

The Exploration of Community Boundary Spanners in University–Community Partnerships

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Abstract

In university–community partnerships, boundary spanners can flexibly traverse historically divided lines to increase access to resources and build upon reciprocal partnerships. Previous research has examined the roles of boundary spanners but only from the perspectives of the institutional partners. The purpose of this dissertation study was to examine the characteristics, roles, and motivations of community boundary spanners in university–community partnerships. A qualitative instrumental multiple case study was conducted with community partners of a university–community partnership. Findings led to a community boundary spanning adaptation of the Weerts and Sandmann (2010) institutional model. The Framework for Community Boundary Spanners in Engaged Partnerships identifies four distinct roles community boundary spanners may play. This study provides institutional partners with the tools and techniques to better locate and engage community boundary spanners through partner identification and development.

Introduction

Boundary spanners are leaders who are able to bring people together across traditional boundaries to work toward a common goal. In university–community partnerships, boundary spanners can flexibly traverse historically divided lines to increase access to resources to solve problems and to build upon reciprocal partnerships (Miller, 2008; Sandmann & Fear, 2001–2002; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). Previous research has examined the roles of boundary spanners; however, it has done so primarily from the perspectives of the institutional or university partners (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). But what about the roles of community members engaged in university–community partnerships, especially those actively engaged in boundary spanning behaviors? Given community-engaged scholarship's disproportionate focus on the institutional or university partner, this study was performed to examine the characteristics, roles, and motivations of community boundary spanners in university–community partnerships.

The Research Design

Friedman and Podolny (1992), early researchers of the topic, noted two main functions of boundary spanning. The first was the ability to convey influence between constituents and partners through negotiating power and balance between the institution and community partners working toward mutual objectives. The second function was to best represent the perceptions, expectations, and ideas of each side to the other through educational functions to promote mutual understanding among partners. From Friedman and Podolny's concepts of differentiation of roles, Weerts and Sandmann (2010) developed a conceptual framework of boundary spanning, examining characteristics of task orientation and social closeness. Although the Weerts and Sandmann framework identified characteristics of boundary spanners affiliated with the institutional partner, their framework guided this research to help identify salient qualities of the community boundary spanners in an attempt to create a similar framework focused on the boundary spanning roles in the community. Toward that end, the study was guided by the following research questions: (1) What are the characteristics of community members actively engaged in university–community partnerships? (2) What roles do community members play as boundary spanners in university–community partnerships? (3) What are the motivations of community boundary spanners? (4) What is the relationship between the phases of partnership and the characteristics, roles, and motivations of community partners in university–community partnerships?

This qualitative research study utilized a multiple case study approach (Stake, 2006). Ten community boundary spanners were identified by institutional partners from three county sites of a statewide university–community partnership called the Archway Partnership (<http://www.archwaypartnership.uga.edu>). The three counties chosen represented diverse phases as an alumnus, evolving, or new Archway Partnership site. The identified individuals were reviewed as individual cases, and the characteristics, roles, and motivations of the participant engaged in the partnership were investigated for each case. Data were collected through individual interviews with these community boundary spanners, as well as through two institutional stakeholder partner focus groups made up of Archway administrators and programmers. A review of relevant documents, such as Archway publications and meeting minutes, was employed to provide context and shared public knowledge. The descriptions of the Archway

Partnership and the three counties selected for this study provided context to the sites of each case.

Interview and focus group data were analyzed using a framework-specific coding scheme based on the Weerts and Sandmann (2010) framework as well as using constant comparison analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1987). Initially, interview transcripts were reviewed for indicators of task orientation and social closeness. In a second round of analysis, the coding utilized research question responses in which data collection reflected characteristics, roles, and motivations of the cases. Phase of partnership and its impact on boundary spanners' capabilities was also examined.

Findings

Characteristics, Roles, and Motivations

The multiple case study analysis found that community boundary spanners, most prominently, were communicative, sought and understood multiple perspectives, and possessed a visionary quality. Their ability to communicate reflected well-developed listening and language skills that helped community boundary spanners gain trust and credibility. Seeking out, understanding, and representing multiple viewpoints gave spanners empathy and informed their decisions for allocating strengths into projects. Being able to consider a broad perspective and being forward-thinking were noted visionary characteristics of community boundary spanners. Common characteristics of community boundary spanners demonstrated the ability to advocate for cohesion and to plan for the future.

Membership, formal positions, and roles in professional and civic organizations gave community boundary spanners visibility. According to Archway staff, they had located their early collaborators within the community partnerships through such roles. Community boundary spanners typically held senior or executive-level roles in organizations or boards and consequently were in positions of influence over change and resources. Professional titles and responsibilities created roles for spanners that were transportable to multiple arenas. Other roles were imparted by the community or personally. Participants aware of their positionality ascribed to themselves overarching roles such as resource broker, relationship builder, or community leader.

Although characteristics or roles might be externally identifiable by institutional partners, motivations were more difficult to

assess. Community boundary spanners' motivations ranged from personal motives to community-focused intentions. Personal and professional motivations to engage in community boundary spanning behaviors included enhancing business relationships, increasing connections to resources, and engaging the competition. Examples of more community-oriented motivations included sense of service or generationality.

Finally, it was found that phase of partnership had no bearing on the boundary spanners' characteristics, roles, and motivation. It can be conjectured that these boundary spanners' roles and characteristics existed before the county Archway boards were composed. In essence, these elements were stable through the duration of the partnerships.

Framework for Community Boundary Spanners in Engaged Partnerships

These findings were mapped into a Framework for Community Boundary Spanners in Engaged Partnerships (Figure 1).

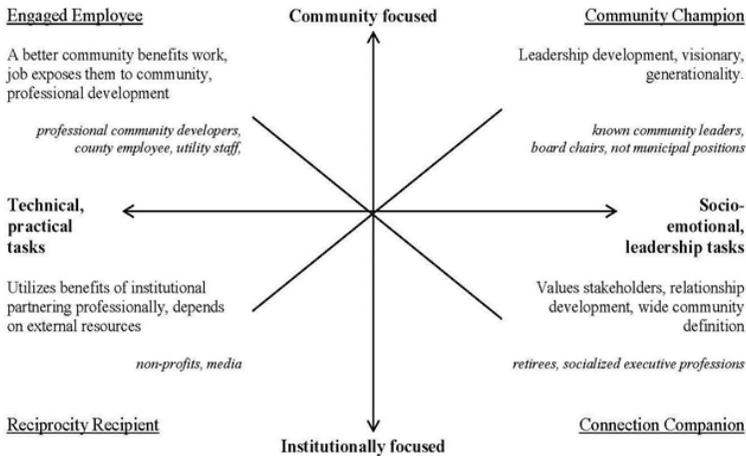


Figure 1. The framework for community boundary spanners in engaged partnerships.

This framework expands the Weerts and Sandmann model (2010) by recognizing boundary spanners in the community. It identifies four distinct roles community boundary spanners may play: engaged employee, reciprocity recipient, connection companion, and community champion. The engaged employee is closely aligned in their community as a function of their professional responsibilities, which also relates to a more technical task orientation. Close proximity to external partners offers the

reciprocity recipient increased access to resources and a greater likelihood of being recognized and credited for their practical task abilities. The connection companion is aligned with the institutional vertices of the framework because of the increased connections that they are able to make by also being open to relationship building in systems outside the community. Community champions are community-focused and are engaged in the most diverse involvements as a result of being proud of their surroundings.

Conclusion

The overarching analysis of this research yielded three conclusions. First, boundary spanning capacities of community partners were derived from motivations regarding roles as previously highlighted in the Weerts and Sandmann (2010) boundary spanning model. Second, from the community perspective, the institution was represented by the institutional boundary spanner. Finally, those identified as boundary spanners came to the partnership with developed boundary spanning capacities; participation was not a boundary spanning development effort.

This study holds implications for those in adult education; community outreach and, in particular, higher education partners. Through the use of the boundary spanning frameworks for assessment and through development of skills distinct to the Framework for Community Boundary Spanners in Engaged Partnerships' quadrants, this study provides institutional partners with tools and techniques to better locate and engage community boundary spanners through partner identification and development. A striking arena needing further investigation is the lack of diversity in community boundary spanners and the implications for their identification and broader base of participation.

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