Zakrajsek, T. (2023). CTL directors need to be centered. *Journal on Centers for Teaching and Learning, 15*, 72-83.

Special Feature:
CTL Directors Need to Be Centered

Todd Zakrajsek

Dr. Todd D. Zakrajsek began his career as an adjunct professor, teaching at a small private college, a technical school, and distance education classes for a large university. Securing a tenure-track position at a small regional college in the Pacific Northwest in the fall of 1994, Todd started a center for teaching and learning in his third year at that institution. For his efforts, he received a budget of $500 his first year. The following year his budget went to $5,000 and a one-course release. In year three, the budget was $20,000 with additional release time. While at that small regional college, he was promoted to associate professor and tenured, partly for his campus-wide faculty development work. In 2001, Todd resigned tenure to accept a position as the founding director of a center for teaching and learning at a research university in the Midwest. With an office consisting of himself and an office professional, he began to develop resources for a campus with approximately 650 full-time faculty members. In 2003, the provost merged the faculty development center he was leading with the learning technologies group. Todd became the director of the combined office, with a large staff and a budget of approximately $800,000. He also served as Co-PI on a Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) grant to provide resources to distance and adjunct faculty. In 2008, Todd resigned from his job as faculty development director to become the Executive Director of a large research extensive university in the South. There, he successfully assisted with the transformation of a long-standing and successful teaching center into a center providing support in teaching, research, and leadership; he was responsible for hiring six positions and managed a budget of $1.2 million. In 2012, Todd began working in the School of Medicine at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, as an Associate Professor in the Department of Family Medicine and in the Academy of Educators to assist in building resources for

faculty in the School of Medicine. He is still at the UNC School of Medicine. Concurrent with his institutional work, over the past 20 years, Todd has been directing Lilly Teaching Conferences and publishing extensively in the area of effective teaching and learning.

Given Todd's extensive experience in faculty development for 25 years in various types of institutions, regions, and faculty served, we have asked him to write a series on essential issues needed by directors of faculty development efforts. This series suggests areas for faculty developers to consider, along with tips and techniques Todd has found helpful along the way. In this issue, Todd describes CTL director's workload challenges and offers advise for avoiding burnout. If there is a specific topic you would like Todd to address, contact JCTL*'s incoming Editor-in-Chief at tony.cimasko@miamioh.edu.*

The Challenge

Shortly after I started teaching full-time at Southern Oregon State College (now Southern Oregon University), I realized it was easy to become overwhelmed. It seemed inevitable to some extent. Faculty members are bright individuals, are committed to helping others, and are in jobs with ill-defined roles. Yes, faculty have times they need to be in the classroom, office hours, and standing meetings. The rest of the job, though, continuously expands, demands surface, requests are made, and energy is expended. Pairing individuals who tend to work in higher education with primarily unstructured jobs can be fantastic, but it is also recipe for disaster. If you are intelligent enough to do something, feel the desire or need to do it, and have the freedom to fill out your schedule, being overworked is an almost inevitable conclusion. Compounding the issue is that, when nearly everyone in a system works long hours, being "swamped" is a defacto mutual expectation. Even if you figure out a way to get to the level of just being whelmed, you will likely be made to feel guilty. Some will likely feel you are not doing your share if you are not working evenings and weekends.

As an indication of the state of work expectations in higher ed, consider the accolades in the form of praise for academic work accomplished by an individual. Recently, I listened with great concern as an administrator bestowed a teaching award and described the recipient as "tireless, always willing to lend a hand when needed, running multiple programs, serving on

countless committees, and going above and beyond." Our system should not use an award to cement an expectation of the excessive amount of time a "good" employee works. Too many in higher education consider the extensive amount of work they do as a badge of honor. And, why shouldn't they? It is what is expected of us and, across time, often of ourselves. I once saw the light when leaving my office to head home at 4 pm, feeling like I was skipping out early. I smiled when I realized I had come in at 6 am that day. I can't recall, but I probably also spent a bit of time that evening prepping for the next day. It is because of this mentality that, a few years ago, I wrote a piece titled "Will you still respect me if I am not overwhelmed" (Zakrajsek, 2023). There is a cost to working tirelessly, always being willing to lend a hand, and going above and beyond. It is a cost that a plaque and a handshake cannot offset. It is also unsustainable.

Center directors work with faculty members, so it is imperative that we establish in our minds what it means to be a healthy worker, not an overwhelmed one. The first few years of teaching were challenging for me, but then I began to establish a decent work pattern. However, just as I was settling into a routine of long but not crazy hours, I accidentally started a center for teaching and learning (CTL). I say accidentally because when I first began helping faculty to learn strategies to become better teachers, I didn't know this was an established field. I was told to attend a POD Network conference and was quickly introduced to an amazing cast of characters. I quickly noticed that faculty developers (aka, educational developers) were bright individuals, cared very much about helping others, had relatively ill-defined jobs, and never had enough resources. After having just learned how to work as a whelmed faculty member, I was quickly overwhelmed again. There are even fewer guardrails and standards for center directors than for faculty members, so it is easy for the field of faculty development to turn into a bog.

Being a center director is challenging, even in the best of times. Unfortunately, we are not in the best of times. The challenging news is that working in higher education is predicted to be particularly difficult in the years to come. For one thing, the COVID pandemic exacerbated and accelerated several motivational and emotional challenges we faced prior to the pandemic. One of challenges centers on isolation and lonliness. The Office of the U.S. Surgeon General released a report (Kannan & Veazie, 2023) noting that social engagement and companionship with friends have decreased steadily since 2012. There are a host of disconcerting reports emerging about the mental health of our incoming students: High school students in every racial and

ethnic group steadily and increasingly report being persistently sad or hopeless (CDC, 2023). Second, the enrollment cliff we have been watching as it proceeded through K-12 will impact higher education starting in 2026. In addition, the percentage of individuals choosing to attend college has declined more quietly for several years. All numbers indicate that 2025 will be the peak attendance numbers for higher education, and shortly after, significant decreases will be anticipated for several years (Mathews et al., 2023). Third, the enrollment drops, and increased costs hit already strained budgets. Of course, the persistent challenges facing center directors over the years will remain.

I set up the challenge of our profession in terms of workload expectations followed by additional challenges we are facing because it is more important than ever that center directors have a plan to handle the stress of the position, now and in the future. We won't be able to do what needs to be done by "working tirelessly and going above and beyond." We will need to be vigilant in advocating for the most valuable asset we have: our health.

We are at a critical time to think carefully about how we proceed as professionals in our work as an essential resource for the faculty on our respective campuses and for the students they teach. To do this work, we need to be at our best, which means taking time to center ourselves is essential. When we are focused and in a good space, we are best prepared to support and guide others on campus, many of whom depend on us, either directly or indirectly.

Centering oneself is a process of engaging in introspection and reflection to understand better and manage one's thoughts, feelings, and behavior. The benefits are well documented. Centering is a critical component of self-care and is often used to reduce stress, improve mental health, and create a sense of self-awareness and self-confidence. It should be as much at the center of our work as anything else. According to research conducted by Beck and Alford (2009), "the ability to center oneself is the single most important skill in managing stress." Centering oneself can also build self-confidence, reduce anxiety, and improve overall mental health (Herman, 2018).

Developing the skill of centering is particularly important for directors of centers for teaching and learning, due to the many directions directors are pulled. CTLs are often at the center of campus, both literally and figuratively. Early in my career, I noted that deans know the faculty in their college but rarely know faculty in other colleges. Department chairs have often not met faculty from departments in different schools. Provosts and presidents are often consumed with many issues but all too frequently interact only with a

few faculty members each year. As a CTL director, I knew more faculty than anyone else on campus, particularly in years where I facilitated the orientation for all faculty new to campus. In multiple ways, I have long felt responsible for many faculty from throughout campus and, to a large extent, the students they teach. This is a privileged position on campus and has many rewards. That said, such a position also comes with great pressure and responsibility. With heavy expectations and much to be done, it is not uncommon for center directors to become fatigued, stressed, and in some cases, burned out.

Burnout can manifest itself in a variety of ways. It can lead to exhaustion and confusion, decreased job satisfaction, and a lack of enthusiasm or motivation. It can also cause physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches, and sleep disturbances. Burnout can also hurt the quality of work produced by faculty members. When center directors are burned out, they are less likely to be productive, creative, and innovative. To prevent burnout, it is important to create an environment conducive to your well-being and sometimes request resources and support needed to succeed.

Additionally, it is important to create a supportive environment with a mentoring team where you can approach concerns and seek assistance when needed. Mentors can also help ground you and help you think through reasonable expectations when feeling completely stuck. I recall being very frustrated by my work in the second year of being a center director. I had enough and turned in a letter of resignation. The provost indicated she was disappointed in my decision because she thought solid progress had been made. She suggested I attend the Lilly Conference as previously planned. While at the conference, I had the opportunity to have dinner with one of my mentors, who was also at the conference. Upon returning to campus, I met with the provost and asked if I could continue my work. She, also an excellent mentor to me, said yes, and when I turned to leave, she said, "You dropped this the last time you were here." It was my resignation letter, still sealed in the envelope.

Whether you are new to faculty development or have been doing this work for decades, you have likely realized your resources in terms of your time, staff, and budget are nowhere near adequate to do what needs to be done. Seeing a need to do much with scant resources at hand will inevitably lead to frustration, which, if it becomes a pervasive state, has many negative effects.

As with every area of health, it is much better to avoid a negative outcome than to deal with it after it occurs. Safety rather than broken bones, vaccines

rather than hospitalization, proper exercise rather than high blood pressure, and washing hands rather than the flu. Rather than focus on what to do after you burn out, let us focus on how not to burn out in the first place.

I have been a faculty/educational developer for just over 25 years, and throughout most of that time, I have been at varying levels of fatigue. I say varying because although I keep very busy, I also keep an eye on my level of fatigue. That is important, as pervasive fatigue levels will often result in burnout. Early in my career, one of my more experienced returning students told me I should slow down or I would burn out. It is more complex than that. What is important is not the speed at which you work but rather that you work at your speed and understand when to pump the breaks to avoid perpetual fatigue levels. It is also important to remember what outcomes you are experiencing as you work. You can feel exhilarated and exhausted at the same time. It is important to get adequate rest for good health and longevity, but working until you are tired to finish something you love and see as important is unlikely to result in burnout. This is an important distinction because you can rest up to overcome fatigue. Burnout does not go away with a day or two of rest. Recovering from burnout is challenging and, unfortunately, not guaranteed.

Centering

The following are some suggestions to take care of yourself to avoid burnout.

Know Thy Enemy

As educators of educators, it is amazing how often we forget that we can learn about areas relatively quickly. Take a small amount of time and learn how to recognize factors contributing to burnout and the symptoms of burnout (e.g., Cherniss, 2020; Hibbert, 2017). Watch for persistent feelings of fatigue in the form of persistent mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion. You may find yourself being more serious, having less time for things you enjoy, and frustrated easily. Some individuals experience headaches, difficulty sleeping, apathy, and a sense of hopelessness (Targum et al., 2016). Sometimes, burnout appears in the form of depression or anxiety. If you start to feel more negative, more frustrated, or less healthy, check in with a mentor or trusted friend for an honest conversation about what they see. The sooner you catch the symptoms, the easier it is to stave off burnout.

Build from Your Strengths

We often focus on their needs because our job is to help others. In doing that, it is easy to overlook our strengths. The field of appreciative inquiry can be extremely helpful in thinking about how we do our work. Appreciative inquiry came out of positive psychology. Positive psychologists decided that one should study humans at their best instead of studying pathologies to understand humans better. With respect to work, instead of identifying ways to address weaknesses, the focus is on leveraging core strengths. My primary approach to faculty development is collaboration, finding amazing educators, and asking them to share their core strengths with others (Zakrajsek, 2014,2015). Appreciative inquiry is based on the concept that the task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths in ways that make weaknesses irrelevant (Cooperrider et al., 2008).

Establish/Fortify Healthy Boundaries

Nearly every CTL director I have ever known, including myself, has accepted or created an unsustainable workload. It is so challenging not to accept a task or not create a program that would help others. Here is something to try. At the beginning of every year, or every semester, if that helps, dream up five projects that would greatly benefit the campus but that you can't do. Write up short descriptions of each and put your five ideas in a growth-minded work folder. Label it "Not Yet." Once created it is easier to add to that folder any ideas that emerge for which you lack resources to complete at that time. Also, if someone asks you to do something you don't have time for, let them know you are interested, that you will keep it in mind, and then put the request in the "Not Yet" folder. This folder will help you to establish a healthy work-life balance because you are not saying "no," you are recognizing that although it is a worthy interest, or request, a healthy work-life balance means sometimes pausing, even for important items.

Studies have found that employees with a healthy work-life balance are more productive, satisfied, and engaged (Bartlett et al., 2021). Employers who provide a supportive work-life balance for their employees typically see increased employee satisfaction, productivity, and retention (Kabir, 2018). For some, there is value in thinking of this interaction of personal and professional lives as work-life harmony. If you have not heard the concept previously, work-life harmony is creating a sense of harmony between work

and life, where work and life are seen to be complementary rather than competing forces, which is how work-life balance is typically conceptualized. Work-life harmony focuses on the idea of integrating the two for a more fulfilling and harmonious lifestyle. This idea of harmonizing recognizes that, at times, we draw energy and satisfaction from work as well as from our personal lives.

Know Your Mission

A personal mission statement is a clear and concise declaration of an individual's values and goals. It is often used to measure and guide personal decision-making and provide a sense of direction in life. Crafting a personal mission statement involves self-reflection, examining your values, and clearly understanding the purpose and goals one hopes to achieve. The first step in creating a personal mission statement is to reflect on your current life and values. This reflection requires an honest assessment of your strengths, weaknesses, and what brings you joy and satisfaction. During this process, it is important to consider the impact of your past experiences and how they shape your current life and values. In order to create a meaningful mission statement, it is important to understand current values and how they influence life decisions. The next step is to consider what type of life one would like and what values one hopes to achieve. Establishing a life lived centered on values requires looking ahead and planning for the future. It is essential to consider aspirations and to set realistic goals. During this process, consider what type of person should surface and what values are held. Once a current life and values is understood and a desired life is imagined, it is time to craft a mission statement. This statement should be concise, clear, and meaningful. It should encapsulate the values you hope to uphold and the goals you hopes to achieve. A good mission statement will guide your decisions and provide a sense of direction and purpose.

Focus on Gratitude

When you are positive and do something genuinely appreciated by others, it is uplifting. Capitalize on this energy whenever possible. You will need this energy, because when you engage in a task where individuals tend to be down, it is draining. One way to maintain positive energy when working with groups is to focus on individuals. It is amazing how many times those in higher education talk about being on a committee, teaching a class,

and working with colleagues without using verbiage regarding individuals. When we frame our thoughts about groups, it is easy to forget the people. One of the easiest things to do is to praise others for what they do. Chapman and White (2012) note that in the general workforce, 70% of employees say they receive no praise or recognition at work. It often takes little effort to recognize individuals for their work. Kumar and Epley (2018) asked individuals to estimate how much energy it would take to send a note of gratitude to another person and the impact that note would have on another. The participants then wrote and sent the note, and the recipients were contacted and asked to what extent the note meant something to them. It turns out that individuals overestimate the amount of energy it takes to show gratitude and underestimate the impact.

In the first CTL I directed, with a staff of just me and a budget of $500, I gave faculty who facilitated workshops for me a coffee mug filled with chocolates and a personalized note thanking them for sharing their expertise. At first, I was embarrassed to give them so little, until several recipients told me it was the most they had ever received for doing work on campus. I got to thinking that I was often thanked in passing for work I did on committees (although sometimes not even that), but I rarely received a personalized note explaining the value I brought to the process.

There is immense value in showing gratitude beyond just the avoidance of burnout. Showing gratitute brings you energy while helping others. Researchers have also found that individuals who engaged in as little as seven total hours of being coached on how to show compassion and gratitude toward others demonstrated reductions in implicit bias six months later (Hirshberg, et al, 2022).

Stay in the Moment

It is easy to perseverate on things that do not go our way. Being turned down for funding, having a low turnout for a workshop, showing up for a meeting to argue for a position only to find the decision had already been made. For many individuals, this becomes a vicious cycle. The more stress and frustration one experiences, the more one focuses on the resulting stress and frustration. Once there is a focus on stress and things not going well, such things appear more readily. This is where practices such as meditation help us to thrive. Meditation is the practice of mindfulness, being present in the moment.

Cortland Dahl, who works in contemplative science, has demonstrated the placidity of well-being. Behaviors related to centering and well-being are practices one can learn with a small quantity of work, and this work has been repeatedly shown to have positive outcomes (Dahl et al., 2020). Lutz and colleagues (2013) demonstrated that those aware of their environment and responsive to what is happening in the present recover much more quickly from adverse situations. Everyone has challenging situations. The speed at which one recovers is important. Responding in the moment can be learned.

Throughout the day, pause and take in how you feel now. During days when I am rushing to make a deadline or thinking about something that did not go well in the past, if I stop and focus on how I am at that moment, a notable shift happens. I have had situations where I have felt a lot of stress, but when I pause and think about the moment, I realize I am feeling very good. Aside from the deadline, I am healthy, the day is beautiful, and my daughters are crushing it. Sometimes, during the pause, I realize that although I didn't get the resources I wanted, everything else is going well. At times, many of us get caught up in the cognitive space and forget about the space around us at that moment.

Conclusion

Directing a center for teaching and learning is challenging, regardless of staff size and resources. It is impossible to do everything that could be done and often challenging to determine what to do. Making those decisions and being mindful is vital to your long-term job performance. I know of several faculty developers who burned out and left the field. I also know many who worked in the field for several decades and retired, still excited about what they have been doing but realized it was time to hand the reins to someone else. Those individuals often stay connected with the field and serve as mentors to others. That is my goal.

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