

Hamilton Center Activity Summary, April 2024

Description of Project

Launched in 2022, the goal of the Hamilton Center is to ensure that the University of Florida is the top university in the nation for research and teaching in Western Civilization. The Center's study of Western Civilization prioritizes three aspects: i) study of Greek and Roman civilization and its legacy; ii) study of the Abrahamic religions; and iii) study of the American Founding. The focus on Western Civilization is intended to educate American citizens in the principles underlying their Republic, and the virtues required to sustain it.

A non-partisan institution, the Hamilton Center hires tenured and tenure-track faculty from a variety of humanistic disciplines according to the following criteria: i) research excellence; ii) teaching devotion; and iii) mission alignment. Faculty must have a shared commitment to teaching and researching the aspects of Western Civilization listed above, as well as transmitting the pre-political virtues of citizenship. They are also expected to demonstrate those virtues in their scholarship and teaching.

The Hamilton Center proposes to offer five undergraduate majors for UF students:

- Politics, Philosophy, Economics, and Law
- Great Books and Ideas
- History, Strategy, and Statecraft
- American Foundations, Ideals, and Law
- Science, Technology, Ethics, and Society

The Center is also developing a new general education class on Civil Discourse, which UF students can take to satisfy their core civic requirements. This will reach between 1250 and 6000 students per year.

Achievements and Strengths

-Rapid Growth in Faculty and Teaching. There are at present 11 faculty; by September 2024 there will be 20-25 additional faculty. The Center teaches 29 classes, reaching 600 students. Courses are largely arranged within the preexisting structure of the University general education curriculum and its constraints; nevertheless, they reflect our mission. Examples include: i) Capitalism and its Critics; ii) God and Science; iii) Wisdom and Heroism: Great Books in the Middle Ages; iv) Constitutionalism and the Making of Modern Freedom. Hamilton faculty are already having significant impact on campus according to the terms of the Center's mission.

-Capacity to foster clusters of excellence in neglected academic fields. The Center has hired some of the best junior and senior scholars in key humanistic fields that are neglected or in decline at most major universities. This includes political theory, early modern European history, diplomatic history, and military history. The Center is set to become a leading research and teaching institute in these disciplines,

-Attractive degree programs that fill in genuine gaps at University of Florida. The Center has proposed viable degree programs for students with a professional orientation. These degree programs do not copy other viable degree programs at UF. Rather, Hamilton's proposed degree programs are developed with UF's existing gaps in course offerings and degrees in mind. For instance, despite having a very strong law school, UF has no formal pre-law stream. Two proposed degrees aim to appeal to students looking precisely for that kind of legal education.

-Support of current University leadership and administration, notably from the President's office. This unwavering support cannot be overemphasized. It allows us to expand and secure our status within the university.

Obstacles, Vulnerabilities, and Weaknesses

-Persistent hostility from University of Florida faculty. Many academics and university employees misconstrue the Hamilton Center as a partisan project. Some make misleading remarks to media and students. Some engage in bureaucratic stonewalling that violates university regulations. Some intimidate students interesting in participating in Hamilton Center events. While ongoing investigations into professional misconduct might resolve several issues, opposition will persist and could undermine the Center's capacity to function. Higher education reform projects should foster good will amongst sympathetic faculty and emphasize a non-partisan ethos. But those participating in reform projects must be under no illusions that they will be universally well received. The ideological monoculture that dominates academic life feeds hostility to higher education reform. It is rooted in antagonism to the core subject matter of the Humanities and a conception of the university that sees it as the training ground for political activism. Lowering the ideological temperature within universities is a multi-generational effort. Over the next two decades, then, accomplishments will remain fragile and could be undone when university administration changes.

-Funding model dependent on direct state support. The Hamilton Center depends on the Florida legislature for the bulk of its funding. This support is essential to launching and sustaining the center in the short term, but it is vulnerable to shifting political winds and policy priorities. The Center must diversify its funding to sustain its mission. The long-term goal, then, is to rely on donor support and revenue brought in through student enrollment. This depends on two uncertain bets: a) achieving sufficient donor support to cover the annual budget and build an endowment; b) achieving sufficient student interest to ensure net revenue gain.

-Challenges of operating within novel multidisciplinary frame. The Hamilton Center hires historians and political theorists, but it is neither a history department nor a politics department. It does not aim to replace these departments within the University, but rather develop a new multidisciplinary department. However, few such departments exist in the country so professors can be unfamiliar with the new model. For instance, professors are trained within the confines of their disciplines to teach staple courses (e.g. 'Modern Political Philosophy (Hobbes to Weber)' or 'Early Modern British History (1453-1688)'). These courses will not be offered through the Hamilton Center. The Center's professors still teach similar material, but they must rearrange their courses to meet multidisciplinary expectations. Many professors otherwise aligned with the Center's mission may prefer to teach in more conventional academic departments; many professors who join the Center may find they have to adjust their teaching and pedagogy considerably.

-Constraints of working within the 'multiversity': The vast majority of students at the University of Florida enroll for technical, vocational training in particular professions. There is no integrated curriculum nor much of a desire for one. As at nearly all universities nowadays, there is no real intellectual unity across campus (which is why one could speak of a 'multiversity' rather than 'university'). The Hamilton Center operates within this paradigm. Its proposed majors are not designed to provide an integrated liberal arts education. There are two courses in Western Civilization that all students will take in their first year, but after that students will specialize—as they do at most universities. The Hamilton Center, then, does not provide a liberal arts or great books education *tout court*, but provides students interested in professional accreditation with humanities and civics formation that they would not otherwise receive. The gold standard of higher education reform is the reconstruction of an integrated liberal arts curriculum—that is the education that transmits civilization. But that kind of curriculum will have to be developed at institutions other than the University of Florida.