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Conversation with Kirk Ambrose, Founding Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning, University of Colorado, Boulder

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Conversation with Kirk Ambrose, Founding Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning, University of Colorado, Boulder¹

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Abstract

An interview by Lisa Lampert-Weissig of Kirk Ambrose, a scholar of medieval art history. Ambrose has authored many articles and four books, *The Nave Sculpture of Vézelay: The Art of Monastic Contemplation*; *Current Directions in Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Sculpture Studies* (co-edited with Robert Maxwell); *The Marvelous and the Monstrous in the Sculpture of Twelfth-Century Europe*; and *Urnes Stave Church and its Global Romanesque Connections* (co-edited with Margrete Systad Andås and Griffin Murray).

¹ The University of Colorado, Boulder is a public research university, founded in 1876. It currently has a student population of around 29,000 undergraduates and 6,000 graduate students spread across three divisions: Arts and Humanities, Natural Sciences and Social Sciences. The Center for Teaching and Learning Center (CTL), founded in 2020, serves faculty and students across these divisions. CTL also serves the College of Engineering and Applied Science, the School of Music, the Law School, the Business School, the School of Education and the College of Media, Communication and Information as well as Boulder's programs in Environmental Design and in Museum Studies. More information about the University of Colorado four-campus system, including student demographics is available at: <https://www.cu.edu/doc/essentialcufacts2020pdf-1>

Lisa Lampert-Weissig: You are the founding director of the University of Colorado’s Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL). When was the Center founded and what is its mission?

Kirk Ambrose: The CTL was launched in 2019, though the 2019/20 academic year was initially dedicated to foundational activities, including hiring staff, setting up an office, establishing a [website](#), and other activities.

Our Center was established at the recommendation of several campus-wide planning processes, which involved students, staff, and faculty. These included a 2018 Academic Futures report on plotting the direction of our campus, a Diversity Plan, and a report on recommendations for first-year students. The advantage of this was that the CTL had clear marching orders from our campus, which were confirmed as I met with individuals and groups.

We were charged with five foundational activities: professional development for faculty and graduate students, inclusive pedagogy, [building assessment capacity](#) for faculty and departments, developing and supporting Boulder’s [teaching community of practice](#) and supporting faculty who teach in the online environment.

LLW: How many people work at the Center and in what kinds of roles?

KW: In addition to my director position, a 60% appointment, there are eleven full-time staff. We have a budget/HR position and a communications & events coordinator, but most of our staff hold advanced degrees and have experience teaching in higher education: a specialist in inclusive pedagogy, a specialist in assessment, a specialist in faculty development, and a specialist in future faculty development. In the summer of 2021, we welcomed an existing team dedicated to supporting teaching with technology, known as the Arts & Sciences Support of Education Through Technology ([ASSETT](#)). This group includes a team manager, instructional design and technology consultants, a technology assessment specialist, a [student services portfolio manager](#), and an [innovation catalyst](#). The [latter position](#) directs and supports faculty teaching incubator groups, one of which received this year both NSF and NEH funding for its pathbreaking work on incorporating data sciences into humanities curricula. Last, our team includes six undergraduate and two graduate students, who work on supporting various projects for the CTL.

LLW: When you say “faculty development,” what does that mean exactly?

KW: It’s basically offering a set of skills and so on, that may not have been part of a faculty member’s experience. Many faculty are experts in their field but they may not have received much guidance in terms of teaching and pedagogy. At the Center, we don’t think about our work as imposing “best practices.” We’re trying to think relationally and trying to understand what the individual faculty

member, the department and so on think of as success. We want to think collaboratively with them about how better to reach those goals.

LLW: So, success for themselves and success for their students.

KA: Yes, exactly.

LLW: How do you think your work as a medievalist informs your role as the Center's director?

KA: One of the central metaphors driving my understanding of the work of our Center is “the commons,” a notion with origins in medieval England. All educators—from graduate students, to adjuncts, to staff, to tenure-stream faculty—are welcome to participate and benefit in the space of the CTL.

Much of my work as a medievalist has focused on the production and reception of knowledge within communities, especially monastic communities. I think that has positioned me to regard teaching less as an isolated activity of a teacher transmitting knowledge to a group of students, than as a deeply collaborative enterprise. To my mind, this works on a number of levels. Teachers collaborate with their students to advance learning. Teachers collaborate with one another to share effective practices. And our center serves as a space that collaborates with units and specialists from across campus to support educators in achieving their goals.

LLW: So, teaching, then, might seem like an isolated, individualized act, but it is actually a public act, a communal one. You mentioned to me that when you did your dissertation research/field work in Vézelay, France that you actually ended up living with a small group of monks. Did you realize at the time that this experience would shape how you thought about the concept of community or is it only on reflecting back that this becomes apparent?

KA: My entry into the Vézelay community was largely accidental. I was living in the town, renting a little room and I was spending a lot of time in the church doing sketches, taking notes and things like this. Then at one point I was in the church and one of the brothers just came up to me and said, in the nicest way, “What are you doing?” We just struck up this conversation and he invited me to stay with them. He said, “Well, you’re a student. Basically, you’re poor. Why not just live with us and it’ll be much more inexpensive.” So, his invitation was immediately this care that he was extending to me right there.

Entering into that living situation broke every expectation I had had, in terms of my preconceptions about monks and what their life was like. It was really eye-opening for me. In retrospect, something that came up for me was this idea of care. In my field, for instance, there’s a lot of talk about the aesthetics of care and so on, but it was interesting that this particular community was dedicated to supporting brothers in a much more, shall we say, “on the ground” way. They had ministries in Paris

and Marseilles and were working in the kind of Franciscan mode of preaching to and serving folks that are disenfranchised. The Vézelay community was what you could honestly call a retreat. There was a core community of brothers, six of them living in Vézelay and then there would constantly be folks coming through to kind of “recharge,” if you will. They were there to get back in touch with their vocation.

In the community we observed a lot of traditional practices. I would have lunch with them most days, and they would read passages from saints’ lives and from other kinds of religious materials. So, you would eat in silence and then there would be a little tea afterward and you would talk about one’s life and one’s personal circumstances and so on. It was that notion of the whole self, you could say, that was important. A couple of these folks were professors previously. One had been a professor of philosophy, for instance. So, it was a very, very intellectual group. There was also a range of people. There was actually someone who had been a drummer in a Japanese punk band as well. This way of living was more than simply just an intellectual enterprise. It was this whole range of folks and there was a kind of humanity in relation to intellectual activity and an attention to how you foster and support that humanity. So, I guess, in retrospect, that the experience was more profound than I would have initially expected from a simple invitation.

LLW: Wow. So, some of the Members of this order would be working in urban areas, ministering to people, and then they would come back to the Vézelay community that you were invited to stay with in order to recharge and reflect. Were they Franciscans?

KA: No, the order is the [Brothers of Jerusalem](#). It’s a relatively new order. Vézelay was established as a traditional Benedictine monastery in the ninth century, then the Franciscans established a presence in the thirteenth century. The Brothers of Jerusalem took over in the 1970s. The Brothers are a relatively young group, and they just brought a different kind of energy to the place.

LLW: In relation to our overall conversation, what’s especially interesting to me in your description of your experience in Vézelay is the question of institutional context. It sounds like you got to meet people that were living in a way that in the late twentieth century and certainly in our moment, is radical. It’s also, through the urban ministries, dedicated to a public good. To go off and live the kind of life that these monks live is very countercultural, but it is also supported by the Church.

We’ve been talking about the work that you’re doing leading a Center for Teaching and Learning at a large public university. CTL is supported by this large institutional apparatus, but you’re trying to cultivate pedagogy, which can be a radical act, depending on how you do it. Not for everyone, of course, but pedagogy still has this potential for change even within an institutional structure that is inherently conservative.

KA: The way you're phrasing it, I suppose I would agree with it. It's in a way a type of radical reform. That comes with an investment in the values of that institution, but that doesn't mean the institution can't change in profound ways.

LLW: It's stimulating to think about this community that you lived with that's part of another large institution, an ancient one. Within institutions, based on personal connection and personal vocation there are ways to have an impact and also maybe ways to change an institution from within, like your Center is doing. There are things to consider that are really interesting and promising.

It's pretty easy in this moment to just give up on the idea of the public good, because everything feels so difficult. It's very heartening to think about such possibilities for impact. Maybe "faculty development" can also be getting in touch with one's vocation and thinking about paths for change.

KA: These times feel unprecedented. How do you cultivate empathy or compassion for your students? And how do you balance that with empathy and compassion for yourself? I think that one of the things I have observed is that a lot of folks are just giving up.

A lot of faculty are retiring early and so on, and I totally understand why. The landscape has shifted. There are so many things that have shifted. There is acrimony in terms of public issues. I think we have to think about how not to lose sight of that as an individual going into the classroom.

LLW: Yes.

KA: It's a delicate balance.

LLW: Perhaps with the Center you're creating a space where people can go to recharge. A teaching and learning Center can be that kind of space. It's not that by default, but it can be.

KA: Yes, and ultimately, a place - I keep coming back to that notion of space - a commons. How do you take full advantage of that idea of the commons in both a literal way, but also in conceptual way? It's so important. Because, as we were noting, the university encompasses so many disciplines. There is that kind of universal aspect to it, but there is a common concern that we share. We are invested in this next generation in a really profound way. How do we act as responsible stewards? It's both exciting and daunting at the same time.

LLW: What sort of programs does the Center offer?

KA: In addition to individual consultations and classroom observations, we offer a broad range of programs, from book clubs to a [Fall intensive training program](#) each August for new graduate student teachers that serves over 700 participants. In the past academic year, we offered over 150 workshops on several themes, such as assessment, innovative teaching, and wellness. We further host several communities of practice dedicated to a common shared interest, such as gamification, inclusive practices, and online teaching. We sponsor a faculty fellowship program, a cohort of 10 to 15 faculty who participate in a seminar in the fall and then work on individual projects in the spring. We offer a certificate in college teaching to graduate students, and, this past year, began offering [micro-credentials](#)

on [Just and Equitable Teaching](#) and another on [Teaching International Students](#) to all instructors on our campus. We are considering adding some additional micro-credentials in the coming academic year.

LLW: How is the Center funded?

KA: We have two sources of funding. The provost's office and the Graduate School provide a substantial portion of our budget. The ASSETT team receives student fees from the College of Arts & Sciences.

LLW: The CTL came into being at a very tumultuous and challenging moment. What kinds of programming and support has the Center offered to the campus community to address the impact of local, national and global events on the campus community over the past couple of years?

KA: We were in the midst of hiring many of our staff when the pandemic shut down our campus in March of 2020. Our first order of business was to train instructors on the basic functionality of Zoom and Canvas, our campus's learning management system. We basically had two weeks to meet this demand. To do so, we partnered with other entities on campus, including our [School of Continuing Education](#), which had much experience in the online space, our [Office of Institutional Technology](#), and our [Office of Academic Innovation](#), which had been developing content on the Coursera platform. We developed a common web platform so that faculty could get the support that they needed, including asynchronous resources on teaching well with remote technologies, setting up individual and group consultations, and creating a community of practice in which faculty and staff shared ideas about teaching remotely. This experience was key, for it baked a collaborative working method into the DNA of our team. I believe that any success we have enjoyed can largely be attributed to this.

As our spring semester ended in early May of 2020, we began to plan how to support our campus in the upcoming academic year, which was still full of uncertainty. Then, on May 25, George Floyd was murdered. We were immediately inundated with requests on how to teach inclusively, often with an anti-racist focus. We developed an [online anti-racist course](#), which continues to be used and has had more than 1000 participants on our campus. We also worked with departments and units across campus in developing tailored programs. To help us meet this need, our provost funded a faculty fellow, who helped us through offering workshops and developing content for our website that addressed DEI issues. Our inclusive community of practice, which meets weekly, became a real source of community and support for faculty and staff grappling with these issues.

As the November 2020 election approached, we recognized that there was a lot of anxiety among our instructors and held panels on how to handle conversations on charged subject matter and developed a guide that was circulated broadly on our campus.

LLW: Could you share a specific example of how CTL has supported social justice and equity in teaching on your campus?

KA: One example would be the law school. They've taken this very, very seriously. They have even thought deeply about things like the Socratic method and the ways in which that can negatively impact students of color, for instance. The law school has a center focusing on legal issues impacting Indigenous peoples, [The American Indian Law Program](#). A lot of faculty and students of color engage with this program and you could say that they are particularly tuned in to social justice issues.

LLW: What sort of interactions would the law faculty have with CTL staff?

KA: We have a number of staff who worked with them and our inclusive pedagogy expert specifically took on working with the law school, as did another staff member. These staff members met monthly with people from the law school to go into various topics. Their work culminated with a panel featuring students of color. This was incredibly effective and it's one of the things that we're trying to do more of: thinking how to thoughtfully engage with and foreground student voices. I think sometimes faculty take for granted that they're in the classroom and speaking to their students, but there are certain issues that, of course, students may not feel comfortable sharing with faculty.

LLW: I know that CTL is a very new program, but how are you measuring the impact of this work you've done, for example with the law school, or with other programs? How do you know if you're being successful?

KA: One of our key partners is our institutional research outfit, the [Office of Data Analytics](#). With their help we are looking very closely at moving the needle on a number of student access measures. We look at things across the board, but we can also drill down into different kinds of demographic data. We can think about, for instance, how well are women on campus succeeding in STEM fields, where historically there have been real challenges? We are looking at data about students who identify with various demographics in different contexts.

As you say, we're a little young at this stage, but we're trying to think about how the long-term projects we are undertaking are impacting the campus. This is one way to engage faculty because often pedagogy issues are multifaceted and very complex. We don't want to impose methods, as in "you know you have to do X," but if we are trying to be inclusive, if we are targeting, for example, supporting women in STEM fields, we work with a unit to see how we can create supportive environments. In being more welcoming, that often goes beyond just things like pedagogy.

We are also thinking environmentally in terms of things in the literal classroom. How is it structured? We are considering things like the infrastructure both inside the classroom and outside the classroom. How can we coordinate with various tutoring services and so on to make sure that folks really feel supported and engaged both in the classroom and outside of it as they are working on particular skill sets, like calculus or something similar?

LLW: Did you develop some way that a department can see what's working?

KA: We have a lot of data on our campus, but for all sorts of reasons, it can be complicated for department chairs to access. We have someone in the office who specializes in data, who is helping

departments to see how they can responsibly interpret and act on data. Sometimes there can be mis-readings of significance in certain numbers. A classic example on our campus is faculty teaching evaluations. We have student course surveys and so on, but certain departments were putting way too much weight on statistically insignificant differences among student evaluation forms. That could have real impact in terms of wages over time, and so on. We're really keen on working with departments day-to-day so that they can begin to build the capacity to ask the questions that are important to them and their students.

LLW: How does the Center determine what types of programming to undertake?

KA: At the campus level, our team meets weekly to discuss what common themes and concerns we're hearing in individual consultations with instructors (without betraying any confidentiality, which is super important to our work). We are fortunate to have several groups associated with our Center that further help us in decision-making processes. In addition to an advisory group, which consists largely of campus administrators, I meet regularly with an "intellectual board" of faculty educators to discuss what challenges they and their peers are facing in the classroom. That's invaluable. The ASSETT team likewise has a faculty and student advisory board that fulfills a similar role.

Our Center supports a network of approximately 50 graduate student fellows, representing over 40 departments, who serve as liaisons and keep us apprised of common challenges, especially in large, introductory courses. Also, I sit as a liaison to our campus's faculty senate, as well as a subcommittee on educational technology, and that helps me have another avenue to hear what kind of needs faculty face. Last, we underwent an extensive campus climate survey and, as we head into our summer planning, this, as well as other data sets, will help us identify needs.

LLW: What do you see as the biggest challenges facing your campus in the next few years?

KA: Many of our biggest challenges likely resemble those of our peers. What immediately leap to mind are issues related to mental health and wellness. Again and again, I see and hear that students and faculty are exhausted. For instructors, there are two primary areas of concern: extending compassion to their students and extending compassion to themselves without burning out. Another way of putting this is: how does an instructor balance empathy for students, and all the academic and personal challenges they face, with the need to maintain academic standards and student accountability? I've been working with some campus offices and faculty to develop programming for the coming academic year aimed at supporting faculty in walking that tightrope.

Improving student success in our [large classes](#) is another challenge, especially, but not exclusively, in STEM fields. This is largely an issue of equity, for studies have identified performance gaps among women and students from minoritized backgrounds (Anne-Barrie Hunter and Elaine Seymour's recently updated *Talking About Leaving* provides wonderful data and insights) in many of these courses. This has cascading effects for the persistence and retention of these students that run counter to our faculty's commitment to diversity and inclusion. Large courses live in an eco-system that goes well beyond the students and instructors, for they rely on TAs, on academic advisors, on other support

staff, on tutors, and so on. Our campus has an array of wonderful support systems for students, both in their academic pursuits and in co-curricular activities, that are, in many cases, underutilized. Next year, we are partnering with four departments on a three-year initiative focused on innovating large courses with the goal of creating better outcomes for all our students.

Last, I think universities will increasingly have to make a case to our students, as well as to broader publics, that we serve a public good. There is so much skepticism extended to higher education these days, often in politically charged spheres. Admittedly, there are some good reasons for this increased skepticism: higher education costs have outpaced inflation and, with the tightening labor market, many industries are offering and/or accepting streamlined credentials to populate vacancies in positions typically reserved for college graduates. Some communities have historically had less access to higher education and some minoritized populations also have lower graduation rates. Because of this, various industries are recognizing alternative paths to employment qualification, paths beyond traditional university degree programs. Universities—and this includes faculty—will need to think deeply about what values and benefits their education serves and articulate that effectively to a broad public.

LLW: Well, that's a great place to end, I think. It's been really illuminating and really fun to talk to you and I want to thank you for your generosity with your time and in sharing your experiences.

This interview was conducted over two sessions in March and May of 2022 as well as through email. The present copy was edited for length, accuracy, and readability.