

BUILDING ON STRENGTHS: THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH CENTER

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Issues facing children, families, and schools have reached unprecedented levels. More than ever before, there are complex and formidable challenges that society and its members must address everyday. Indeed, there are social, developmental, and ecological atrocities facing many children and youth. To understand children and their unique circumstances, it is necessary to understand the systems within which they live: the family, classroom, school, and community contexts from which they come and which they impact every day. An effective and efficient way of supporting children is by working across disciplines to forge connections and linkages among all these major systems in a cooperative, collaborative fashion. This is what the Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools is about.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the building of the Center, from the ground up. We are hoping that through this research center, we will change the knowledge and practice base and hence, the lives of many children, youth, families and schools. I will use a building analogy to represent the diverse efforts going into its development. Indeed, it is a work in progress that follows a general blueprint, is built upon a foundation, uses its strengths to define its foci, and continues to build upon its capacities with tools and mortar that hold the efforts together.

The Blueprint: Mission, Goals, and Objectives

The mission of the Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools (Center for CYFS) is to improve through cutting-edge interdisciplinary research, our understanding of optimal ways that parents, teachers and other service providers in family, school and community contexts can promote the intellectual, socio-emotional, physical and behavioral adjustment of children and youth. Central to all of this is enhancing our understanding of how these systems can all work together to support the future of our nation.

The long-term goal of the Center is to become a nationally recognized center of excellence in research related to children and youth, and the multiple

interrelated contexts in which they function (i.e., families, schools, and communities). In particular, we expect to enhance the scope, quality and prominence of Nebraska's research related to children, youth, families and schools; create, nurture, and develop an interdisciplinary academic environment that will foster new basic and applied research in all areas related to children, youth, families and schools; and position the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) to become a vital and vibrant research institution and collaborator in research of national and international prominence. Specific objectives are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Objectives of the Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools

- 1 Generate, Submit, and Secure Competitive Research Grant Projects
- 2 Foster Interdisciplinary Research
- 3 Provide Opportunities for Interaction with National Researchers
- 4 Increase Visibility of the Center and Center Faculty
- 5 Ensure Center Supports are Responsive to the Needs of Faculty

The Foundation: Administrative Support

The Center idea began through a series of discussions in response to a call from the University of Nebraska Board of Regents for programs across the university system to promote excellence and establish institutional priorities. During the 2002-03 academic year, the Nebraska Research Alliance on Children, Youth, Families and Schools was one of 14 priority programs at UNL to receive Board of Regents support as a "Program of Excellence."

An interdisciplinary research retreat was held in October of 2002, attended by 31 UNL faculty members, three deans and two vice chancellors. This day-long retreat served as a working meeting wherein areas of institutional strength were identified and interdisciplinary teams developed that served as a foundation for Center-based research. Many research partnerships formed and continued to collaborate actively as an outcome of the retreat. Some grants were submitted and funded, providing an excellent start up and demonstrating the potential of the Center to be a leader in research productivity at UNL. In February, 2004, the University of Nebraska Board of Regents approved the establishment of the Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools, recognizing the opportunity to achieve prominence through the interdisciplinary research initiative. With capitol support provided by the

Chancellor of UNL, remodeling of the existing building is underway and will provide a central location for interdisciplinary research meetings, grant support activities, and future Center development functions.

The Building Blocks: Faculty Strengths

The building blocks of the Center, or those resources that ultimately build its strength and capacity, are faculty whose expertise fall into four main thematic areas. These areas define the scope of research currently underway by faculty within the Center. They are *Early Childhood Education and Intervention; Academic Interventions and Learning; Youth Risk Factors and Behaviors; and Child and Youth Health Promotion*. The thematic strengths of the Center are further represented by individuals and groups of researchers whose expertise cuts across multiple specialty areas. Specifically, research expertise is evident in the areas of social development in children and adolescents; early childhood development, early literacy, and play skills; bullying and school violence; adolescent risk-taking behaviors and outcomes; homeless and runaway youth; immigrant and migrant families; culturally relevant social, educational, and familial topics; school-family connections; families and step-families; mental health; academic interventions and reading; school environment; dual-language programming and outcomes; adults; and teacher preparation and professional development.

The Tools and Mortar: Center Supports

The capacity of UNL faculty to compete broadly and successfully for extramural funding is strengthened to the extent that faculty affiliates are supported in their efforts. The Center on CYFS assists faculty in grant writing and proposal development in numerous ways, including scouting grants, summarizing grant opportunities, maintaining a grant library, and providing support in grant writing and budget development.

Scouting grants and informing faculty affiliates of federal and foundation funding opportunities is one way of supporting faculty by identifying appropriate and relevant sources of support. In this capacity, staff in the Center research the latest federal grants and foundation priorities and funding opportunities, and ensure that faculty affiliates receive the most up-to-date information. Federal grant announcements and foundation funding opportunities are summarized for faculty to ensure that pertinent information is shared in a relevant and succinct manner. Internet notifications of all federal and foundation funding opportunities, specific to research interests, are then sent to faculty affiliates on a bi-weekly basis.

A large grant library is housed at the Center to further support faculty and provide relevant samples and resources. Electronic and hard-copy files are kept of all grant announcements and summaries. Previously funded grants are

archived and available to faculty affiliates as sample proposals. In addition, information is provided on specific types of grants and federal initiatives to educate faculty affiliates about relevant issues and priorities of funding agencies.

An additional support activity provided by Center staff is assisting with providing information necessary to the development of grant proposals. For example, useful statistical information and needs data are researched by Center staff and stored in the Center library. Monthly e-mails of relevant statistics and needs data that support grant proposals are disseminated to faculty affiliates via Center-wide listserve distribution.

Reviewing the Plans: Outcomes by Objectives

Objective 1: Conceptualize, generate, submit and secure competitive research grant projects. UNL's ability to make significant strides in important research on children, youth, families and schools rests in large part on the external grants secured by its teams of interdisciplinary researchers. The Center staff actively assist faculty affiliates in conceptualizing, generating, submitting and securing competitive research grants.

Assistance early in the grant conceptualization and writing process is necessary for some faculty affiliates to develop appropriate research foci. Center staff meet with faculty affiliates to discuss their research ideas, and help them identify funding sources for faculty research projects. Between October 2003 and May 2004, Center staff members met individually with 27 faculty affiliates to discuss their research ideas and grant proposals. Twenty-eight distinct projects were discussed during these meetings. Of the 28 projects discussed, 16 were submitted for funding as of this writing.

In addition to early concept development, Center staff assist faculty researchers with developing grant budgets to accompany research proposals. Among the type of assistance provided, staff help faculty affiliates develop budget items and calculate costs, assist in completing budget forms, and coordinate efforts with the Office of Sponsored Programs.

Among the most important functions of the Center is providing assistance with writing, editing, and assembling proposals. Prior to grant application deadlines, Center staff receive, review and edit sections of grant narratives and provide sometimes extensive feedback to researchers. To assist with the final stages of grant submission, final documents are compiled and copies made by the Center for submission to the funding agency. As a result of these efforts, numerous federal, foundation and local grants were submitted in 2003. Some large-scale federal grants were funded in 2003. Specifically, three grants were awarded totaling \$6,561,727. Across 2003-2004, an additional 19 grants were submitted, totaling \$13,895,580.

Objective 2: Foster interdisciplinary research. The collective strength of the Nebraska Center for Research on CYFS is found in its interdisciplinary, collaborative endeavors in research and scholarship. Thus, an integral function and central objective of the Center is to bring together faculty from diverse backgrounds and disciplines to address broad and far-reaching issues through joint, collaborative research partnerships. Faculty affiliates of the Center share expertise around a number of specialty areas, increasing the potential for interdisciplinary collaboration. Table 2 identifies the research themes and specialties of the faculty affiliates.

Opportunities for interdisciplinary networking occur in part through Center-sponsored research events. In its first year of existence, a series of luncheons were held to introduce faculty to the Center, provide opportunities for faculty to meet and interact around mutual research interests, and inform research teams about potential grant opportunities.

Table 2

Research Specialties of the Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools

- Social development in children and adolescents
- Early childhood development, early literacy, and play skills
- Bullying and school violence
- Adolescent risk-taking behaviors and outcomes
- Homeless and runaway youth
- Immigrant and migrant families
- Culturally relevant social, educational, and familial topics
- School-family connections
- Families and step-families
- Mental health; academic interventions and reading
- School environment
- Dual-language programming and outcomes
- Adults
- Teacher preparation and professional development

Objective 3: Provide opportunities for interaction with national researchers. Reaching out to scholars nationally and internationally is an important feature of the Center’s work, which includes increasing dialogue with

prominent researchers in the areas of children, youth, families and schools. Likewise, increasing the opportunity for Center faculty and students to interact with top researchers is essential in staying abreast and keeping UNL at the center of important research dialogues. The Center provides opportunities for interaction with national researchers through its series of “Spotlights on Research,” held approximately quarterly. In its first year, four such spotlights were conducted.

Objective 4: Increase visibility of the Center and Center faculty affiliates. The recognition of UNL as a premier research institution in children, youth, families and schools requires increased visibility and outreach to national and international audiences. Thus, an important objective of the Center on CYFS is the assurance of opportunities to increase visibility of faculty affiliates and their projects. A website was developed (www.cyfs.unl.edu) and launched in September, 2004. Several panel presentations at the University, community, and national levels provided opportunities to share information about the Center and its mission, goals, objectives, and activities.

Objective 5: Ensure Center supports are responsive to the needs of faculty. Formative evaluation procedures are used to ensure that the Center is responsive to the needs of faculty affiliates. Specifically, input and feedback is solicited at various times throughout an academic year to assess needs, desires, and goals. Specifically, information about potential support activities and research presentations is collected. The activities identified by faculty affiliates as desirable are in Table 3.

Table 3

Percentage of Faculty Affiliates Endorsing Grant Support Activities

Grant Support Activity	Percent Endorsing
Email Grant Opportunities	95
Budget Development	77
Relevant Website Notification	73
Internal Review	68
External Review	59
Grant Library	55

Social validation procedures are used to collect faculty perceptions of Center support functions and activities. Information is collected following research presentations and "spotlights," and following grant submissions. Participants attending the research spotlights complete brief evaluation surveys. Information regarding helpfulness, interest, and preference is collected. One hundred percent of faculty in attendance at the spotlights reported that the topic was of interest to them. Ninety one percent indicated that the format was appropriate, and 83% indicated that the spotlight was helpful or somewhat helpful in their research efforts.

Similarly, information is collected from faculty affiliates who submit grants through the Center. We solicit information about perceptions of their experience and the usefulness of Center support services. Feedback data are in Table 4. Of note, 100% of the faculty affiliates indicated that "I had such a positive experience in working with the Center, I would work with them again in future grant submissions." Additionally, 42% of the faculty affiliates indicated that "I was pleased that I submitted the grant through the Center and believe the potential funding of this grant was enhanced due to their assistance." None of the faculty affiliates indicated they "did not find the assistance provided by Center staff very helpful in the grant development and/or submission." Furthermore, none of the faculty affiliates indicated that they "did not think [they would] ask for help in the future from the Center Staff when submitting a grant proposal."

Table 4
Perceptions of Faculty Following Grant Submission

Grant Support Activity	Helpfulness Rating
Concept Formation	4.85
Identification of Funding	4.57
Development of Grant	5.0
Submission of Grant	5.0

The "Messy" Stages of Building: Challenges and Next Steps

The early formation of the Center has not been without its challenges. Continual redefinition of the Center's identity and foci, and strategic planning around strengths and growth are always central. It will be very important to assure that the mission of the Center and projects supported therein are consistent and serve to strengthen each other. Thus, although it may be tempting to invite all faculty to work with the Center for all grant projects, it will be necessary to maintain a focus on those most germane to the overarching mission of children, youth, families and schools. Likewise, issues of balance are always present. For example, there is an ongoing balance between the diverse levels of faculty needs and what is reasonable for Center staff to provide. There is a need to balance interest in supporting all faculty members in their efforts at grant writing with staff availability and priorities on quality and competitiveness.

In all interactions with faculty and administrators, the priority of establishing a "win-win" experience has been emphasized. Issues such as internal credit for grant submissions and distribution of fiscal and administrative (F&A) returns are paramount, particularly given the interdisciplinary nature and cross-unit, cross-campus emphasis of research generated through the Center.

Although the Center leadership and staff believe initial goals and objectives are being attained, new opportunities are on the horizon. Enhanced opportunities to support faculty researchers at all stages of experience will be necessary, as will more and varied opportunities for interdisciplinary networking and meaningful dialogue. Importantly, increased interactions within the university and across regional, national, and international circles will serve to strengthen research efforts and yield the broadest and most positive outcomes for children, youth, families and schools.