

Centers for Teaching and Learning Are Worth Defending

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Higher education in the United States is being asked to do more, with less, for students who arrive with greater needs, in a technological environment that is rapidly evolving. Generative AI has rewritten what assessment means. Accessibility law continues to expand the institutional obligations that flow from the Americans with Disabilities Act. Modality choices that did not exist a decade ago, including Hy-Flex, FlexPath, asynchronous, micro-credentialing, badging, and competency-based delivery, are now ordinary expectations. Student preparation profiles vary widely within the same classroom. Faculty composition has shifted toward contingent appointments at most institutions in the country. Inside that environment, the question of how students learn (particularly adult learners), and how institutions help faculty support that learning, is not a peripheral concern. It is central to whether higher education can do what one may call its primary function—educate.

Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs) exist to do that work. They are the institutional structure through which faculty receive support in facilitating learning experiences and environments, the unit that translates research on cognition and instruction into practice, the convening space for cross-disciplinary conversation about what teaching/learning actually requires in this moment. They are worth defending, and they are worth building well. In November 2025, at the POD Network's 50th Annual Conference in San Diego, I had the privilege of serving as a panelist on a session titled Delivering the Mission: Educational Development as Strategic Infrastructure, alongside Dr. Carl S. Moore, current POD Network president, Laurette Foster, Executive of the HBCU Faculty Development Network and Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence at Prairie View A&M University, and Dr. Jonathan Iuzzini, POD Network president-elect and Interim Provost at Howard Community College. The framing of that panel was deliberate. Educational development is not a soft amenity. It is institutional infrastructure. The current debate over closures is, at root, a

debate about whether higher education leaders still understand that distinction. From that conference stage to this moment, my colleagues and I made an argument that has only become more urgent: this is work I must contend for, and so must any leader who takes seriously the institutional charge to educate.

This is not a marginal claim. According to Mary C. Wright, author of *Centers for Teaching and Learning: The New Landscape in Higher Education* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023), roughly 94 percent of high-research-activity doctoral universities in the United States operate a Center for Teaching and Learning. Her recent analysis, published in *Inside Higher Ed* in February 2026, situates the closure of the University of Texas at Austin's Center for Teaching and Learning as a striking departure from this baseline. Wright's broader scholarship has identified more than 1,200 such centers across U.S. higher education, spanning every Carnegie classification from the largest research universities to community colleges and minority-serving institutions. Approximately one in three American postsecondary institutions has one. This is what a settled professional consensus looks like. The institutions that have chosen this infrastructure are not the outliers. The institutions without it are. A 94 percent baseline is not a trend on the verge of correction. It is a structural feature of how American higher education has organized itself to do its work.

The empirical case for Centers for Teaching and Learning also extends well beyond prevalence. The *Changing Landscape of Online Education (CHLOE)* report, produced annually by Quality Matters, Eduventures, and EDUCAUSE, provides some of the most authoritative data in the field on faculty preparedness and institutional capacity. The 2025 CHLOE 10 report, drawn from chief online learning officers across the country, found that only 28 percent of institutions consider their faculty fully prepared for online course design and only 45 percent for online teaching. Faculty preparedness has stagnated, and in some areas regressed, since 2021. Just 28 percent of institutions report having fully developed academic continuity plans for future emergency pivots. These are not signals of an oversupply of faculty development infrastructure. They are signals of a profound undersupply, and the entities best positioned to close those gaps are Centers for Teaching and Learning.

The fiscal argument for targeting Centers for Teaching and Learning is equally weak. Most centers are small operations, often three to five staff at a regional comprehensive or minority-serving institution, sometimes a single director with a faculty fellow rotation, surviving on grants and the unpaid labor of faculty who believe in the work. They are not lavishly funded administrative empires consuming institutional resources. Treating these units as exemplars of administrative bloat is a categorical error. When measured against their institutional value, i.e. supporting faculty development, ensuring course quality, managing compliance obligations, and building capacity for innovation, Centers for Teaching and Learning represent one of higher education's clear return on investments.

On disciplinary expertise and learning facilitation

Disciplinary expertise is necessary but not sufficient for the work of adult learning facilitation. Teaching for many years no more makes someone a learning scientist than shopping for many years makes someone a consumer scientist. Practice is not the same as the systematic study of practice. Doctoral programs credential scholars to do research; they rarely credential them to provide quality instruction and facilitate learning. The Center for Teaching and Learning is the institutional structure that closes that gap, and the people who lead centers tend to be faculty with doctorates, scholarly agendas, and classroom assignments who have committed themselves to that closing. Critics who frame this work as unnecessary might themselves benefit from professional development to understand that pedagogy is not exclusively or primarily what takes place in learning environments. There are many strategies, theories, and evidence-based learning sciences that can be leveraged to enhance and guide learning facilitation, including andragogy, heutagogy, and other frameworks developed specifically for adult learners. The conditions that support adult learning are studied empirically, and the people who study them have things to say that subject matter expertise and craft knowledge alone cannot generate.

Centers for Teaching and Learning are shaped by context

There is no generic Center for Teaching and Learning. A center at an elite research university serving a tenured professoriate may differ significantly from a center at a regional comprehensive serving a heavily contingent faculty, which in turn looks almost nothing like a center at a tribal college, a community college, or an HBCU. Centers for Teaching and Learning are built around the institutional context they serve, the faculty composition they support, and the student population they exist to help. This contextual responsiveness is not a flaw in the model. It is the model.

Centers for Teaching and Learning also retool themselves continuously in response to what institutions actually need. They built emergency remote teaching infrastructure during the pandemic, in days rather than semesters. They are now building faculty capacity around generative AI, including redesigned assessments, conversations about academic integrity, and curricular work on AI literacy in each discipline. They support compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and the accessibility obligations that flow from it, work that benefits every student. They support accreditation, faculty onboarding across multiple modalities, and the assessment of student learning outcomes that accreditors increasingly require. Looking forward, Centers for Teaching and Learning are likely to be major institutional assets in the work ahead on the U.S. Department of Education's Accreditation, Innovation, and Modernization (AIM) negotiated rulemaking, announced in January 2026 and convening through April and May. The AIM committee's focus on data-driven student

outcomes, instructional quality, and institutional accountability touches squarely on the work Centers for Teaching and Learning already do every day. Institutions positioned to demonstrate measurable faculty development, course quality assurance, and student learning outcomes will be the ones best prepared to navigate whatever framework emerges from this rulemaking. Closing the very units that build that capacity, on the eve of regulatory changes that will demand it, is a decision that defies sound institutional logic. None of this work was on the agenda twenty years ago. None of it can be paused. Institutions that lack this capacity will discover, slowly and expensively, that the work does not disappear. It simply gets done worse, by people with less time and less expertise, in offices not designed to hold it.

Centers for Teaching and Learning are a proven resource. Faculty should not be shortsighted or have amnesia about how Centers for Teaching and Learning have provided invaluable resources—they literally were lifelines during the pandemic. When campuses pivoted to remote instruction in March 2020, the units that held institutions together were the Centers for Teaching and Learning. They built emergency training in days, not semesters. They partnered with IT to deploy learning management systems at scale. They produced asynchronous resources for faculty providing emergency remote instruction. They did this work whether or not faculty had previously valued them, and whether or not administrators had funded them adequately. Faculty and administrators alike should be wary of anyone trying to remove any of our resources, particularly those that have demonstrated such institutional value under the most challenging circumstances higher education has faced in generations.

On dismantlement

There is a tone in current higher education discourse that should concern anyone who has actually run a functional area. Closure decisions are being proposed and executed with a casualness that the underlying decisions do not warrant. To eliminate a unit is to end careers, displace colleagues with families and obligations, and remove from the institution capacities that took years and decades to assemble. This is not a small thing. It deserves more than a confident essay or a Friday afternoon email.

The willingness to dismantle without weighing what is being dismantled is not judicious. It is reckless. Higher education has begun to absorb a vocabulary of cuts and consolidation that treats human consequences as abstractions, and the voices most fluent in that vocabulary are usually the ones least equipped to rebuild what they are tearing down. Capacity once dispersed cannot be reassembled by memo.

What is actually being closed

It is also worth naming what the current wave of closures has in common. They cluster in states with anti-DEI legislation. They occur alongside the dismantling of community engagement offices, undergraduate research programs, and student success initiatives. Centers for Teaching and Learning frequently house an institution's capacity for inclusive learning facilitation, culturally sustaining practice, and faculty development on bias in assessment. Closing the center accomplishes a portion of the political agenda without requiring it to be named, which is convenient where the explicit offices have already been eliminated. This is worth saying plainly.

There is a second function being eliminated. Centers for Teaching and Learning create a soft accountability layer for teaching practice, operating outside the slow machinery of tenure and promotion. When a center supports peer observation, partners with deans on faculty whose practice needs attention, or makes course-level outcome data available, it creates institutional capacity to notice and address weak teaching without waiting for a six-year review cycle. Faculty whose practice has not been examined in decades have an interest in characterizing that accountability as illegitimate. Sadly, they have begun to find allies in writers willing to make that case for them.

Why this target, and why now

The harder question, and the one the closure conversation tends to avoid, is why Centers for Teaching and Learning have been selected as the object of attention at all. The choice is, frankly, bizarre. Higher education in 2026 is contending with declining public confidence, demographic cliffs, tuition discount pressure, post-pandemic learning loss, generative AI disruption, accreditation reform, and direct political intervention. Inside that landscape, Centers for Teaching and Learning are nowhere near the top of any honest problem list. They are, in fact, one of the few functional areas actively helping institutions respond to several of those pressures simultaneously. The selection of this target, at this moment, reveals more about the agenda than about the centers.

The right interrogation is not whether Centers for Teaching and Learning should exist. The right interrogation is what serves students. That is the question higher education exists to answer, and Centers for Teaching and Learning are organized around it. I have argued elsewhere, in my publication, [A Missing Piece \[Peace\]: Teaching and Learning in the Digital Age](#), that there is a structural gap between how the academy traditionally hires and develops faculty and what students now require of their learning experience. Centers for Teaching and Learning are how institutions close that gap. They are not a luxury layered on top of teaching. They are the missing piece that makes contemporary teaching and learning whole. I am contending for the work that matters. They support the faculty who serve the students. They translate research into practice that improves the experience

of learning. They build institutional capacity to respond to the moment students are actually living in. Anyone proposing to remove that infrastructure should be prepared to explain how the removal serves students. Most of the current closure arguments cannot meet that bar, because they are not actually about students. They are about politics, budgets, or unwanted accountability, dressed up in the language of reform.

The work continues

The case for Centers for Teaching and Learning is not a case for the status quo at every institution. It is a case for centers led by faculty, grounded in disciplinary partnership, held to evidentiary standards as rigorous as those they ask of others, and measured against student learning and faculty growth rather than workshop attendance. That is achievable, and it is happening at institutions across the country. Closing these units would not return higher education to a more authentic age. It would leave faculty more isolated, students less well served, accreditation work more fragile, and institutional capacity for innovation diminished, at exactly the moment when each of those things matters most. The honest task is to build Centers for Teaching and Learning worth defending, and to defend them.

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