excellence should be \$500,000. Some cautioned that under-funding a Center of this type could cause it to fail.

## **Center of Excellence in Civic Life**

Discussion of a Center of Excellence in Civic Life centered in part on whether the focus would be on the City of Cleveland, or if the Center's activities would extend more broadly to concern the region and the state. Participants again voiced the dilemma of CSU's relationship to the City of Cleveland and surrounding region. In many ways the University's location in an urban center allows for a range of engagements that would not be possible for most other public universities in the state. The City offers assets that can form the basis of partnerships and programming, including museums, the symphony, theater, and a cosmopolitan setting in general. The City also presents substantial challenges in terms of its residents' social, educational, and economic well-being. Roundtable participants were cautious about seeming to concentrate a Center of Excellence exclusively on the City of Cleveland. While the exploration and development of partnerships with the City and its institutions should be part of a Center of Excellence in Civic Life, participants expressed a desire for an extended geographical framework as well as a broader conceptual basis of such a Center. Because civic life specifically embraces the principle of citizenship examined, the roundtable affirmed that this Center must include the University's strengths in the liberal arts and sciences. No less important, this Center should also focus on developing a better understanding of the nature and character of civic life in an urban setting; for example, one area of focus could be on creating a sustainable, livable community in an urban environment; a formulation of this kind could include considerations ranging from physical infrastructure to the promotion of social, economic, and civic vitality.

It was observed that the goals of a Center of Excellence in this domain would link naturally to a host of CSU's colleges. Currently established programs in the Colleges of Business Administration, Education and Human Services, Engineering, Law, Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, and Urban Affairs can be expected to supply nuclei around which this Center of Excellence could build its programs. As with the Center of Excellence focusing on Health, the head of the Center of Excellence focusing on Civic Life would report directly to the Provost.

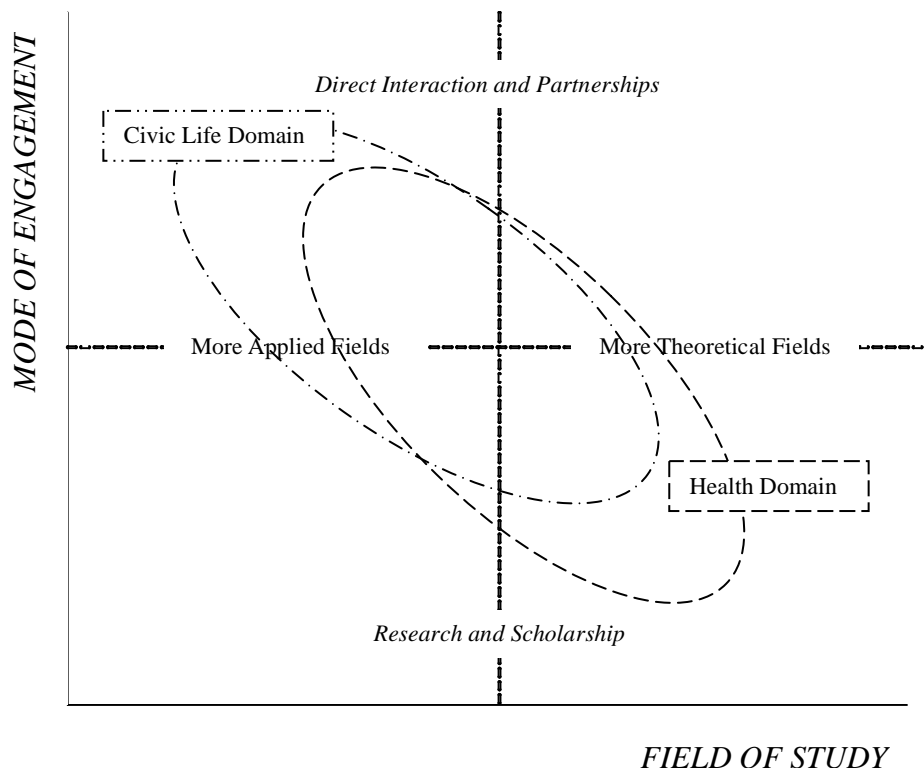
## **Other Potential Themes**

Following the discussion of the two proposed CSU Centers of Excellence, it was asked whether there might be additional areas or domains of expertise that offered the potential for development into a Center of this type. As in the earlier discussions, part of the question was to identify which academic groups or units on campus would be poised to anchor or nucleate a Center of Excellence in a given area. Three thematic areas were identified that could become the basis for Centers of Excellence. One possibility was a center on economic development, anchored in the College of Business Administration with links to other sources of strength with a bearing on economic development in a region. Another suggestion was for a center for creative and innovative thought, focusing on creative thinking and problem solving across domains of knowledge, involving music, visual, performing, and fine arts, computer sciences, and other academic units. Another suggestion was for a center focusing on space technology, drawing on several sources of scientific strength within the University.

After some consideration it was agreed that the two domains in which the University is best positioned to move forward at present are those which the Provost's Task Force had considered: in health, and in civic life. These two are the areas in which CSU has the most substantial clusters of strength with potential to become nucleating agencies for Centers of Excellence; as areas of concentration they are sufficiently elastic to incorporate many people and activities from across the University. The other suggestions may offer prospects for such Centers in the future, but it was thought best for CSU to focus on the two identified Centers in the foreseeable future. It was pointed out that the core assumptions that would guide the development of any Center should include the fact that CSU is a public university with a commitment to a comprehensive liberal arts education and to engaged learning. It is also a university with a commitment to enhancing the vitality and well-being of its community. In developing Centers of Excellence, CSU must build on the character and core values that define it as a public university in Ohio.

### **Institutional Synergy**

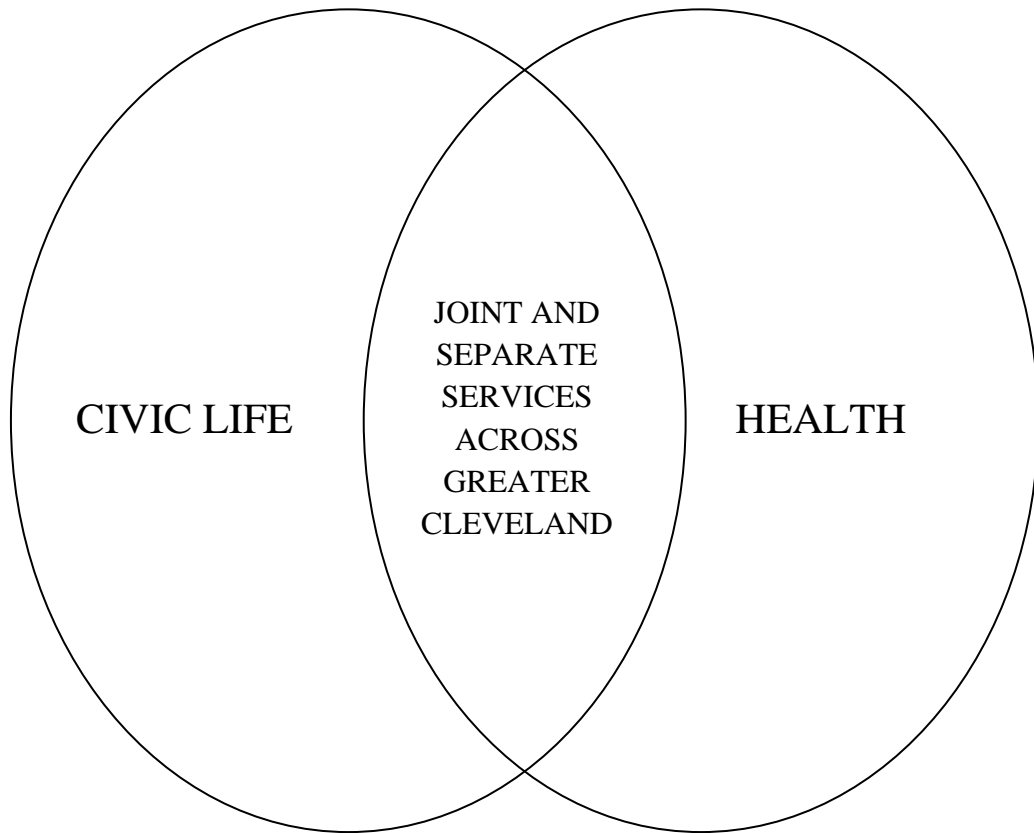
Ultimately what emerged from these discussions was a sense that the domains of the two proposed Centers of Excellence, while capturing two of CSU's particular strengths, also reflected



an unexpected synergy as depicted in two diagrams members of the roundtable envisioned. The first reflects the understanding that a Center of Excellence, whether focusing on Health or Civic Life, would necessarily involve a range of academic disciplines and several possible modes of engagement. The activities of any Center of Excellence might be conceived as falling within an area defined in one dimension by the academic disciplines involved, and in another dimension by

the modes of engagement employed in achieving a Center’s purpose. Both proposed Centers could have their domains mapped in this way, though, as such mapping would make clear, the Centers would be both related and different. The Center focusing on Health, for example would likely be sited more in the lower-right quadrant of the diagram above; the Center focusing on Civic Life more in the upper-left quadrant.

A second way the roundtable came to conceive of the synergy of the two proposed Centers of Excellence was in terms of a Venn Diagram showing that both Centers would undertake important actions that bring direct benefits to the Cleveland community and beyond.



The Venn diagram conveys that many of the activities and programs of the Center of Excellence focusing on Health – for example, its work with the Cleveland Clinic and its outreach programs – are forms of community engagement and hence direct contributors to civic life. Similarly, many programs of the Center of Excellence focusing on Civic Life – for example, an Engineering initiative focusing on physical infrastructure and water quality – would have a direct connection to the Center focusing on Health. Programs linking legal and urban health issues could similarly be supported by both Centers.

## **Metrics of Success**

The final segment of the discussion considered metrics by which the University would gauge the success of Centers of Excellence. It was observed that the Chancellor would seek nationally accepted metrics of impact in such Centers. Among the measures suggested:

- Scholarly and research productivity leading to publication in national venues;
- Levels of external funding attracted from all sources;
- Intellectual property developed as a result of Center projects;
- Quality of service provided to the community, as reflected for example in the ratings given to CSU health clinics;
- Number of students participating in internships created through a Center's activities;
- Number of graduate and undergraduate students participating in research projects linked to a Center;
- Number of graduates in key areas of study related to a Center;
- Job placement rates of graduates in the domain of a Center.

In addition to being relevant to gauging a Center's impact, these measures were thought to be feasible in terms of the effort required to collect data. While the list identified was not regarded as comprehensive, it was thought that the advisory committees formed for CSU Centers of Excellence would help identify measures suited to the mission and goals of a particular Center. The general discussion of metrics indicated that measures of impact on students' education would be key, as well as measures of a university's impact on a local community. It was thought that the survey on learning outcomes developed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) could provide a measure of learning in liberal arts disciplines, though in itself this survey would not likely capture the full effect of a Center's activities on student learning. It was also thought likely that the System Chancellor would develop a survey of employers to ask whether they are satisfied with the quality of graduates from Ohio public universities. Measures of this kind would supplement CSU's own collection of information to gauge the impact of its Centers of Excellence.

## **Promising Potential**

The roundtable concluded as it began, with a sense that CSU is a university with strong potential to continue building strengths and contributing to the vitality of the City and region of which it is part. Provost MJ Saunders thanked roundtable participants for their thoughtful contributions to this project. The purpose of the roundtable discussion, and of this written account of its exchanges, is to supplement the work of the Provost's Task Force on Excellence and Engagement, helping to inform the thinking of the Provost as she and the President advise the Board of Trustees about the Centers of Excellence that Cleveland State University should propose to the Chancellor, and as she gives shape to CSU Centers of Excellence in terms of size, leadership, structure, goals, budget, metrics, and other factors.

The prevailing sense of energy and enthusiasm through the course of this roundtable suggested that in developing Centers of Excellence, CSU has an opportunity to take a significant step forward in defining its identity as a public university with distinctive strengths in helping advance a major metropolitan region of Ohio.