

# Instructional Improvement Centers in Higher Education

## *A Status Report*

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**Abstract.** A random sample of 72 instructional improvement centers in higher education were sent a questionnaire to determine their current status.

Data were collected concerning whether the centers were in operation, whether they had been evaluated, the type of activities they pursued, their budget, and their staff sizes.

Seventy-two percent of centers surveyed were still in operation. Both open and closed centers reported engaging in a wide variety of activities. Budget size and increase/decrease patterns varied widely with a general downturn noted after 1975. Few centers had been the subject of formal evaluations and evaluation data was not a factor in the decision to close all but one of the closed centers. Comparing the pattern of closed centers to some operating centers suggests more closings may occur in the next few years. Additional research on the history and life cycle of centers is recommended.

During the 1960s and 1970s, higher education institutions became actively involved in attempts to improve instruction. In the 1960s public policy promoted education and produced a period of general expansion in the nation's colleges and universities. Between 1952-1972, college enrollments grew from 2.6 million to 8.4 million (Mulkeen, 1981). Opportunities and funds were available to develop new courses and curricula and to experiment with new teaching techniques and technologies. At the same time, federal legislation encouraged institutions to expand their programs to meet the needs of new student populations. In response, many institutions which had not previously done so created instructional improvement centers (Bolten & Boyer,

1973; Gaff, 1975; Centra, 1976; Berquist & Phillips, 1977). The centers were often established with the aid of external support from federal agencies (e.g., Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education), and foundations (e.g., Exxon, Kellogg, Ford, and Carnegie). These centers were charged with the task of encouraging faculty renewal and instructional improvement.

By the mid 1970s over 1,000 institutions claimed they had some type of internal program or were planning to create one (Centra, 1976; Lindquist, 1979). During that same period, Gaff (1975) reported over 275 instructional development centers existed in higher education institutions.

Instructional development centers have been the subject of a number of doctoral dissertations (Engle, 1969; Buterbaugh, 1970; Holsclaw, 1974; Erickson, 1975), published articles (Lee, 1972; McMillan, 1975; Bratton, 1978) and informational reports (Alexandria & Yelon, 1972; Crow, Milton, Morrow & O'Connell, 1976; Davis, 1978; Bedient, 1981). The findings, particularly among later informal reports, were similar: The centers varied in size and funding, but engaged in similar types of activities (e.g., workshops, individual consultation, instructional improvement grants, etc.).

The present study, conducted in 1983, was prompted by two facts. First, it had been a number of years since research data were collected on instructional improvement centers in higher education. Second, it was known that some centers had closed in recent years.

The purposes of the study were to determine the number of open and closed centers based on a list of centers existing in 1975, and to document their activities, budgets and staff size. Of particular interest was whether the centers had changed their focus over time and if a relationship existed between the type of activities undertaken and their current status. The extent to which the

centers had been formally evaluated by the institution was also of interest. Finally, information was sought from each closed center about the reason for the closing and any resulting impact on the institution.

### Methods and Procedures

The study required identification of centers to be surveyed, development of a data collection instrument and distribution of that instrument to the sample selected.

#### Centers Surveyed

The population for the study was defined by a list of centers published by Gaff (1975). Thus, no centers established after 1975 were included in the study. The list contained the names of 275 centers and their directors. It was generated by Gaff as part of a national study and is believed to contain virtually all centers in existence at that time. A random sample selected for inclusion in the study.

#### Survey Materials

Data were collected using a questionnaire created by the authors. Instruments used in previous studies were examined to assist in the development of the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of five sections. The first section contained a list of 22 activities in which the center might have engaged. (These encompassed instructional development, faculty development and organization development activities.) The respondent was asked to indicate whether the listed activities were carried on during the center's first years of operation, during its middle years and at the present time (or during its last years of operation).

The budget section of the questionnaire requested figures for the original, the largest, and the smallest budgets the center had received. Respondents were also asked to plot on a graph the center's budget increases and decreases over the time of its existence. Information regard-

ing the ratio of "hard" to "soft" financial support of the center over the years was also asked requested.

The staff section requested figures for the original, largest, and smallest size of the professional staff. A graph was displayed on which respondents were asked to plot the size of the center's staff over the years.

The evaluation section asked if the center had ever been formally evaluated, and if so, by whom. A copy of the evaluation report, if available, was requested.

The final section of the questionnaire sought information only about closed centers, i.e., date of closing, data on the impact of the closing within the institution, attempts to re-establish the center, and reasons for the closing.

#### Survey Procedures

Questionnaires were mailed to each of the 72 centers. The researchers' hope that directors of closed centers would be available to complete the questionnaire proved not to be justified in several cases. In the instances, phone calls were placed to the institution's central administrative office to locate someone who is familiar with the center and would agree to complete the questionnaire. In all cases the respondents were institutional administrators under whose supervision the centers had operated.

Frequency counts were tabulated on all questionnaire data. Mean and median statistics were calculated for budget figures. Chi square significance tested (alpha .05) were conducted to compare the types of activities engaged in width size of staff, year the center was established, percent of hard versus soft money, and open versus closed status. Cross tabulations of responses were also performed selected items.

#### Results

Survey responses were received from 67 of 72 institutions (93%). However, three respondents indicated their centers did not have a campus-wide jurisdiction, and three questionnaires were incomplete. These six were deleted from the study resulting in a usable sample of 61. Based on survey data and other information it was confirmed that 20 of the 72 centers (28%) had closed and 52 (72%) remained open. Data were analyzed in the aggregate and in two subsets representing open and closed centers.

Findings are reported in terms of year established, budget, source of funds, staff size, activities, and center evalua-

tion. Comparison data on open and closed centers is also presented.

#### Year Established

The centers had been in existence for widely varying lengths of time. For example, one was established "before 1960" while five were created as late as 1975. Seven were established in 1965, and 8 each in 1970 and 1972. The largest number (10) were established in 1973. See table one for complete data on when center's were established as well as the year in which closed centers ceased operation.

budgets range from \$5,000 to \$3,500,000 with a mean of \$41,000. Not reflected is the fact that for nine centers the smallest budget was not the original budget. For all of these nine centers, the smallest was for the most current year reported.

The budget figures should be viewed with some caution because some centers include a variety of different types of services/activities in their data. For example, the center reporting a budget of over six million dollars provided all audiovisual equipment and production services for one of the largest univer-

**Table 1**  
**Number of Centers Established and Closed from before 1960 to the Present**

Year Established	No. Established	No. Now Closed	Year Closed
Before 1960	1		
1962	2		
1963	1		
1965	7	1	(1981)
1967	2		
1968	2	1	(1978)
1969	2		
1970	8		
1971	4	1	(1975)
1972	8	2	(1977/1977)
1973	10	3	(1978/1978/1978)
1974	6	2	(1979/1982)
1975	5	3	(1977/1980/1980)
No Data	3	1	(1978)
Total	61	14	Mean yrs. open: 6.1

#### Budget Data

The researchers anticipated that many respondents would be reluctant to share detailed budget information. Thus, only the center's original, largest, and smallest budgets were requested. As suspected, several centers declined to provide even these figures, and others stressed the need to retrain the confidentiality of figures provided. The following budget data are based only on centers which remain open and provided budget data (n=34). The range of first-year budgets was from \$13,000 to \$3,500,000. The mean was \$ 225,000 and the median was \$60,000. The largest budget (which for 17 institutions was in 1983) ranged from \$53,000 to \$6,000,000. The mean was \$ 501,000 and the median \$207,000. The smallest

sities in the country. Their budget also included its national film and videotape rental library service. Thus, the amount spent directly on improving instruction on that campus was obviously much less. In contrast, some of the smaller centers did not provide any support services such as audiovisual materials and TV. In fact, some did not even include the director's salary in the budget. Hence, the budget data are best used only to examine trends.

Respondents were requested to draw a line graph indicating the general rise and/or fall of their centers' budgets over the years of existence. (Some respondents completed the graph, even though they declined to provide specific budget figures.) Two frequency tables were then constructed, one based on number of

years the center had existed and the other by calendar year beginning in 1967.

The "years of existence" data yielded several discernible patterns of budget changes. For example, 10 of the 34 centers which provided budget data and are still operating reported increased budgets each year for all or almost all years of their existence. In contrast, 5 reported wide fluctuations suggestive of a boom-bust environment. The remaining 19 reported a variety of up-steady-down movements with trends generally occurring in one direction for several years before turning in a different direction.

majority of the centers (55%) reported their original budget consisted entirely of hard money. At the other extreme, 19% reported no hard money in their original budget. Other centers ranged across the spectrum with the mean for all the centers being 66% hard money at time of creation. This distribution remained stable for as many years as could be plotted.

#### Center Staff Size

Respondents provided information on staff size when the centers were created, when the staff was largest and when the staff was smallest. At the time of creation, centers ranged in size from less

First, the five most commonly provided activities were (in average percent rank order): (1) conduct workshops, seminars, etc., (2) experiment with innovative instructional procedures, (3) assist faculty in planning on-campus courses, (4) solicit outside funds by preparing contract or grant proposals and, (5) plan/produce instructional materials.

That faculty workshops and seminars was the most frequent activity (average 80%) is not surprising given that are inexpensive to offer, relatively easy to prepare and can reach many faculty. Likewise, experimenting with innovative instructional techniques (activities 66%) also has been reported elsewhere as a popular activity (Gaff, 1975). Many centers viewed their role as catalytic change agents by making faculty aware of alternative instructional methods and the newer technologies, such as TV, media-based self instruction, and computers. The third most popular activity was assisting faculty in planning on-campus courses (average 64%). It is noteworthy that only 20% of the centers originally provided assistance to departments and faculty in planning off-campus courses but later this increased to 34%. This change may reflect the general increase in off-campus offerings as colleges sought more non-traditional students.

The fourth most popular activity (average 63%) was soliciting outside contracts and grants for supporting the center's activities. In contracts, only 40% assisted other departments in such activity. Given the number of centers reporting dependency on outside funds these data are not surprising. Even centers well-funded with "hard" money reported preparing proposals for outside funding.

Planning and producing instructional materials was the fifth most commonly reported activity (average 59%).

The least amount of activity was reported for (1) collecting and analyzing cost-effectiveness data, (2) reviewing academic departments, (3) designing remedial courses, and (4) identifying curricular needs between departments. Given the claim by instructional developers that systematic design of instruction can improve both effectiveness and efficiency (Gustafson, 1971), it was surprising to see that few centers (average 9%) collected cost-effectiveness data. In contrast, offering workshops and seminars was very popular despite the lack of direct evidence of their im-

**Table 2**  
Budget Data (in Thousands of Dollars)

	Range	Mean	Median
Original	13—3,500	225	60
Largest	53—6,000	501	207
Smallest	5—3,500	195	44

The "calendar year" data showed no particular pattern until about 1975. Beginning in that year a general downward trend in budgets was noted. The percent of centers reporting increases in their budget dropped from 86% in 1975 to 50% in 1982. During the same period, there was a rise in the percent of centers reporting no budget change (10% to 25%) with the percent reporting budget decreases remaining at 25%.

Increases in budgets generally were small (less than 10%), but decreases often were over 10%. Thus, the data on budget movements reflect only the direction and not the magnitude of the fluctuations. Recognizing that the Consumer Purchasing Power Index dropped by 50% between 1970 and 1982 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1981), much of the increase in budget represents inflation rather than absolute growth. Several respondents commented that their "real" budget was actually smaller despite reporting small increases.

#### Source of Funds

Information was requested by year concerning the percentage of "hard" (institutional) vs "soft" (grant/contract) dollars in each center's budget. The ma-

than one full-time staff to sixteen professional staff. The mean staff was 3.4, with a median of 1.2. The largest staff size reported ranged from 1 to 73 with a mean of 8.2 and median 4.3. The smallest staff size ranged from less than 1 to 56 with a mean of 5.0 and a median of 1.1.

#### Center Activities

In order to identify the types of activities in which centers engaged, respondents were provided a twenty-two item checklist. They were encouraged to add activities at the end of the list, but few did so. The respondents were asked to indicate when each activity was engaged in during the center's first two years (or last two years of existence if no longer in operation).

Table 3 presents the percent of centers providing each service during the three time intervals. For most activities the figures do not change dramatically across time. Analysis of individual responses confirm that the totals reflected stability of choices rather than masking wide fluctuations. This is true for centers still in operation and for those which closed. Several center activities deserve particular comment.

**Table 3**  
**Percent of All Centers Engaged in Selected Activities During Their "First,"**  
**"Middle" and "Current or Last Year" of Operation N=61**

Activity	First 2 Years	Middle 2 Years	Last 2 Years
Conduct workshops/ seminars etc.	79%	87%	74%
Experiment with innovative instructional procedures	59	70	70
Assist planning on-campus courses	62	70	62
Plan/produce instructional materials	57	64	57
Solicit own grants/ contracts	56	67	66
Interpret course assignments	46	58	62
Internal grants to fac/dept.	54	66	46
Design student course assessments	66	51	54
Interpret student assessments	46	56	51
Orient new faculty	41	52	54
Design student assessments	36	46	43
Assist depts in writing grant proposals	36	38	46
Prepare summaries of research literature	33	44	41
Conduct research	33	44	38
Publish newsletter/ bulletin etc.	34	44	39
Identify curricular development needs within depts.	25	41	33
Assist planning off-campus courses	20	33	34
Conduct team building sessions	20	36	31
Identify curr. dev. needs between depts.	16	23	21
Design remedial/ non- credit courses	10	20	20
Review academic departments	10	18	15
Collect and analyze cost- effectiveness data	7	10	10
Other activities (described by respondent)	8	15	15

fact on improving either effectiveness or efficiency of instruction.

Another activity seldom performed was the review of academic departments (average 14%). This finding is consistent with the few case studies found in the literature (Dietrich & Johnson, 1967; Diamond et al., 1975). Also, very few centers (17%) engaged in planning and designing quality remedial instruction.

Identifying curricular needs between departments also received little attention. (average 20%). This probably reflects the reality of departmental "turf" protection and lack of interest in developing interdisciplinary programs. However, it also suggests that centers are not out in the forefront of efforts to re-examine how colleges organize their current offerings.

#### Center Evaluations

One question asked whether the center had been formally evaluated. Additional questions solicited information concerning the distribution and availability of evaluation reports. Sixty-eight percent of the centers reported that a formal evaluation had been performed. The evaluations were reportedly conducted by the institutional faculty (31%), the institutional administration (26%), the center staff (23%), and others (33%). For the last option one or more outside consultants were usually employed to perform an evaluation. A few centers reported being reviewed by accrediting agencies during institutional reviews.

Only 30% reported that the results of their evaluations were distributed either internally or externally. Of these, only a small number indicated their reports were available. The researchers requested these reports and included payment if a cost was indicated. This inquiry resulted in five reports being received; two checks were returned with the comment that the report really was not available. The few reports received were more in the way of annual administrative reports rather than evaluations of services.

#### Closed Centers

Based on information from several sources, it was confirmed that 20 of the original sample of 72 centers were closed. However, data on closed centers are less than complete despite extensive efforts by the researchers to obtain them. As indicated earlier, phone calls to each non-responding institution eventually located a knowledgeable individual who agreed to complete the questionnaire. Despite three follow-up

mailings to these persons, no replies were received from six institutions. Complete data were collected on only 14 of the 20 closed centers. Of the 14 centers, five closed in 1978, three in 1977, two in 1980 and one each in 1975, 1979, 1981, and 1982. Their mean length of existence was 6.1 years with a median of 5 years. No center was closed with the expectation that it would later be reopened. See Table One for more information on when centers closed.

Of the 14 closed centers half had experienced a formal evaluation of some type, but no pattern was evident. Whether they had or had not been evaluated did not appear to be linked to the decision to cease operation. All but one respondent indicated formal evaluation data were *not* a factor in reaching the decision to cease operation. The single exception reported formal data were "partially" a factor. None of the respondents reported that there were any formal data indicating that closing the unit had a negative impact on instruction. However, eight respondents personally felt there had been a negative impact due to a general decrease of interest in instruction. On only one campus was there any indication of an active attempt to re-establish the closed center.

A final question encouraged respondents to add any comments regarding the closing of their centers. Several themes were present across comments, with financial reductions being the most commonly expressed reason for the centers closing. Among other reasons given were non-renewal of external funding, failure to obtain new external funding, failure to develop strong political connections, and lack of "political clout." One respondent added a comment indicating that the arrival of a new college president coincided with a decision to close the center. Two centers may have closed because their directors decided to pursue different positions. Other comments included: lack of a research thrust, failure to communicate their successes, lack of campus rewards, professional jealousy from the college of education, and lack of acceptance of professionals who did not have degrees in psychology or education. One comment suggested the center was less than a dynamic force on campus by noting, "I don't even know when (it closed), it just faded away."

#### Closed vs. Open Centers

Numerous comparisons were made among the data from open and closed

centers. The most striking difference was in staff size. Closed centers had originated with few staff (mean 1.3 persons) and with only one exception never exceeded three professionals. (The exception had 13 staff). Similarly, their budgets were small. Their mean original budget was \$56,000 with a median of \$66,000. The largest mean budget was \$205,000 with a median of \$59,000. Two thirds of the closed centers never had a budget larger than \$75,000.

The closed centers did not report widely different patterns of activities from those remaining in operation. Chi-square analysis by activity for open and closed centers revealed five significant differences (Alpha .05). Three of these differences were associated with the activity "Plan and produce instructional

were mailed to 72 randomly selected centers from Gaff's (1975) list. Based on the data received and follow-up contacts, it was confirmed that 52 centers (72%), were still in operation and 20 (28%) were closed. Usable data were obtained from 47 open centers and 14 which had closed.

As a whole, the centers were quite similar in the type of activities they performed. The single activity which seemed to distinguish open from closed centers was in the area of planning and producing instructional materials. A significantly higher percentage of open centers reported engaging in materials production.

Extremes in first-year, largest and smallest budgets for the centers was noted across centers. No significant pat-

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## Times have changed. In this new environment, instructional improvement centers are at risk.

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materials, e.g., videotapes, slide/tapes, transparencies, etc." During all three time periods (first two years, middle years and current or last years), centers still in operation reported significantly higher involvement in planning and producing materials.

The other activities for which these significant differences were (1) developing student course assessment during last two years and (2) publishing a newsletter first two years.

The average number of activities reported during each time period was similar for the two groups except for the time period "current or last two years in operation." The closed centers reported a smaller number of activities for that time period compared to earlier periods.

#### Discussion

This study, conducted in 1983, was limited to investigating the status of instructional improvement centers established in higher education institutions by 1975. The purpose was to determine their present status (open versus closed) and to document their activities, budget, staff size and evaluation. Questionnaires

tern of budget data was evident among the centers until 1975 when a general downturn in support began to occur. It was also noted that in the case of nine centers the smallest budget was for the current year. These centers had clearly lost ground in terms of financial flexibility and one must be concerned about their ultimate fate.

As expected, staff size fluctuated with changes in budget. However, no data were collected on qualitative characteristics of center personnel. Few centers were evaluated in a systematic fashion. Thus, there is little data beyond anecdotal and descriptive reports upon which to speculate about their establishment, their development and their closing. Clearly, there are many opportunities for additional research. Descriptive studies might monitor existing centers to systematically document their characteristics and activities. On-site visits to the campus; interviews with center personnel, their clients, and institutional administrators and reviews of historical documents would also be desirable. Studies could also be conducted to scrutinize the institutional suprasystems in which the centers exist

and to record the effects of environmental changes over time.

Developing and testing a predictive model of center survival might also be useful. For example, the apparent link between engaging in instructional materials production and survival should be further investigated. More importantly, attempts should be made to identify significant clusters of factors which might not only predict, but aid, survival. These might include perceived value of the center as viewed by administrators and faculty, qualifications of the staff, administrative location of the center, nature of center activities, and quality of center evaluations. It is likely that both objective and subjective factors interact with center survival and both deserve examination. Studies might also accurately document the life cycle of closed centers using ethnographic methodology or historical analysis of archival records coupled with interviews of personnel still available.

Instructional improvement centers were born in an era of growth and prosperity unmatched in the history of higher education. The 1960s and early 1970s were a period of unbridled optimism and experimentation. Government, foundations, corporations and college personnel all shared a belief in the ability of higher education to make a great leap forward in educating ever increasing numbers of students to fulfill the needs of a technological society. But like good wine gone sour, the times have changed. Government and foundation priorities have moved to other concerns. The flow of students has slowed and budget retrenchment is now the watchword at many institutions. In this new environment, instructional improvement centers are at risk. Some have closed and the data suggest others might well follow.

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