



# CELLebration Stories

## What need prompted the creation of CELL? Why was it the right time and UIndy the right place for what would become CELL's mission?

*A convergence of needs and opportunities prompted CELL's emergence. The University of Indianapolis Board of Trustees wanted to create centers of excellence as part of the strategic plan. They considered many ideas and in the end two emerged: aging and education. Aging aligned well with the university's strengths in healthcare. Education built on the innovative work of the School of Education's P-12 partnerships and collaboration with the College of Arts and Sciences.*

*Concurrently, but independently, Lilly Endowment was awarding focused grants to postsecondary institutions in targeted areas. UIndy's strategic plan intersected with the Endowment's postsecondary investments. What would become the Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning received a nearly \$15 million grant to launch its work of transforming education in Indiana.*

*About one year after CELL was up and running, the organization received an \$11.3 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. David Harris, who led education initiatives in the Indianapolis Mayor's Office at the time, as well as other community leaders, supported outreach to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. This is an example of what would become CELL's model—non-partisan partnerships that extend beyond the university's boundaries to create the opportunities that make transformation possible.*



**Dr. Lynne Weisenbach**  
CELL Executive Director  
2001 - 2008

## Shakespeare wrote, "What's in a name?" What is the story behind CELL's meaningful, but tricky-to-say name?

*Because of the university's emphasis on "center of excellence," there was a desire to have that phrase as part of the name. "Leadership" and "learning" also were deemed critical. We considered other words, such as "education." Additionally, we tried to avoid duplication and copyright concerns. Back in 2001, it wasn't nearly as easy to search as it is now. We overlooked a similarly named center and received a call from their director shortly after CELL's first press conference. Thankfully, our missions differed and the director was very gracious about it.*

*In the end, Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning, with the acronym CELL, was selected. It was easy to remember, contained the right words, and created a strong metaphor for our work.*

### **When you look back at your time with CELL, what makes you proudest?**

*CELL always has focused on quality education for all learners in Indiana and blurring the lines between P-12 and postsecondary attainment. That's meant not being afraid to expose data about racial inequalities—and then doing something about it. The team leading our Gates grant-funded work ensured we stayed focused on students who were not being well-served by the current systems and that we looked critically at the data.*

*CELL often is described as a “big tent” and it's a great metaphor. CELL continues bringing a range of people together—K-12, postsecondary, community members, and policymakers—to have bold conversations and work together to solve educational challenges.*

### **Looking back, what is the key moment when you undoubtedly knew that CELL was making a difference for Indiana students?**

*Probably “the moment” was CELL's first Indiana's Future Conference when I looked out and saw nearly 500 people all talking about closing equity gaps and raising educational achievement. The conference deliberately had an inclusive design. Credit goes to Nancy Sutton for knowing how to get the right people to the table. She brought disparate groups together, including grassroots community members, P-12 teachers, parents, university faculty, and board members. The event's design gave time for people to discuss, strategize, and take those plans back to put them to work. The conference lit that initial fire around courageous conversations in P-16 access and achievement. The event helped CELL take a giant leap forward in fulfilling its mission.*

### **What is your favorite memory of working with CELL?**

*Honestly, there are so many. But hands down, the people. Working with the staff, university faculty, national advisory committee, and CELL's many partners.*

*Perhaps one of the funniest memories was the “elegant space” we occupied on Virginia Avenue in downtown Indianapolis. Moving back to campus and into our new space in Esch Hall in September 2005 was a great thing—for many reasons!*

### **If you had a crystal ball, where do you see CELL in the next 20 years?**

*In an ideal world, there would be no need for CELL, but there is so much critical work left to do. I imagine CELL will continue supporting effective practice but engage even more in informing policy and promoting research, like the critical area of early literacy for example. I envision faculty from across the University of Indianapolis (and other higher education institutions), as well as CELL staff, engaging in this important work. I think CELL has the potential to expand beyond the borders of Indiana and take its work and model for effectively guiding change to the national stage.*

### **Why is an organization like CELL so important to Indiana?**

*CELL has solidified itself as the “big tent” and has an important, if not essential, job within the state. As such, CELL plays multiple roles: respected convener, professional learning supporter, and policy informer. That reputation attracts even more education innovation to Indiana and conversely helps shine a spotlight on the state among national leaders. CELL has earned a reputation as an honest broker. From its tireless efforts over the last 20 years, the organization now is known for being committed to equity of outcomes for all students, which is exactly what it was built to do.*