Beyond the Retrofit— CTLs as Centers for Institutional Change: A Message From the Editor-in-Chief

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One of my principal concerns as a Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) staff member has involved ways our efforts at the center might best circulate throughout our institution and beyond. At the same time, Jay Dolmage's (2009) notions of "retrofitting" and "universal design" help me discern how news of CTL work might be spread not just far and wide, but so as to achieve particular results in a sustainable fashion. In other words, I hope not so much for our CTL to be just everywhere but everywhere to serve as a catalyst for ongoing dialogues geared to pedagogical innovation and to the institutional changes needed to motivate and maintain that innovation. Dolmage works primarily in the fields of rhetoric and disability studies, but his theories have enhanced my understanding of contributions CTLs can make to campus cultures, contributions I find highlighted in this issue of the *Journal on Centers for Teaching and Learning* (*JCTL*).

A retrofit, of course, is a device or fixture superadded to an existing structure. Within the context of Dolmage's disciplines, a most obvious example of retrofits would be the ramps affixed to buildings in order to provide access for people with wheelchairs. In this sense, the retrofit benefits those persons with disabilities, at least so far as it provides entrance to an otherwise inaccessible structure. In terms of CTL work, a retrofit might represent the outcomes of a consultation with an individual instructor who has difficulties generating class discussions or even those of a learning community that meets about ways the instructors gathered there might incorporate a new technology into their teaching. The retrofitted ramp does not, however, ensure that the rest of the building (its hallways, its water fountains, its doorways, or its restroom stalls) will be equally accessible, nor does it erase the stigma of having to negotiate a ramp to begin with—a retrofit is, after all, an afterthought, typically designed with little

attention to the aesthetics consistent with the main building. Similarly, in a place of higher learning, the existence of support for consultations or faculty learning communities does not, in itself, ensure that overall conditions at the institution will be amenable to new practices that may result (or even that the institution has not itself been responsible for curtailing new practices or generating ineffective ones). And in some situations, those faculty members who seek involvement with their CTL might even encounter stigma, might be marked as deficient for having experienced difficulty in the classroom or for having abandoned a research agenda in favor of teaching concerns.

Drawing on this comparison to the retrofit, I do not mean to disparage the CTL practices I list above. Like the ramp, which does hold an immediate benefit to those who need to use it, individual consultations and learning communities serve well those who participate in them. My associating them with retrofits, however, underscores for me our CTL's need to identify ways our activities might pose broader questions for a larger chain of institutional practices: Will there be technological support for faculty exploring the new technologies? Will other instructors and classes develop practices that curtail or facilitate students' use of the new technology? What kinds of cultural work are we undertaking as we move our students' and our own work more and more away from alphabetic and toward digital forms? How is student participation valued in other facets of campus life, and what are we doing across campus to help students recognize the long-term benefits of their public participation? How might a faculty member's overall well-being factor into her classroom performance and the performance of her students? These contextual considerations extend beyond isolated responses, no matter how prolonged these responses might be. They are questions that position CTLs as agents of paradigmatic change, as activist sites that ask not only why a teacher can't get her students to talk or what else a group of faculty can learn about a new technology, but also that ask what causes student passivity, what might ready the campus for ways new technologies will reshape knowledge production and circulation, and how the experiences and insights of an individual teacher and a faculty learning community might be brought into dialogue with one another.

For Dolmage, universal design (UD) represents a radical alternative to retrofitting. With UD, structures are developed from the very beginning with the greatest diversity of users in mind. There is no need to retrofit a ramp to the side of an entrance, for example, because the person with the wheelchair is imagined from the very beginning to be a user of the space. Ramps are a part of the original structure, as are accessible water

fountains and restrooms, and they are aesthetic matches, contributing to the beauty as well as to the functionality of the overall design. UD approaches to education operate along the same goals: They encourage the development of curricula and resources and programs accommodating the greatest diversity of learning styles and needs. Because my CTL work is situated on an open-access campus, Dolmage's vocabulary has been particularly attractive to me as a means of institutional critique—as well as curricular innovation—as our staff explores ways to enhance educational access and to empower our diverse body of students. The idea here is not just to retrofit various initiatives (quick, or even long, fixes or adjustments) to the status quo (which appears as "steep steps" in Dolmage's vocabulary), but to identify ways each of our efforts might be part of a broader building process that operates according to UD principles. This process focuses on the transformation of institutional practices that curtail innovation and on ways we can strengthen, extend, and bring into dialogue those innovations already underway. Within this framework, I consider how CTL practices such as those mentioned in this *JCTL* issue (gathering stakeholders for brainstorming sessions, writing proposals, constructing podcasts) can move us beyond seeing our work as retrofitting and toward transforming the broader environment in which we work.

The essay that opens this issue of *JCTL,* **John Tagg's** "Teachers as Students: Changing the Cognitive Economy Through Professional Development," draws together vocabularies (like "time horizon") that overlap with conceptions of UD and speak directly to the broad contexts in which CTLs operate and to the new learning culture they can construct. Building in part on the work of David Perkins (1992), Tagg's piece helps CTL workers understand their particular practices not in isolation but in terms of a cold or hot cognitive economy. A hot cognitive economy "encourages students to take a deep approach to learning rather than a surface approach" (p. 9). Such a perspective "see[s] the cognitive economy as the overall environment . . . that shapes choices for students" (p. 10). Tagg argues that CTL workers can "apply the same model to teachers" (p. 10). He writes, "professional developers are uniquely situated to change some features of the cognitive economy and to raise productive questions about how to heat up the cognitive economy overall" (p. 10). In light of these considerations of the "economy overall," Tagg's essay describes means through which CTLs can help instructors develop and maintain communities of practice that can negotiate the paradigm shifts necessary to develop and maintain a campus culture that is learning- rather than instruction-based.

For **Susan L. Phillips, Patricia B. Crane,** and **Susan T. Dennison**, in

"Establishing a New Faculty Mentoring Program: Proposal Development," the process of developing a proposal for a new faculty mentoring program can represent an integral place in what Tagg would call an institution's cognitive economy. The Teaching and Learning Center at the authors' university serves as an ideal location to generate a mentoring program from "the ground up rather than imposed from the administration down" (p. 44), a program that, in the end, saves the institution money through increased faculty retention but also benefits the school's effectiveness by helping teachers make meaningful connections among various aspects of their work (service, research, teaching). Phillips et al. involve various stakeholders in the proposal process, over the course of which the goal becomes "the development of the faculty member as a whole person, with needs not only in teaching, but in research, service, and life balance" (p. 47).

Looking evermore deeply into notions of life balance and how the well-being of faculty can determine the degree to which they can "create the optimum environment to nurture healthy students and healthy institutions" (p. 53), **A. Jane Birch** and **Tara Gray**'s "Workaholism in Academe: Strategies for Centers for Teaching and Learning" explores how CTLs may themselves be complicitous with institutional factors that encourage workaholism on the part of faculty and makes suggestions as to ways life balance issues might persist through and inform each aspect of CTL work. Not a retrofitted concern, matters of life balance grow central to the authors' CTL's mission, which is central to the health of the university: "If we wish to nurture institutions that support quality teaching and learning," they conclude, "then it should also be our goal to help faculty be more healthy, well-grounded, and well-balanced" (p. 66).

In "Inserting CTLs Into Campus Strategic Planning Through an Effective Brainstorming Process," **Charlie Sweet** and **Hal Blythe** detail a way that professional development centers can influence innovation throughout a broad range of campus functions. Sweet and Blythe develop a brainstorming practice they have come to call Ideation Development for Excellence in Academic Learning ("I.D.E.A.L.") that they use to help structure conversations among stakeholders in various campus initiatives, such as a project that responds to students in distress, the program review processes, and the activities related to their school's Quality Enhancement Program. Rather than assume productive conversations will emerge from any gathering of interested parties, the I.D.E.A.L. process helps their CTL ensure creativity across problem-solving groups and situations: "When people know they are part of a creative process," Sweet and Blythe argue, "they tend to be creative" (p. 86). Through the I.D.E.A.L. process,

in other words, their CTL shapes creative collaborations across multiple institutional sites, sites not necessarily tied immediately to classroom life but of defining significance to them nonetheless.

While Sweet and Blythe infuse new breadth and dynamics into a common CTL practice, **Matthew Evins**, in "Podcasting Initiative at the Center for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching, and University Assessment at Miami University (Ohio)," describes how podcasts might function as a new way for CTLs to reach a broader audience through technology. Responding to the results of a needs assessment that determined his center lacked short-term modes of teaching support, Evins helps the center design podcasts, edited versions of workshops and other forums, to help faculty negotiate time and place demands and engage with conversations they might otherwise miss. Just as Tagg applies language typically reserved for student development, Evins marshals previous scholarship on the impact of technology on student learning to identify technology's benefits for faculty development initiatives. Podcasts provide a means through which CTL programs can mingle with other aspects of faculty members' daily lives, sustaining conversations generated through the work of the center and inviting more members of the university community to join dialogues about teaching issues and innovations.

The significance of this use of technology to extend the range of CTL work emerges even more in light of **Deborah J. Clark** and **Bruce M. Saulnier's** "Broadening the Role of the Teaching and Learning Center: From Transforming Faculty to Transforming Institutions." For these authors, the CTL provides "a forum for bottom-up faculty, staff, and student empowerment and participation" (p. 111) in regard to university initiatives. Like Tagg's challenge to institutional practices that encourage cold cognitive economies, Clark and Saulnier's essay argues we are still "in need of a transformative institutional culture change" (p. 113) to develop and maintain the learning paradigm and "ongoing conversations about learner-centered teaching" (p. 113). Building on previous scholarship and reflecting arguments that Tagg lays out at the start of this issue, Clark and Saulnier focus on a particular case study to describe ways CTLs can be integral to institutional transformation—ways CTLs might transcend the issues typically "associated with individual faculty improving their teaching methods" (p. 113) and involve stakeholders across campus in building an innovative intellectual community.

Together, then, the pieces in this issue of *JCTL* represent not just a series of suggested retrofits to CTL work, but a network of sustainable practices that provide for deep changes in institutional structures. The articles highlight the various stakeholders, practices, and goals that CTLs are uniquely

positioned to orchestrate as part of a broader conversation in which all members of an educational community can play a part. Through such a conversation, one we hope *JCTL* can help coordinate and fuel, CTLs do not just administer guidance and resources on case-by-case bases or just operate a cluster of activities like so many retrofits to an inadequate mainframe. Rather, CTLs turn those cases and activities into questions that can challenge the design as a whole, especially where those designs might slow or deplete innovations struggling to be born.

References

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