

Boundary-Spanning Actors in Urban 4-H: An Action Research Case Study

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Abstract

Today's Cooperative Extension organization continues to face challenges of providing relevant, quality programming in urban communities. Challenges include the ability to build capacity in Extension's urban youth educators to assess and interpret the unique, variable needs of urban clients and to communicate effectively the identified needs to the state land-grant institution to leverage resources. To be responsive, intentional change can be informed and initiated by those closest to the challenges of creating thriving 4-H programs in urban environments – the urban Extension youth educator. Guided by open and sociotechnical systems theory, this multiple case action research study used the critical incident methodology to explore boundary-spanning behaviors of urban Extension youth educators. Four conclusions were drawn from an analysis of the findings including an adaptation of the community-based problem solver quadrant of the Weerts and Sandmann (2010) university–community engagement model. Boundary-spanning behaviors can inform organizational policies related to program development, staff development, hiring procedures, and performance evaluation procedures.

Introduction

The increasing demand for outreach to address the needs of the ever-growing urban population—as opposed to the shrinking rural population—has forced urban youth educators to become more innovative in their programming approaches. Despite a culture deeply rooted in Cooperative Extension's rural orientation and despite organization leaders who “do not recognize the disadvantages they stack against” urban programming (*De Ciantis, 2009, p. 6*), educators are integrating programs into urban communities and engaging youth, families, and stakeholders.

“Why do urban educators receive the same training as other educators in the state but fail to produce thriving programs?” The assumptions of organization leaders and the structure of the organization's professional development efforts inspired this study, which was designed to illuminate the innovative boundary-spanning behaviors of expert performing (one showing significant desired program impacts) urban youth educators in response to the

“one size fits all” professional and program development training expected to prepare rural and urban youth educators to meet the needs of their distinctly different audiences.

Research Method

This multiple case study action research dissertation explored how managers of outlying audiences span the boundaries between sponsoring institutions and the audiences they serve. Specifically, it identified behaviors that urban youth educators use to navigate resistance from the rural-oriented Cooperative Extension education system (sponsoring organization) and the urban community (outlying audience). To meet the study’s objective, urban 4-H youth educators in eight urban cities participated in group meetings and individual critical incident interviews to reflect on the critical link between their concrete experiences, their judgments about their experiences, what meaning they attributed to their experiences, their resulting actions, and the implications for their programs (Yin, 2009). This resulted in qualitative data, which is considered the most appropriate choice when little knowledge exists about a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). These data were used to identify strategies and behaviors that were applied for two purposes: (1) bridging learning and support gaps often invisible to Cooperative Extension organization leaders and (2) navigating resistances faced when serving nontraditional, outlying urban audiences.

Conceptual Framework

An investigation into the behavior of expert performing urban youth educators and the outcomes of their efforts required consideration of the influence of associated factors. Three primary factors influenced the results of the study: programming behaviors of educators, the urban setting, and resistances experienced. The study was designed based on a linear conceptual framework (see Figure 1) that explored the combination of these factors and the resulting outcome for urban educators’ practice. Developing this approach helped in identifying and isolating boundary-spanning behaviors found to be useful for reaching outlying urban clients and communicating experiential knowledge gained at the individual and organization levels within Cooperative Extension.

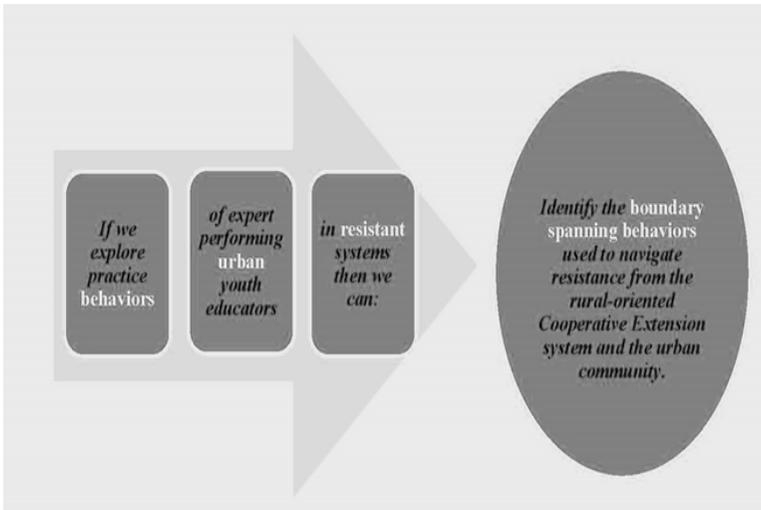


Figure 1. Depiction of the conceptual framework guiding the study including the study's purpose statement.

Theoretical Framework and Key Literature

Prior to this study, representative data on the relevant conceptual framework did not exist. The fundamental principles of each of the factors within the conceptual framework have been scantily covered in the literature, and the literature does not address the fusion of these factors into a focused study of the behaviors employed by Cooperative Extension urban youth educators to navigate resistance. Following a review of the multidisciplinary and multicontextual literature on boundary-spanning theory, a focus on boundary spanning for the purposes of community outreach and engagement was chosen.

Weerts and Sandmann's (2010) study exploring the roles of boundary spanners in university–community engagement considered actors' level of social concern and resulted in the suggestion of four distinct roles of spanners and a university–community engagement boundary-spanning roles model (see Figure 2) that classified boundary spanners in four roles based on their practices: community-based problem solvers, engagement champions, technical experts, and internal engagement advocates. Because boundary-spanning educators stand in the gap between the learning organization and the communities they serve, their capacity to accept,

process, and act on the needs of the internal and external environments is key to producing quality Cooperative Extension youth development programming. In an effort to provide such quality programming, boundary-spanning actors search for and retrieve new information across organizational boundaries—information which is then applied to task knowledge and diffused throughout the organization to enhance programming (Richardson & Lissack, 2001).

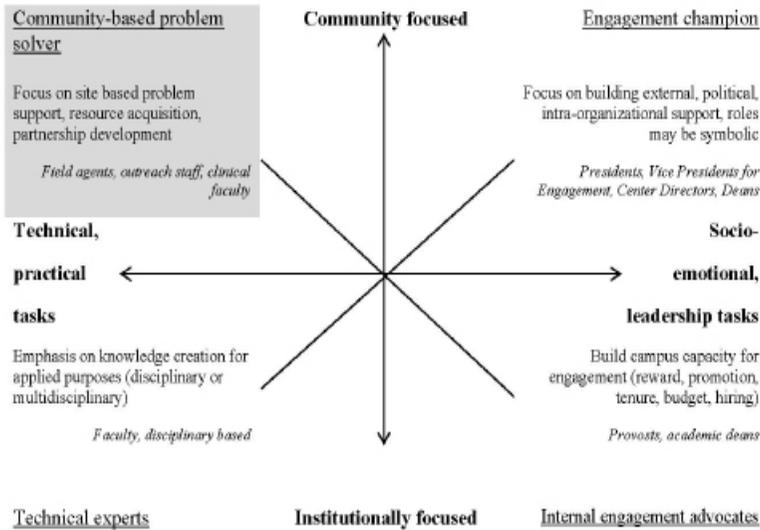


Figure 2. University–community engagement boundary-spanning roles at public research universities (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010).

Little attention has been given to the role of boundary spanners within higher education. However, within an open system like Cooperative Extension, boundary-spanning behaviors are crucial in maintaining two-way communication between an organization's leaders and its dispersed, ancillary unit personnel, such as contingent faculty and staff at branch campuses or Cooperative Extension educators working at community-based locations (Skolaski, 2012).

Research Findings

This study based on three research questions yielded three primary findings related to the boundary-spanning behaviors used by urban 4-H youth educators. (1) What strategies do urban 4-H youth educators use to navigate resistance from both the urban community and the rural-oriented Cooperative Extension system?

Knowledge and information gathered by boundary spanners engaging with outlying communities to structure relationships, initiatives, programs, and collaborations illuminated the complexity of communication between organizations and external clients. This study demonstrates how this subculture of self-directing urban youth educators uses informal learning to manage internal and external resistance individually and within self-formed communities of practice or interest groups. (2) What behaviors do urban 4-H youth educators use to span boundaries for the Cooperative Extension system and for working within the system? Demands on mature organizations require the development of competencies among boundary-spanning actors to successfully convey information and resources to and receive them from external environments (Scott, 1998). Four boundary-spanning behaviors—assessing, engaging, reformulating, and advocating—were categorized in the David adaptation of the community-based problem solver quadrant of the Weerts and Sandmann (2010) university–community engagement model (see Figure 3). These behaviors link the sponsoring organization and the outlying audience. Study findings showed that outlying boundary-spanning actors successfully used strategies to receive information that informed their practice as urban youth educators and to act on behalf of the Cooperative Extension system. (3) What is the impact at the individual, organizational, and national policy levels of action research related to boundary-spanning behaviors of community-based, urban 4-H youth educators? Identification and acknowledgment of boundary-spanning behaviors used by urban 4-H youth educators hold potential for learning at individual, organizational, and national policy levels. This study also found that boundary-spanning behaviors can inform policies related to program development, staff development, hiring procedures, and performance evaluation procedures and that reflective practice serves as individual professional development and potential organizational learning.

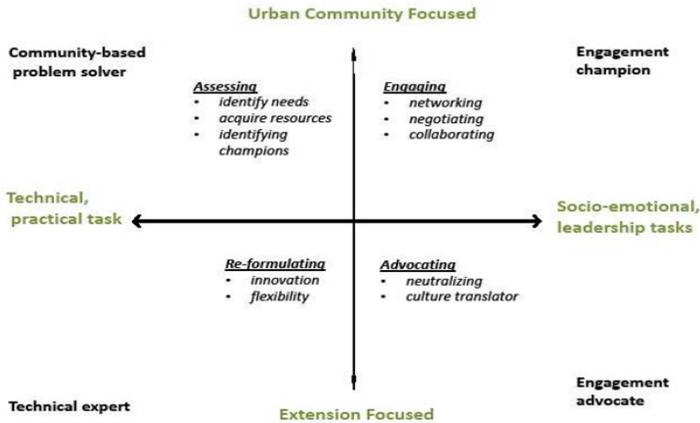


Figure 3. Outlying youth educators as community-based problem solvers. David adaptation of Weerts and Sandmann (2001) University–Community Engagement Boundary-Spanning Roles at Public Research Universities model.

Research Significance

“There are no cows in the city.” “City kids think eggs come from the back of the grocery store.” “4-H is about cows and cookin.” “The only cows in the city are on the Chick-fil-A billboards.” These remarks made by opponents of urban programming are meant to imply that organizational resources should not be wasted on urban youth. Ironically, such comments from opponents make the case for including urban youth in the programming circle to advance awareness of the state’s agriculture, agricultural industries, and food sources.

This study exposes the results of the failure to take into account fundamental programming differences despite the organization’s rich history of program development and delivery. The traditional delivery model of Cooperative Extension and the land-grant system is facing both external and internal pressure to develop tailored programs and delivery modes consistent with audience needs. Conversely, there are also counter pressures from Cooperative Extension constituents who argue that in an era of limited economic resources, the organization should remain focused on its core agricultural development and delivery modes.

This study yielded a profile of current community engagement boundary spanners, particularly in urban contexts, and an analysis of their characteristics and practices. It identified boundary-spanning strengths and weaknesses within an organization. This

information is valuable for informing state and national organizational policy regarding the selection, support, and professional development of boundary spanners as community engagement actors. More broadly, it provides insights into effectively leading, institutionalizing, and sustaining engagement. Further, it informs the literature on boundary spanning, agency, and innovation and change models and theories in higher education.

Overall, this study demonstrates the need for future studies that not only explore behaviors but also investigate more deeply the level of acceptance/adaptability—or lack thereof—at the organizational level and the impact of characterizing boundary-spanning behaviors on improving practice in urban communities, contributing useful data to the existing knowledge base on organizational learning.

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About the Author

Victoria Dotson David is a program coordinator at the University of Georgia in the Office of Diversity Relations and Multicultural Affairs for the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences. Her role involves recruitment and support of underrepresented faculty, staff, and students and the development of outreach and engagement programs for the college. Her research interests in the field of adult education include university–community engagement and outreach, boundary spanning, and action research. She earned her Ed.D. in Adult Education from the University of Georgia.