

**PCI – FCRC – CUES Workshop**  
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Roundtable Discussion: Emerging Issues

*Discussion Question: What Are the Challenges When University Centers Serve as Neutral Forums?*

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Central Questions:

- Are we neutral?
- What is a neutral forum?
- What are we neutral about?
- What are the standards for being neutral?

Are we neutral?

- Land Grant Universities play a role in particular / expectations of the state that they will serve a role in the community / dull-double edged sword – extension has a role everywhere
- More emphasis on the service role of Land Grant Universities
- Emerging area of disputes between state agencies / means universities are now in a unique role
- Process and subject expertise both come from the universities
- Universities have credibility / seen as unbiased
- Colleagues do advocacy work within the community, which could come into conflict with the idea of neutrality

What is a neutral forum?

- University extension programs offer services for agriculture / Universities can also offer services to cities
- The word “forum” means a physical place where dialogue happens
- Example of Cleveland State University’s Levin College Forum: doesn’t do dispute resolution or conflict resolution. Simply a neutral convener around issues for the community. Means a place where the community feels comfortable coming and speaking

What are we neutral about?

- Which university houses a center shapes what you can / cannot do as a center (Example: Georgia Tech is approached for engineering / technology related issues based on the university’s reputation)
- Serving in a neutral role, representing a university center and the university, need to understand what you’re representing
- Need to be careful about which projects the center takes on to preserve neutrality

- Centers could do more projects within the university with departments having problems – could become a role that centers could play within the university that could be seen as valuable

### Standards

- Transparency, Inclusiveness, Accountability, Confidentiality, Implementing Best Practices
- Also consider if the center is serving an educational role / if there's a scholarship opportunity to get into a process?
- Also consider if the project is serving a public purpose?
- Develop a list of the principles a center works under / criteria for choosing to take on a project
- Include mutuality of engagement?

### Challenges

- Roles: being perceived as consultants vs. being seen as a neutral forum
- Centers may end up becoming so broad, they might have roles in conflict with each other
- Centers need to be measured / valued for the work done in the university / if Centers are more service-oriented, how do they receive value from the university?
- Often a problem of conflicts between the university itself and the surrounding community / the university is seen as a developer
- Working across universities with other centers that provide topical area programs could create a conflict given their support / agendas
- Struggle with working with contractors / consultants from private practices as partners while at the same time offering neutrality
- Universities aren't set up for rapid response
- Culture / self-interest of the university center / staff