

VOL. 9 • NUMBER 1 • 2002

Ideas

FROM THE NATIONAL HUMANITIES CENTER

Do Centers for Advanced Study Deserve a History?

by W. Robert Connor

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Like married couples of a certain age, centers for advanced study have begun to mark major anniversaries.

The most senior of these centers, the Institute for Advanced Study, turned fifty in 1983. In the festivities commemorating the anniversary, the Institute paused to reflect on its history, taking note of Albert Einstein and other members of the original cohort who, in 1933, founded the institution as an American refuge for European scholars and intellectuals fleeing the approaching Nazi tyranny of the nineteen-thirties and -forties.

As they approach anniversaries of their own—the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences will reach its fiftieth year in 2003, the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study held a twenty-fifth anniversary conference in 1996, and the National Humanities Center will do so in 2003—all the centers in our consortium have good stories to tell, but do they deserve a history? By this, I do not mean a narrative of their individual accomplishments or a record of what has happened year by year, but a study of the phenomenon of advanced study in residential communities. Is the experience of sufficient significance to merit an analysis and an exploration of the causes for what is, after all, a strange chapter in the history of learning?

In the case of the Institute for Advanced Study, the interaction of European academics and intellectuals with their American colleagues, especially with junior scholars,

proved so productive that there was no hesitation in continuing the work after the end of the Second World War. As the idea spread, it took new forms and developed new rationales, for example in the more focused gathering of groups of exceptionally talented social scientists without a permanent faculty at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences and of humanists at the National Humanities Center. The idea took international form through the creation of the Netherlands Institute, the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin, and the Swedish Collegium. Each is an independent institution, closely tied to one or more universities, but the idea has also internalized in the form of centers sponsored by colleges and universities. There are now more than a hundred such campus-based centers in the United States—although not all of them offer resi-

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dential fellowship programs—and more are to come: at Harvard, the famous women's college, Radcliffe, is being transformed into a wide-ranging center for advanced study, the Radcliffe Institute.

The idea has also appealed to governments: even the federal government of the United States, always wary of involvement in cultural matters, has chosen to honor a past president by establishing the Wilson Center, in Washington, D.C. At least one foundation (the Russell Sage Foundation in New York) has set up its own center, and now major libraries are doing the same. Both the New York Public Library and the Library of Congress have established centers for the humanities within their walls. And who could fail to notice the Getty Institute in California or the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery in Washington?

Modesty should not prevent Wolf Lepenies, the rector of the Wissenschaftskolleg, and other European colleagues from calling attention to the success they have had in encouraging the establishment of centers for advanced study in areas where the integrity of scholarship has in the past been severely impaired by authoritarian regimes. The Collegium Budapest and the New Europe College in Bucharest are important new institutions and sources of great intellectual benefits far beyond their own countries. Thanks to them, we in the United States and in Western Europe are coming to recognize how much we have missed by not being in dialogue with our colleagues in Central and

Eastern Europe. Similar efforts are now underway to respond to inquiries from colleagues elsewhere in Europe and in Africa to assist in the formation of centers for advanced study in their countries.

How are we to understand the broadening appeal of this idea of centers for advanced study? What forces account for its extension? Are they of sufficient importance to engender a true history? Let me reformulate those questions in the phraseology that a friend used when I told him I was going to North Carolina to direct the National Humanities Center. He asked, "If the National Humanities Center is the answer, what's the question?" I would like to be able to say that I had an immediate, and profound, response to his query, but I did not. Since then, however, I have been able to give further thought to that question. If we can be clear about the answer, we can plan better both individually and collectively, and in due course a history can be written that explains why these centers have had an influence and significance vastly disproportionate to their size and resources.

Most of the fellows at our centers, I believe, would answer my friend's question with a single word: "Time." The most pressing problem for many scholars in today's university is how to find enough time for serious research while simultaneously fulfilling their responsibilities as teachers and participants in university administration and governance. There simply are not enough hours in the day. Centers for advanced study typically provide a full academic year during which a scholar is able to work without interruption on a major pro-

ject. It is a gift from the gods, or at least from an enlightened selection committee.

This is an answer, but only a partial one. Time for scholarship and reflection can also be provided in many other ways, by university sabbatical programs or by outside funding agencies—such as the American Council of Learned Societies or the Guggenheim Foundation—that allow the fortunate recipients of their generosity to travel where they wish and advance their work in whatever setting seems most congenial to them. If all centers for advanced study did was provide additional time for scholarship, our institutions should sell our buildings, dismiss those staff members who provide services to fellows, and award more of these “transportable” fellowships. However valuable time released from teaching and other duties may be, it cannot be the entire rationale for residential centers.



A National Humanities Center Fellow recently made a comment that seems more to the point. He told me that his year at the Center had been the way he expected academic life to be when he had just received his Ph.D. He meant, I believe, not simply that he thought there would be time and support for his best scholarly work but that he would find in a university an environment that would sustain and challenge him with fresh ideas, new insights, and honest criticism. He expect-

ed to find a very special kind of community, not some professional *Gesellschaft* but a *Gemeinschaft*, or, if you will excuse my preference for Latin, *communitas*, a group based on a genuine sharing of the things they consider most valuable. Anthropologists have reminded us of how powerful and widespread the desire for such *communitas* is among humans, but it does not take advanced research to recognize how rare and endangered such *communitas* is in today's university.

It is not difficult to give it sustenance, however, if the will is there. The experience of the centers in this consortium suggests that, although *communitas* cannot be forced or hurried, it will develop over time, when people of genuine commitment to learning come to know and trust each other. It derives not from the number of formal seminars, lectures, workshops, or meetings, valuable as these may be, but from the emergence of mutual trust, the discovery of shared interests, and the growth of genuine friendships in a setting in which the life of the mind is at the center of the institution's values.

In the true scholar's yearning for intellectual *communitas*, we begin to find an explanation sufficient to account for the extension of the idea behind centers for advanced study. For an idea it is, rather than an organizational form. These institutes differ in structure, administration, and, by now, tradition, but they share the vision of a community in which learning is at the heart of things, thought is unfettered, critics are honest yet friendly and supportive, and the person next door is a true colleague.

In emphasizing this notion of *communitas*, I am not trying to expropriate for residential centers of advanced study the ancient claim of the university to be that kind of community. Yet several factors in universities, at least those in the United States, make it increasingly difficult to sustain this kind of community. Let me mention three of them.

The first is the sheer scale of the modern university, now reaching upwards of fifty thousand students on some U.S. campuses and as many as half a million in some developing countries. In such settings, it is not only students who may find themselves isolated; the same can happen to scholars. By contrast, the modal number of fellows in our centers is about forty. The greatest strength of centers for advanced study, and some of their greatest challenges, come from this deliberate limitation of size. The small scale facilitates community but requires that a center's influence come not from the quantity, but from the significance, of the scholarship it sustains.

The second factor in the modern university that deserves scrutiny is the adverse intellectual effect of some administrative structures, in particular the organization of work through departments. This structural arrangement is administratively essential if large and complex universities are to function, but as the scale increases it becomes less and less effective as a means of sustaining intellectual community. Fellows at the National Humanities Center by and large speak positively of teaching and do not complain much about spending significant amounts of time on advising students or on

the legitimate demands of university administration and governance. Nevertheless, many of them say how happy they are to escape from their departments. To be sure, some departments are congenial, even convivial, but many function through a tacit understanding that their members will not challenge or bother one another except on necessary matters of business. When that understanding breaks down, departments often fall into strife, but even at their most harmonious departments rarely provide a genuine stimulus to the intellectual lives of their members. Departments, moreover, tend to divide senior from junior faculty, especially when tenure decisions are being made, and they reinforce territorial boundaries precisely at a time when scholarship requires better ways to surmount those boundaries. The best work, in the humanities at least, is often to be found at the convergence points of traditional disciplines and uses eclectic methodologies drawn from several fields. The exploration of new fields, moreover, is much more easily achieved in centers for advanced study than in universities, where a critical mass of tenured appointments is necessary for any serious new effort. Centers for advanced study can bring together clusters of scholars to explore for limited periods of time promising new areas of inquiry.

The third factor in the contemporary American university is the principal one to which I wish to call attention, the change in societal expectations about the university. This transformation is based in large part on the recognition of the effectiveness of the

university in producing economic growth. This is often referred to as “the central role of the university in the new knowledge-based economy.” Such rhetoric has proved useful in stimulating public and private support for universities but, not surprisingly, also establishes a criterion for judging these universities. How productive are they? It is not surprising, then, if productivity becomes the criterion for deciding what resources are to be allocated to the university and how those resources are to be distributed within the university. “Productivity” becomes the way to assess and reward faculty members, that is, by the number of classes taught, students enrolled, theses supervised, and pages published.



I have to admit that, despite the crudeness of these measures, I am not entirely unsympathetic to the concerns they reflect. Every organization has its deadwood, slugabeds, and ten o'clock scholars, but productivity assessments as currently practiced, and the social pressures behind them, if allowed to run unchecked, will undermine academic excellence and leave all of us impoverished.

Moreover, there is a surprising twist to this emphasis on “productivity,” for even the finest universities find it hard to match, scholar for scholar, the number of books and articles produced at centers for advanced study or the

number of prizes awarded them. These institutes are remarkably productive places, even if productivity is measured in the most simplistic ways. The National Humanities Center is probably not atypical: a few years ago our librarian counted the books published as a result of fellowships at our Center and found that, once allowances were made for the time it takes to bring a scholarly book into production, more than one book had been produced for each one-year fellowship awarded.

How is such productivity to be explained? It does not come from compulsion or imposed schedules, for nothing of this sort is allowed in our settings. Dr. Johnson, in *The Adventurer*, points to a partial explanation when he writes of the “stimulations of honest rivalry” and “the contagion of diligence, a resolution to write because the rest are writing, and the scorn of obscurity when the rest are illustrious.” To this, however, must be added what one of our Fellows calls “the spirit of a shared enterprise” that makes a year at the Center “one of the unforgettable highlights of one’s life,” for it is community as much as rivalry that releases in this setting energy that might be otherwise confined or misdirected. This energy, combined with the affection that Fellows show for the Center, can have, we have found, powerful effects far beyond the scholarly projects of individual Fellows. It is strengthening teaching in both secondary and higher education, elevating the level of public discourse, helping frame issues of public policy, and enhancing understanding across geographic and cultural divides. All of these accomplishments depend on one central

fact—the demonstrated effectiveness of such centers in advancing scholarship of uncompromising excellence.

In spite of the demonstrable success of centers of this type, those of us who direct them have often been reluctant to call attention to the statistics and other hard evidence that demonstrate the exceptional achievements of our centers, lest by doing so we play into the hands of those who use a narrow definition of “productivity.” The claim our institutions make derives not from the number of books produced, prizes won, or frequency of citation over a short time period, but from the ability of scholarship to create fresh insights and open new paths of inquiry, and thereby invigorate learning. A book for us is not a statistic or a trophy, but, as Kafka said somewhere, an ax to break up a frozen sea of thought.

Books of this sort take time to produce, and time for their full effects to be felt. They emerge most readily in a special environment. When we ask them to reflect on their experience at these centers, our fellows tell us that they have found an environment that advances their work in surprising ways, not simply through an attractive setting, comfortable facilities, a good library, a computer, and other support services, but also through a distinctive collegiality. I am convinced that this is what stimulates originality and encourages healthy intellectual ambition.

One cannot have the much-touted knowledge-based economy unless seekers of knowledge are granted time to discover new and unexpected paths, which is why narrow conceptions of “productivity” are self-defeating.

Left unchecked, they will narrow that grand boulevard of intellectual exchange, the university, into a new Grub Street. You will remember that, in his dictionary, Dr. Johnson described that London street as “much inhabited by writers of small histories, dictionaries, and temporary poems, whence any mean production is called Grubstreet.” Nothing will more readily stifle the life of the mind, or more thoroughly erode intellectual *communitas*.

By putting the unfettered search for knowledge at the center of their institutional life, centers for advanced study provide a counterweight to these tendencies. They raise the sights of scholars everywhere, help us to recognize the benefits of true collegiality, and hold up to the university and to all who care for learning an alternative model for the life of the mind.

If I return then to the question with which I began—Do these centers for advanced study deserve a history?—the answer, I am convinced, is a categorical yes, but the history will not stand alone. It must be seen in relation to the more complex history of the university and all the pressures that shape it, the institution to which all centers for advanced study relate in constant, and, we hope, mutually advantageous, tension.

And when I next meet my friend who asked what question the National Humanities Center (or a center for advanced study, in general) answers, I will ask him to refresh his Latin and think for a while about *communitas* and the question of how intellectual *communitas* can flourish in a time of immense and sometimes threatening change.