

THE HEART OF THE WABASH CENTER: AN ANALYSIS OF WABASH CENTER EVALUATIONS AND REPORTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Established in the late 1990s, The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion of Wabash College in Crawfordsville, IN has had a significant impact on theological schools, colleges, and universities. The vision that gave birth to the Wabash Center emphasized enhancing religious leadership, the quality of religious institutions, and the impact of religion on public discourse. The center has engaged that vision by touching the lives of thousands of teachers of theology and religion and, through their work, higher education, congregations, and the wider public. It is known as the primary place providing support for faculty in teaching.

This work not only continued during 2020-2021, but expanded. Through its creative responses to the pandemics, the center led the way in providing through ZOOM, webinars, podcasts, and consultations significant conversations about the future and impact of the teaching of theology and religion. The Wabash Center supported scholars who had to rapidly move classes online; continued to provide teaching workshops and salons where faculty could meet; addressed the trauma of the shifts in teaching and learning practices; and provided consultants to schools on such issues as online teaching, institutional change, and anti-racist pedagogy.

The report “The Heart of the Wabash Center” explored those contributions and offered suggestions for next steps. That report was developed by analyzing 25 years of internal and external evaluations, grant proposals, and annual reports. It sought to address: *What is at the heart of the Wabash Center that has affected so many faculty members and universities, seminaries, and religious institutions?*

Mission: In the late 1990s, Lilly Endowment Inc. provided funding for the Wabash Center through its “Theological Teaching Initiative.” By attending to the quality of teaching and learning, the Endowment sought to enhance the impact of religious leadership on both congregations and public discourse.

Since 1996, the originating mission of the Wabash Center of Wabash College has remained the same: “to enhance and strengthen teaching in theology and religion in theological schools, colleges and universities.” Through workshops, consultations, podcasts and webinars, and research, the center has initiated a robust national conversation about teaching and learning. To build on this accomplishment, the Wabash Center attends to how its work affects religious institutions and the role they play in public life.

Leadership: Since its founding, the directors and staff of the Wabash Center have embodied a mutual and organic style of leadership. They consulted widely to develop programs and to clarify the vision of the center. They drew on the resources of persons making a difference in theological education and religious studies, supported them in their work, gave

them freedom to develop aspects of the program, evaluated, and then reflected together. In fact, they called this work of nurturing and encouraging others being “servants of excellence.”

This mutual style has helped the staff build a program that connects with the needs of participants. In turn, it has resulted in support and loyalty for the center. The sense of connection and fulfillment is captured in a phrase heard often from Wabash Center participants: “When Wabash calls, I say, ‘yes.’” A consistent organic working style has empowered the staff to listen, trust, free, and evaluate; to build significant programming; and to garner a loyal and growing constituency.

Finally, the Wabash Center has inspired leadership development across higher education. The center has provided a context where faculty members could consider their wider contributions to higher education. Wabash Center participants and leaders now serve as presidents, deans, department chairs, and assessment directors.

The Heart of the Wabash Center: Our study was written during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic when practices of teaching and learning came to the forefront for institutions of higher education. We asked: how has the Wabash Center fulfilled its mission, what has been its impact, and what are some potential directions to consider for its future? To explore that impact, we organized our research around the original seven program areas of the center:

1. *Inspiring conversation about teaching and learning in religion and theology,*
2. *Examining the teaching practices in the fields of theology and religion,*
3. *Exploring the vocation of teaching,*
4. *Supporting schools as nurturing environments for faculty,*
5. *Enhancing training of doctoral students in teaching and learning,*
6. *Expanding opportunities for online resources for teaching and learning, and*
7. *Engaging in research on teaching.*

Without a doubt, the Wabash Center is best known for its on-campus face-to-face workshops covering a wide range of topics such as mid-career faculty, African America faculty, teaching in racial and culturally diverse classrooms, and teaching online. Through these workshops as well as meetings at professional associations, the Wabash Center has inspired a lively conversation about teaching. These events have also assisted faculty to look at the vocation of a teacher where scholarship, teaching, administration, and public service are combined. The move of the Wabash Center to online options during the pandemic has further enhanced its impact.

Resulting from the conversations about teaching are questions about how faculty are supported by their institutions and how learning environments are created. While the center has addressed these directly, it has also developed a cadre of consultants to assist schools to explore faculty support, teaching across the diversity of students, curriculum and assessment, and building learning communities.

Finally, the Wabash Center has initiated extensive research into the practices of teaching across the disciplines of theological and religious studies. Questions of curriculum development, diversity in the classroom, and the public impact of teaching in religion and theological study have been addressed. The center has supported significant book projects such as *Educating Clergy* (Jossey-Bass, 2005), *Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Religion Courses* (Blackwell, 2007), and *Being Black Teaching Black: Politics and Pedagogy in Religious Studies* (Abingdon Press, 2008). The *Wabash Center Journal on Teaching* (previously *Teaching Theology and Religion*) is an important place to publish the scholarship of teaching. In addition to publication, the Wabash Center has developed a network of podcasts and webinars on important topics for faculty, including most recently projects such as teaching in the trauma of the pandemic; how white privilege and racism affect students, teaching practices, and faculty interaction; and how spirituality informs the vocation of teaching.

What is at the heart of the Wabash Center? First is a significant conversation and training program enhancing the impact of teaching in theology and religious studies on students, religious institutions, and public dialogue. Second is a growing network of colleagues who work to enhance the quality of institutions of higher education. Third is a wide-ranging research agenda that deepens the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Potential Directions: The evaluations of the Wabash Center suggest future directions for the center. Moreover, completing this review during the pandemic, seeing its economic impact, and experiencing the consequences of white supremacy on education and society also suggest directions for the Wabash Center. We name five.

1. *Online and Face-to-Face Workshops on Teaching and Learning* – The long history and high quality of Wabash Center workshops as well as the acceptance of the online versions during the pandemic suggest that continuing faculty conversations about teaching and the vocation of teaching is foundational to the work of the Wabash Center. These workshops make a difference. Providing both on campus and online versions expands the outreach of the Wabash Center.
2. *Mobilization pedagogy* – An innovative project begun in 2020 brought together some of the best practices of the Wabash Center. The topic was white supremacy and racism – a topic key to the education of students, the flourishing of faculty, and the impact of religious teaching and learning on public life. Combined were a series of seven public webinars, a symposium (online) for sixteen faculty participants representing sixteen schools, and support for anti-racism projects at those schools to facilitate institutional dialogue and change. This connective process inspired collegial and transformative action at local sites. The public could view and learn from important webinars. Local groups could use the webinars to inspire faculty conversations. Finally, projects could emerge to support teaching, institutional environments, and the public impact of higher education. Mobilization pedagogy is innovative and needs to be continued and developed.

3. *Future faculty* – The economic impact of the pandemic on higher education, the learning that online education reaches students across the globe, and the growing trend for schools to hire term and adjunct faculty means that the life of a faculty member may be significantly changing. No longer can a person expect to attend graduate school, find a job, and move into a tenure-track position. Furthermore, the students a faculty member meets in class may be more diverse than in the past with some attending online from other countries and cultures. Just as the Wabash Center made a difference for faculty in the last 25 years and provided an environment in which leadership for higher education could be formed, the center now needs to expand to these new populations and cultivate new teaching practices and leaders for higher education.

4. *Practices of Teaching and Learning* – The pandemic has demonstrated the power of the internet and online options for education. Not only are student populations more diverse, but faculty are increasingly being asked to draw on a wider array of resources for teaching and learning. Classroom practices of lecture, discussion, group work, and evaluation all continue, but faculty members are increasingly being called on to teach both face-to-face and online and to support the learning of new populations. The success of and expansion of online education during the pandemic points to the impact of the digital age on all education. The need to curate internet resources, the expansion of the use of podcasts and webinars, and the ability of schools to extend their outreach to new populations will require attention to the spirituality of teaching and to cultivating imagination and creativity as tools of education.

5. *Impacting Religious Institutions and the Public* – The original proposal for the Wabash Center emphasized how attention to teaching and learning in religion could enhance religious leadership and religious institutions, and their impact on public dialogue. This vision is even more important amidst profound social changes. We applaud how it has been claimed in the last year and a half. The Wabash Center can assist theological education and religious studies to explore how the work of faculty can be supported, how teaching and learning can thrive, and how institutions of higher education can expand their impact.

Conclusion: In the original proposal that requested funding for the Wabash Center, the writers set a goal: “the Wabash Center will establish itself as a central location to which we hope faculty members and administrators will look for resources and programs supporting excellence in teaching.” Without a doubt, this goal has been met. The impact of the Wabash Center has been remarkable. The investment of resources by Wabash College and the Lilly Endowment has been richly rewarded. Continuing to build on that impact is the task of the current leadership of the Wabash Center.

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