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Why we need independent Centres for Advanced Study

W. ROBERT CONNOR

Teagle Foundation, 10 Rockefeller Plaza, 10020–1903, New York City, NY, USA. E-mail: BOBCONNOR@earthlink.net

Institutes for Advanced Study provide havens for advancing scholarship, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, and have increased in number in recent years. The article explores the reasons for this development.

In the last few years, centres for advanced study have proliferated in the United States and around the world. I do not mean specialized centres on individual campuses, although those have become more common than ever before, but broad-gauged centres, usually autonomous and primarily residential, with the mission of advancing scholarship in core areas of the humanities and the social and natural sciences. How are we to understand this phenomenon, and what are its future implications for the advancement of knowledge?

Such centres first appeared in 1933, when the Institute for Advanced Study opened its doors in Princeton, NJ, and welcomed its first members, many of whom, like Albert Einstein, were eminent scholars forced out of Europe by Nazi tyranny. The idea came from the educational pioneer Abraham Flexner, who dreamed of a new kind of university without undergraduates, where advanced graduate students and distinguished scholars would 'be left to pursue their own ends in their own ways … in tranquillity'. Although often confused with Princeton University, with which it has had close ties, the institute was set up as an independent institution with its own endowment.

The institute's great strength has been in mathematics and theoretical physics and a few fields of historical study. In the early 1970s, a School of Social Science was added, but in the meantime, in 1954, the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences had been created in Palo Alto, California. In the later 1970s, 'the third leg of the stool', the National Humanities Center, began its work in the Research Triangle Park of North Carolina. In the early 1990s, these three institutes joined with three similar European centres – the Netherlands Institute for

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Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (founded in 1970), the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin (1980), and the Swedish Collegium in Uppsala (1985) – in a small consortium. One of goals of this consortium was to strengthen scholarship in the countries of the former Eastern bloc. Soon, centres for advanced study appeared in several Eastern European countries – for example, the Collegium Budapest in Hungary and the New Europe College in Rumania. In the last few years, there have been similar developments elsewhere in Europe, Africa and Asia.

In the United States, the research-institute movement has continued with centres at major libraries, including the new Kluge Center at the Library of Congress and the Center for the Humanities at the New York Public Library. The Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars emerged under the wing of the Smithsonian Institution, and even some foundations such as the Russell Sage Foundation in New York, have begun operating centres of their own. And there are two famous residential institutes, both centred in the history of art but reaching into many other fields. . . the Center for the Advanced Study of the Visual Arts at the National Gallery and the Getty Institute in California.

A similar tendency is evident on college and university campuses. An especially striking development has occurred in Cambridge, MA. In 1999, after Radcliffe College was merged into Harvard University, the Radcliffe Institute was formed with a twofold mission: 'to support advanced work across all the academic disciplines, the professions, and the creative arts, while simultaneously sustaining a commitment to the study of women, gender, and society'. The life of the Radcliffe Institute is modelled, to a large extent, on patterns that have proved themselves effective in other centres for advanced study: relatively small size, international participation, emphasis on informal cross-disciplinary seminars and colloquia that sustain a vigorous intellectual life without distracting the scholars in residence from their individual projects. It brings the great resources of Harvard and the historic strength of Radcliffe in women's and gender studies to bear on scholarly problems in a wide range of fields.

How are we to account for the success of these centres?

When, more than 13 years ago, I came to direct the National Humanities Center, I thought that the principal benefit of such an institution was the release time from teaching and the research support for individual scholars. That is certainly part of the story, especially in the humanities where fellowship support is so scarce. But if that is the whole story, why have a residential centre with all the added costs and inconvenience of bringing scholars together at a single site?

Of the many possible answers, my favourite came from a recent fellow of the National Humanities Center, who said that his year there had been what he had expected academic life to be when he had first entered it. He meant by that, I believe, that he had looked forward not only to financial support to let him do his

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best work, but also to an environment that would sustain and challenge him with fresh ideas, new insights, and honest criticism. He expected to find a special kind of community, one that it is increasingly uncommon in the modern university, with its vast scale and structure of specialization to sustain a *communitas*, a word that I use to underline a broad intellectual community.

To achieve that, size is crucial. With the exception of the Princeton institute, which may have around 200 scholars in residence during an academic year, centres of this type usually have no more than 50 fellows at a time. The limited scale, combined with an emphasis on informal exchanges through luncheon seminars and small reading and discussion groups, encourages frank dialogue across disciplinary and professional boundaries, and often friendly but tough critiques of work in progress and future scholarly plans.

These centres, of course, are not well adapted to advance every kind of research. Their greatest strengths have been in the humanities and related social sciences, in mathematics, and in those parts of the sciences that are not dependent on the laboratory. But within their areas of strength, today's institutes are highly productive. At our humanities centre, for example, the fellows over the past quarter century have produced more than one book for each annual fellowship. To be sure, many of my colleagues who direct such centres consider such a measure of very limited significance. It may even do damage by encouraging the tendency to adopt purely quantitative definitions of academic 'productivity'.

Centres for advanced study make their mark not by the quantity but by the quality of the work they sustain, the relatively small number of projects that make a genuine difference to the future course of scholarship. 'More of same is not enough', one of my colleagues said to me last summer. Ultimately, these centres will be judged by their ability to help scholarship move in new directions and address issues not readily treated in existing scholarly structures.

As the centres succeed, it becomes more likely that, over the next few decades, there will be a historic shift in the circumstances and conditions of the production of knowledge – at least in the humanities and other fields that do not depend on large research teams or experimental facilities. Centres for advanced study will become a primary locus for addressing new, especially transdisciplinary questions and for the development of new paradigms. I discussed that possibility with Francis C. Oakley, an eminent medieval historian and president emeritus of Williams College, and he suggested that we may well be witnessing a third stage in the production of knowledge. The first stage began in the late 12th century, with the appearance of universities at Bologna, Paris and Oxford, soon followed by others at Orleans, Padua, Rome and elsewhere. In addition to undergraduate instruction in the liberal arts, those universities focused on the transmission of the knowledge that was vital for the learned professions – medicine, law, theology,

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and the like – and on canonical texts, often in Greek or Latin, from which such knowledge was derived.

The second stage started in the late 19th century, with the development of the research-oriented universities and the departmental and professional structures that went hand in hand with them. At that point, the emphasis changed from the transmission of learning to the creation of new knowledge, with dazzling results for the growth of scholarship. But specialization, which has contributed so much to the advancement of knowledge, has its limits. Now we may be entering a third stage, in which, in some fields, the most significant new scholarship will emerge in centres for advanced study.

Questions that do not fit neatly into existing specialities are too easily deferred, unless there are strong incentives to address them. In the humanities, for example, there have been relatively few such incentives, and scholarship has, for the most part, flowed in predictable channels. That must change, especially if one takes seriously the need for fresh insights into issues of cultural and religious conflict, the moral and societal dimensions of new technologies, and the urgent concerns about the environment. No one individual or discipline has a monopoly on issues like those; indeed, progress on them will require new types of collaboration and hence new forms of communitas. For example, an initiative at the National Humanities Center in the 'ecological humanities', financed by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, has brought together scholars from history, biology, philosophy and literary fields.

Centres for advanced study are less tightly confined to the issues and approaches of existing disciplines and, since they do not depend on the departmental structures of the university, can identify and pursue promising new paths of inquiry. Since tenured appointments are relatively uncommon in such centres, they have great flexibility in deploying their resources to explore new paths, as well as to stimulate fresh approaches to old problems. They are also relatively cost-effective, focusing on key projects and supporting individuals at breakthrough moments in their careers. At their best, the sense of community they build encourages scholars to do their most creative work.

The suggestion that a new stage in the generation of knowledge is emerging does not belittle the continued importance of universities, but it points to the possibility that more and more will follow the lead of those universities that have already created centres for advanced study on their own campuses or that have forged close ties with independent centres. The list is already impressive, including in the US, Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, Duke, and many other private and public universities. Over the next few decades, that list is likely to expand to include every major university. Sure, that is speculation, but the adaptability and flexibility of these centres, and their record to date, strongly suggest that they

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will be a powerful force in the creation of new knowledge and new forms of communitas.

About the Author

Robert Connor was, until recently, the Director of the National Humanities Center, a private centre for advanced study at Research Triangle Park, NC; he is now President of the Teagle Foundation in New York. For 25 years he taught classics at Princeton University. His most recent book is *Thucydides*; a new book, *Festivals of Memory*, will appear shortly.

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