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Community Engagement and Boundary-Spanning Roles at Research Universities

During the last decade, community engagement has emerged as an important priority among many colleges and universities in the United States. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching defines community engagement as the “collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (Carnegie, 2006). As the Carnegie definition suggests, engagement differs from traditional conceptualizations of public service and outreach in important ways. Specifically, service and outreach are typically conceived as *one-way* approaches to delivering knowledge and service to the public, whereas engagement emphasizes a *two-way* approach in which institutions and community partners collaborate to develop and apply knowledge to address societal needs (Boyer, 1996; Kellogg Commission, 1999).

Engagement has gained momentum over the past five years due to a number of important influences. In 2006 the Carnegie Foundation created an elective classification system recognizing campuses by their commitment to community engagement via curricular and community partnerships (Carnegie, 2006). The work of the Carnegie Foundation has brought national attention to engagement and has served to legitimize

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this work across the country. In addition, professional networks and professional development opportunities around engagement have flourished. A recent report, for example, documented over 23 national associations that have formed a coalition to promote engagement through the Higher Education Network for Community Engagement (Sandmann & Weerts, 2006). Furthermore, regional accreditation bodies are increasingly supportive of community engagement and are beginning to include indicators of engagement in their assessments of institutional quality (see Higher Education Learning Commission, 2006). In short, the totality of these factors has created a surge of interest in engagement-related activity on campuses across the United States.

Engagement at Research Institutions

While interest in community engagement in higher education is on the rise, the adoption of this work has been uneven among sectors of the higher education community. At a recent meeting of the Research Universities and Civic Engagement Network, participants declared that research universities have been slower to implement engagement compared to non-research institutions: “The [community engagement] movement has been fueled largely by community and liberal arts colleges and state universities. Research universities have been relatively less involved, despite the ambitious efforts many have undertaken to promote and advance civic engagement in their institutions” (Stanton, 2007, p. 5).

Engagement may be slower to take hold at research universities due to a number of factors. First, research universities tend to be larger, more complex, and more decentralized than colleges and universities in other sectors. As prototypical “organized anarchies” (Cohen & March, 1974), research universities’ adoption of new innovations—such as engagement—is often unpredictable. Thus, despite strategic steps taken by institutional leaders to advance engagement at research institutions, the level of implementation on these campuses is likely to vary considerably across units.

In addition, research universities are comprised of cosmopolitan faculty (Birnbaum, 1988) who have developed national and international reputations based on their success in advancing traditional forms of scholarship. Yet, traditional views of scholarship typically maintain restrictive definitions of research and promotion that inhibit community-based work (Dickson, Gallacher, Longden, & Bartlett, 1985). In her study of promotion and tenure, KerryAnn O’Meara concluded that “[m]any faculty hold values and beliefs about service scholarship that doubt and devalue its scholarly purpose, nature and products” (O’Meara, 2002, p. 76). Overall, the two-way interaction with community proposed

by leaders of engagement initiatives is often hampered because university research is designed narrowly, with community partners acting as passive participants, not partners in discovery (Corrigan, 2000).

Due to the reasons stated above, there may be reluctance or lack of understanding among leaders at research universities about how their campuses might best interact with communities in the context of engagement. To help leaders navigate this landscape, important questions must be addressed such as: (a) What are the appropriate roles for research university leaders, faculty, and academic staff in developing reciprocal relationships with community partners?; (b) What campus actors are best positioned to advocate for engagement internally and externally?; and (c) Who should serve as the primary liaisons with community partners, and to what extent do these individuals represent community and/or institutional interests in the partnership? In short, new frameworks are needed to help leaders at research universities conceptualize linkages to community in ways that account for institutional complexity, recognize traditional forms of scholarship, and foster reciprocal relationships with community partners for mutual benefit. These issues are at the heart of our study.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine how research universities build bridges to community partners, and thus increase institutional capacity for engagement. We investigate this issue through the lens of boundary-spanning theory. Boundary spanning can be defined as the “bridge between an organization and its exchange partners” (Scott, 1998, p. 196), with the primary purposes being to process information from the environment and provide external representation to stakeholders outside the organization (Aldrich & Herker, 1976).

The research questions guiding our study include: (a) How are boundary-spanning roles understood and defined across research institutions in the context of university-community engagement?; (b) Who are the primary university-community boundary-spanning agents at research institutions, and what are their roles?; and (c) To what extent do these boundary-spanning practices facilitate or inhibit university-community engagement?

As our introduction suggests, research universities possess unique attributes that shape their boundary-spanning behaviors. Our focused look at research universities aims to inform leaders at research universities about spanning roles and strategies most compatible with the unique character, structure, and culture of such institutions. In short, this study aims to help research institutions reach their full potential in implementing the strategies of engagement.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Our literature review and conceptual framework is divided into three parts. First, we provide a brief overview about key influences that have shaped contemporary understandings of engagement. In this section we introduce important studies that shed light on university boundary-spanning behaviors in the context of engagement. Second, we discuss key assessment tools that have emerged to help institutional leaders build mutually beneficial relationships with community partners, and how these tools relate to our study of boundary spanning. Finally, we offer a theoretical framework analyzing boundary-spanning roles and practices in the context of research university-community engagement. Through these analyses we will address the research questions posed in our study.

Boundary Spanning and the Evolution of the Engagement Movement

Contemporary understandings of engagement can be traced back to important national leadership initiatives and scholarly contributions made during the 1990s. For example, *Scholarship Reconsidered* (Boyer, 1990), *Scholarship Assessed* (Glassick, Huber, & Maeroff, 1997) and *Making the Case for Professional Service* (Lynton, 1995) are influential works that paved the way for the support of faculty work that focused on serving broader public interests (Knox, 2001). Engagement has also been stimulated by the work of national organizations aimed to elevate the civic roles of colleges and universities. Due to the efforts of Campus Compact, 51 colleges and university presidents signed a proclamation in 1999 recommitting to the civic missions of their institutions (Campus Compact, 2008a). And in 1996, the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Colleges called on public research universities to become more productively engaged with the communities they serve (Kellogg Commission, 1996). Similarly, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities issued a report calling on public colleges and universities to step forward as “stewards of place” (2002).

A body of literature soon formed around issues of engagement focusing on broad themes such as leadership and institutional commitment to engagement (e.g., Kezar, Chambers, & Burkardt, 2005; National Center for Public Policy in Higher Education, 2008; Votruba, 1996; Walshok, 1999), faculty roles and rewards related to engaged scholarship (Colbeck & Michael, 2006; O’Meara, 2004, 2002; Peters, Jordan, Adamek, & Alter, 2005; Sandmann, Foster-Fishman, Lloyd, Rauhe, & Rosaen, 2000; Ward, 2003), organizational and structural factors that facilitate engagement (Amey, Brown, & Sandmann, 2002; Bringle & Hatcher,

2000), campus-community partnerships (Bacon, 2002; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Dorado & Giles, 2004; Jacoby, 2003; Sockett, 1998) and the centrality of mission in designing engagement programs (Holland, 2005).

Much of this literature relates specifically to institutional boundary spanning: building bridges from campus to community. For example, Bringle and Hatcher (2000) suggest that the development of inclusive governing structures is one bridging strategy that institutions employ to facilitate meaningful exchanges with community partners. In these arrangements, community participation in shared governance, shared staff positions, and committee work is continually negotiated and restructured among partners. Development of effective university-community partnerships in these settings requires a high degree of trust and the development of sustained relationships (e.g., Maurrasse, 2001; Miron & Moely, 2005; Sandmann & Simon, 1999; Sandy, 2007, Walshok, 1999; Ward, 1996; Zlotkowski, 1998).

In addition, boundary-spanning efforts may also be significantly influenced by the mission, history, and location of the institution. For example, Holland (2005) suggests that institutions in economic hubs with significant regional challenges and opportunities are most likely to adopt an engagement agenda. Holland's work implies that engagement may be easier in settings where spanners are embedded in the communities they serve, as opposed to serving in isolated places where partnerships may not occur naturally.

In general, the literature suggests that institutional boundary-spanning behaviors are shaped by a number of complex social, cultural, and political factors. Summarizing findings from his comprehensive analysis of community-university partnerships, Maurrasse (2001) concludes that the historical relationship with community partners, power relationships between campus and community, availability of funding, institutional culture, and background of the higher educational representatives and partners are critical elements that institutional leaders must consider when building bridges to community.

Institutional Assessment Tools

Alongside the scholarly literature, various assessment tools have emerged to help colleges and universities of all types monitor their progress in becoming more engaged with their communities. Many of these tools are especially relevant to our examination of boundary spanning. For example, Holland (1997) developed a matrix linking key organizational factors with levels of commitment to service learning. Holland's matrix can help leaders assess the effectiveness of their current

institutional practices in relation to their goals for involving community partners in their work—from random or limited involvement to comprehensive involvement in designing, conducting, and evaluating research and service learning. Similarly, Furco (2003) developed an institutional self-assessment rubric to assist higher education leaders in measuring the progress of service-learning institutionalization efforts on their campuses. One key dimension of Furco's rubric addresses the degree to which community partners are aware of campus goals for service learning. His rubric also gauges the extent to which campus and community partners are aware of each other's needs, timelines, goals, and resources. Both the Holland and Furco assessment tools focus on helping institutional leaders visualize a sequence of progressive steps that connect campus and community interests and efforts.

Another important initiative relevant to our analysis is the Campus Compact Indicators of Engagement project. The purpose of this project is to document and disseminate best practices of engagement to help institutions achieve broader institutionalization of civic engagement (Campus Compact, 2008b). One of the key indicators identified by the project—community-campus exchange—relates to how institutions cross boundaries into the community through resource-sharing, inclusion of community voices in educational design, and fostering of public dialogue in public problem solving. This particular project contributes to our understanding of engagement by suggesting that comprehensive community bridging strategies are essential to building civically engaged campuses.

Some institutional assessment tools relate specifically to research universities. For example, in 2003 the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), a consortium of Big Ten Universities and the University of Chicago, joined forces with the Council on Engagement and Outreach (CEO, formally the Council on Extension, Continuing Education, and Public Service) of the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (formally the National Association for State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges) to develop benchmarks assessing institutional effectiveness in meeting commitments to engagement. Among metrics related to boundary spanning, the benchmarks call for evidence that institutions have established relationships with diverse entities, participate in environmental scanning, and provide communities with access to university resources and programs (Committee on Institutional Cooperation, 2005).

Finally, and most recently, the Research University Civic Engagement Network identified three dimensions of engaged scholarship to help institutional leaders achieve greater clarity about how scholarship is understood in the context of community engagement. Specifically, their work focuses on unpacking elements of engagement purposes,

processes, and products or outcomes (Stanton, 2007). This work contributes to an understanding of boundary spanning in that it helps research university leaders better conceptualize the role of external partners as they relate to scholarly activity.

The previous discussion illustrates that institutional leaders have access to a growing toolbox of assessment strategies aimed to help campuses monitor their progress toward engagement. While these tools are valuable in helping campus leaders visualize a pathway to engagement, we note that no comprehensive framework exists to help these leaders understand roles and responsibilities of institutional actors in progressing toward these goals, especially within the complex environment of major research universities. To begin filling this gap, we advance a boundary spanning conceptual framework in an attempt to identify roles of campus actors in building bridges to community and increasing institutional capacity for engagement.

Boundary Spanning Theory and Community Engagement

Our conceptual understandings of boundary spanning in the context of engagement relies heavily on work by Friedman and Podolny (1992) who suggest that spanning is best viewed at both the individual and organizational levels. At the individual level, spanners are actors who are primarily responsible for interacting with constituents outside their organization. These spanners negotiate power and balance between the organization and external agents to achieve mutual objectives, and they also represent the perceptions, expectations, and ideas of each side to the other. In the context of community engagement, university spanners perform teaching and learning functions to promote mutual understanding among the institution and community representatives.

At the organizational level, boundary-spanning roles may be more accurately viewed as composite entities that subsume multiple types of relationships with external agents (Friedman & Podolny, 1992). In other words, boundary spanning is not confined to an individual job description; rather, it refers to broader institutional strategies to engage with external partners. This broader definition of boundary spanning suggests that institutional relationships with community partners are multilayered and may serve various purposes at multiple levels.

Furthermore, Friedman and Podolny (1992) suggest that boundary spanning is a complex activity not confined to a single entity in an organization, and that it may manifest in multiple ways to reduce conflict and facilitate spanning goals. Building on the concepts advanced by these authors, we suggest that boundary-spanning roles may be differentiated by two domains: task orientation and social closeness.

Task orientation relates to an individual's formal job role and how it influences that person's relationship with external constituents. These roles range from technical to socio-emotional tasks and differ in their overall objectives. Adoption of these roles may vary by abilities. For example, past research suggests that spanners with the best ideas (high expertise) may not necessarily be the one most qualified to help the group become internally integrated (socio-emotional skills). However, both skill sets are essential to the development of the partnership with outside stakeholders (Bales & Slater, 1955).

Similarly, some spanners may be more effective than others in communicating with external partners. A critical component of the boundary-spanning process is establishing effective lines of communication between internal and external agents (Tushman, 1977). This is especially important since organizations may carry their own coding schemes (i.e., distinctive language and terminology) not easily understood by another group. Some spanners may play key roles in translating contrasting coding schemes across institutional boundaries, and their ability to do so is based, in part, on their degree of task specialization and their knowledge domain (Tushman, 1977). The background and skill set of spanners may help to determine their task orientation and overall contribution to building partnerships with external groups.

Task orientation and spanner background and characteristics may also determine the degree of social closeness of the spanner to the external constituent. Social closeness in this study is understood as the degree to which the spanner is aligned with the external partner versus the organization that he or she represents. For example, in their study of labor unions, Friedman and Podolny (1992) explained that some spanners serving as portals to outsiders who influence the organization (gatekeepers) may be viewed by members of their own organization as less effective in representing their interests. Conversely, those spanners seen as more aligned with organizational interests (representative) were perceived as less willing to be influenced by the other side. Role conflict can result when spanners hold their own personal values, beliefs, and expectations, which may shape their degree of loyalty to one group compared to another (Friedman & Podolny, 1992). Overall, tension between technical task roles and social closeness of university spanners can lead some spanners to protect institutional interests while others advocate community interests.

In sum, we rely on this body of research to advance the notion that boundary spanning in the context of university-community engagement is a complex set of activities at both the individual and organizational level. Furthermore, roles and responsibilities of spanners may vary

based on task orientation and distance between the university and the community. Through our understanding of these concepts, we aim to construct an emerging theory of institutional boundary-spanning roles and community engagement at research universities.

Methodology

Our analysis draws on qualitative data from a multidimensional research project that examines ways in which research universities are transitioning away from a one-way dissemination paradigm (outreach) toward a two-way constructivist model (engagement) in their work with communities. This project employs a multi-case study design (Yin, 2001) to compare patterns of engagement activity across research institutions.

In a recent study, we analyzed data emanating from these case studies to help readers understand challenges that research institutions face as they take on community engagement (see Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). In the course of that investigation, we were struck by the variation and complexity of roles played by institutional actors in their interactions with community partners. Informed by this past work, the present analysis focuses on theories of boundary spanning and how research institutions build bridges to communities. Thus, we offer the caveat that our boundary spanning frame was not explicitly used to shape our interview questions; however, this frame is incorporated because it provides a unique lens to categorize and make sense of the data collected and address the research questions posed in this study.

Two criteria were used to select case study sites for this project. First, we selected institutions that had an established reputation for supporting traditional outreach and emerging forms of engagement to ensure richness of perspectives in response to our research questions. To identify these sites, we held informal discussions with national engagement leaders to get their perspectives on research institutions that fit into this category. Second, we selected institutions that had differing missions, histories, and stakeholder groups, to understand the impact of context on engagement. And we purposefully paired rural land-grant and urban research universities in the same state to study whether differences in engagement practices were present between these institutions, in service of larger project goals that aim to examine issues of institutional identity and engagement.

The six institutions examined in our study are located in a Southern state, a Great Lakes state, and a Midwestern state. The rural land-grant institutions in this study were established in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The urban universities were established in the twentieth

century, one as recently as the 1980s. Total student enrollments across all institutions range from 25,000 to over 40,000. The number of full-time faculty members at these institutions ranges from 750 to 3,000. Additionally, these institutions report research funding from \$45 million to nearly \$700 million. Urban research institutions in this study are Carnegie-classified as research-intensive or -extensive universities located in the heart of cities with surrounding metropolitan areas exceeding one million people. Regarding land-grant institutions in our sample, two are located in rural areas with surrounding populations under 150,000. The third institution is in a medium-sized city with a surrounding population under 250,000. To protect the identities of these institutions, we have provided a pseudonym for each. Land-grant institutions in this study are herein known as Great Lakes State University (GLSU), Southern State University (SSU), and Midwest State University (MSU). Urban research universities paired with these land-grant institutions are Lake City University (LCU), Southern Urban University (SUU), and Midwest Metro University (MMU).

Data Collection and Analysis

We conducted 80 interviews and reviewed documents (e.g., mission statements, institutional reports, and newsletters, news clippings) in three distinct phases of data collection. Most of the interviews were conducted in person, while some were conducted over the phone. In addition, with the exception of a few sites, the researchers visited the majority of campus and community locations from which the data was collected. In these settings essential documents were collected and researchers became better acquainted with the culture of the partnerships between the institution and community and how context influenced these partnerships. In Phase 1, the campus provost and chief officers overseeing engagement programs were interviewed to get a sense of how outreach and engagement was conceptualized and practiced on their campuses. Using the snowball sampling technique (Merriam, 1998), we asked these leaders to provide names of campus engagement leaders to interview in Phase 2.

In Phase 2 of our study, leaders of campus engagement initiatives (center directors, program directors, faculty and staff leaders) were interviewed to gain their perspective on engagement practices. Again using snowball sampling, these campus leaders were asked to provide names and contact information for three to six community partners who could be interviewed in Phase 3 of the study. In Phase 3, community partners involved with engagement initiatives were interviewed to gain their perspectives on issues of engagement. Community partners interviewed in our

study had some leadership, activist, or representative role in an organized group. They were typically heads of nonprofit organizations, governmental agencies, and industry or neighborhood associations. The interview protocol guiding our analysis appears in Weerts and Sandmann (2008).

The coding measures used in this study are guided by Bogdan and Bicklen (1992). First, we searched our initial data for regularities, patterns, and general topics. Second, we recorded words and phrases to represent these topics and patterns. Third, we recorded these phrases or codes as they emerged during data collection. Fourth, we created indicators to match related data in our field notes. The constant comparative method (Merriam, 1998) was used to analyze themes within and across cases and case types. Measures were taken to ensure confidentiality of interview participants.

Findings

Our findings from this study are presented into two parts. First, we organize our data to articulate four distinct roles of spanners, their practices, and potential conflicts in advancing university-community engagement at research universities. Second, we advance a tentative model intended to expand our understanding about boundary-spanning behavior at research universities. It is in this context that we articulate recommendations for future research and practice.

Differential Roles of Boundary-Spanning Activity

The concepts of task orientation and social closeness outlined in our literature review greatly inform our understanding of community engagement and boundary spanning roles at research universities. Anchored in these two concepts, our data suggests that boundary spanners have four distinct but flexible roles in their work on engagement: community-based problem solver, technical expert, internal engagement advocate, and engagement champion. We provide an in-depth discussion of these profiles in the following sections.

Community-based problem solver. Community-based problem solvers are characterized as possessing social closeness to community and a task orientation that is largely technical and problem based. At all of the research universities examined in our study, much of this work is carried out by professional academic staff rather than traditional tenure-track faculty. Frequently these staff members come from community organizing or practitioner roles that align them more directly with community needs as opposed to institutional ones. Titles include outreach program manager, academic staff, or clinical faculty (non-tenure track).

Community-based problem solvers are on the front lines of making transformational changes in communities; they typically focus on problem support, resource acquisition, and overall management and development of the partnership. Although their roles are often technical and specific to a community issue, many community-based problem solvers possess strong interpersonal and group development skills that are essential to the formation of the partnership (socio-emotional task orientation). For this reason, we see skills of problem solvers spanning a continuum. At one end, they offer technical skills—bringing expertise to bear on a problem; at the other, social and leadership skills—rapport building, facilitating two-way dialogue. Within these diverse roles, community-based problem solvers broker relationships between the community and university, negotiate expectations by community and university partners, and break down cultural barriers that may inhibit effective working relationships between the groups. Such an example, at Midwest Metro University (MMU), is “Sandy,” the director of the neighborhood initiatives program. In addition to her leadership role with the university’s community-based programs, she is assistant dean of community health in its college of nursing. She holds three degrees in nursing, and has experience as a registered nurse and a special assistant to the university’s executive in health services and community health. Sandy’s many community awards garnered during her employment at the university speak to the community’s appreciation of her work.

In practice, Sandy acts as a gatekeeper to the community and coaches faculty and students regarding community sensitivities, use of language, and behaviors appropriate for the partnership. After coaching institutional partners, she makes introductions into the community and provides continuing guidance on how to do community-based work.

In addition to these roles, Sandy demystifies research among community partners and guides the process toward the articulation and understanding of the collective needs of the neighborhood. This is achieved through the direction of community councils comprised of university representatives and community partners who “have the heart of the community in mind,” as one interviewee put it. These councils help local organizations participate in the partnerships as well as increase their own capacity for learning. Community and university partners indicate that Sandy is the key to the success of these councils. She has experience putting together partnerships, speaks the language of federal regulations and funding, is knowledgeable about long-range planning, has a high tolerance for uncertainty, and is reported to inspire confidence as a great network builder.

A common challenge identified by community-based problem solvers is the issue of neutrality. For example, as a community-based problem solver managing the Great Lakes State University (GLSU) Sea Grant program, “Ed” discussed the intense political issues that divide stakeholders and explained his role in managing these issues between community partners, state officials, and the university: “You have to sympathize with everyone. There is a real schism between commercial and recreational fisherman that requires a career’s worth of effort to address. I don’t want to alienate anyone.” Ed is a fisheries and aquatic invasive species specialist who holds a PhD in zoology. His primary role over the past decade has been to monitor the spread of invasive species and to promote public education programs around these issues.

The ability of community-based problem solvers to create a two-way dialogue around critical issues was viewed by community partners as one of the greatest accomplishments of these partnerships. Successful problem solvers help facilitate meaningful exchanges between university and community partners. Since these spanners were more integrated into the community than other university spanners, they were also more likely to challenge the academic status quo and go the extra mile to accomplish something. As one community partner explained, “‘Just because it is always done this way’ or ‘the provost will never agree to it’ doesn’t mean it can’t or won’t happen.” Because of their social closeness to the community, community-based problem solvers were important advocates representing community interests.

These data suggest that the success of these partnerships reflected the strength of community-based problem solvers’ interpersonal skills and technical expertise. However, these mixed roles are often challenging. Fulfilling roles as both academic researchers and community-based problem solvers is stressful for staff involved in these partnerships, many of whom have come from community-organizing roles. Their days are spent designing research projects, managing the projects, and raising funds to support the efforts. They report that their work is more like that of an architect, differing from straight academic work. But the roles providing technical as well as socio-emotional skills were vital in the eyes of community partners.

Technical expert. Technical experts are spanners with a largely practical or content-focused task orientation; they are more closely aligned with the university than their community-based problem solver colleagues. Technical experts are typically tenure-track faculty members who possess a high level of disciplinary expertise and contribute to the partnership as a content expert and researcher. Many of the technical experts in our study came from applied fields such as education, family

and consumer sciences, health sciences, landscape architecture, social work, and urban and regional planning. The extent to which technical experts were perceived as successful in their community engagement roles was largely associated with their experience, background, and personal style.

On the positive side, one community partner explained how one technical expert reflected the values of engagement. “Mary [tenured faculty member in family sciences] just hung around and was committed to finding out how she fit in with our efforts. She didn’t come in knowing it; instead she listened carefully, took the time to get to know us and our needs, and really came to understand our trials and tribulations.” In this scenario, Mary, although she was aligned more closely with the institution and was practicing technical expertise, demonstrated high levels of social-emotional skill and an orientation toward community integration.

However, technical experts were overall more likely than community-based problem solvers to encounter difficulties in building two-way relationships with community partners. Community opposition often reflects past indiscretions attributed to faculty member involvement in engagement. One professor in urban and regional planning explained, “In these communities, faculty are often viewed as poverty pimps . . . exploiting poor people to enhance their own research budgets. There is a feeling that faculty are not actually concerned about people they studied.” Another interviewee described these technical experts as “windshield sociologists” who would drive by the city, quickly collect their data, and eagerly leave town.

Technical experts were most likely to clash with community partners in the area of agenda-setting power. One community partner explained, “GLSU invited a cast of thousands to our first meeting to discuss the issues—there must have been 50 people in the room but only five of us community members. At first, the faculty tried to force their expertise on us and we had to come out and say that their expertise didn’t fit with our mission.” In addition, technical experts were more likely to use procedures and terminology that caused conflicts with the community. For example, in one initiative at GLSU, meeting hours were set up during times that were convenient for the faculty rather than community participants. Community members found terms used by faculty very academic or confusing; as one person put it, “everything is an acronym.”

Our analysis of technical experts supports Bale and Slater’s (1958) research suggesting that individuals with the most technical expertise may not be the ones with the strongest social integration skills. Some community partners were keenly aware of the skills required to succeed in working with the community and could identify who was most capable

of filling these roles. For example, some acknowledged that there were two cultures within the university: the outreach faculty and the traditional faculty. When asked about Southern State University's (SSU) approach to providing neutral policy alternatives, one community leader of a nonprofit group said, "Neutrality depends on whether the information comes from the public service side or the academic side. The academic side doesn't care about political sensitivity, but the service side has a keen awareness of the political environment and shapes the manner in which they present the material." Applied to our model, this interviewee suggests that neutrality is more likely to be expressed by community based problem solvers as opposed to technical experts.

For technical experts, a bigger challenge than the lack of socio-emotional skills was the alignment of engagement activities with traditional academic norms and expectations, namely promotion and tenure. To mitigate these conflicts, some institutions have established clear divisions of labor: community-based problem solvers help the community define their needs, and traditional faculty (technical experts) produce analyses specific to addressing these needs. The problem solvers then translate the findings from technical experts to the community and help them develop appropriate solutions. This hybrid method integrates aspects of both the one-way and two-way approach to service with community.

This division of labor regarding engagement was more evident at the rural land-grant institutions in our study, especially in fields such as life sciences that are driven by the traditional scientific method and long-standing traditions of the Cooperative Extension Service. Overall, land-grant institution technical experts interested in community engagement exhibited more uncertainty and strain, regardless of discipline. At Midwest State University (MSU), faculty have expressed frustration with the tension between outreach and traditional scholarship. As one technical expert put it, "Engagement is seen as rhetorically correct, but inside the tenure committee nobody cares about it. It's business as usual. I'm wrestling with the contradiction between the rhetoric and reality of engagement on this campus."

Internal engagement advocate. We identified a third category of boundary spanner that we term internal engagement advocate. Like the technical experts, these individuals are closest to the institution and typically hold traditional faculty roles within a discipline. However, their contribution to engagement was not technical in the sense of providing support for community problems. Instead, they hold leadership positions aimed at developing infrastructure for engagement. Specifically, these individuals focused on tasks such as creating structures, budgets, reward systems, and promotion and tenure guidelines supportive of engagement.

Internal engagement advocates typically hold roles as academic deans or executive staff in the provost's office. Their leadership brings credibility and commitment to the partnership and is viewed as essential by both internal and external stakeholders. One community partner collaborating with SSU remarked, "Leadership is key. The deans have to be supportive of faculty members working on these issues." Like the other categories of spanners, some internal advocates lean more toward the community and others more toward the institution. But in all cases they possessed socio-emotional skills to advance engagement at the institutional level.

Internal advocates create the infrastructure to support engagement in mission, budget, and personnel decisions. Most of all, they assisted in clarifying the institution's mission and means of operationalizing the mission through scholarly partnerships. Likewise, they created budgetary lines to support these efforts. In addition, internal advocates advanced the engagement agenda through faculty hiring, faculty expectations, and the reporting of engagement activities. Interviewees declared that the integrity of the programs was maintained by internal advocates hiring "like-minded" faculty. At SUU, community partners sensed that faculty cohesion and commitment to engagement was strong. Again, this may relate to the deliberate strategy of urban institutions to embed themselves in their communities.

Data on urban research universities reveal many examples of internal engagement advocates. Both the dean of SUU's school of public policy and the director of a subprogram within that school actively played such engagement advocacy roles. As the school's driving leadership, these two figures are clear about its mission and its means of operationalizing the mission through scholarly, community-collaborative partnerships. "Scholarship is in the middle for SUU," said the dean. He then ensures that such scholarship is embedded in faculty hiring, faculty expectations, and reporting. Faculty are encouraged to "get [their] hands dirty and get involved." It is expected that faculty will disseminate their work to the local major media outlets. In the words of the program director, "When we hire new faculty members, we tell them we expect to see their faces in the press."

In another case, "Stuart" was clearly the internal engagement advocate. As a senior faculty member in a political science department and a director of an urban public policy and research center, he accepted additional responsibilities from the president's office to coordinate major engagement initiatives at Lake City University (LCU). Since most such initiatives are multidisciplinary, one of his main roles was creating internal structures to facilitate the work.

Overall, the primary role of internal engagement advocates is to create infrastructure for boundary spanning activities embedded in engagement. Such advocates were more prominent at the urban institutions and were emerging at the rural land-grant institutions, which may reflect the history and strength of academic norms at such institutions. While less visible to external partners than community-based problem solvers, internal advocates have critically important roles in creating campus culture to support engagement.

Engagement champion. Finally, we identify engagement champions as institutional spanners who are integrated with the community and possess a socio-emotional and leadership task orientation. Unlike the internal advocates who spend much of their time in campus committees or meetings to build infrastructure for engagement, champions are more likely to have a stronger external dimension to their work. Specifically, champions focus heavily on creating alliances and organizational networks to support engagement (fund-raising and political action). In addition, roles of champions may be largely symbolic, acting as a signal to both internal and external stakeholders about campus commitment to engagement.

Engagement champions typically hold executive titles at the presidential and vice presidential level. At the presidential level, spanning roles are both strategic and symbolic as a means to send a message to internal and external partners about the importance of engagement. This was especially true at institutions where engagement was a signature element of the university brand (urban institutions in our study). For example, at LCU, the chancellor personified the engagement brand by leading community forums and lobbying for resources. A widely recognized leader in higher education, civic engagement, economic development and urban education reform, she used her high profile position and communication savvy to energetically involve parties locally, regionally, and nationally in the strategic direction of the institution and its area. One community member associated with Lake City engagement efforts commented that “support is evidenced all the way up the ladder with the chancellor “bringing people in to show off the clinic and Center, being on the Center’s capital campaign cabinet, and hosting events at her home.” The commitment and visibility of these spanners was viewed by community partners as critically important to sustaining engagement on the campus.

Engagement champions at the vice presidential level typically led high-profile offices of outreach and engagement to broker relationships between external partners and the institution. Offices of public engagement and outreach promote visibility and emphasize stewardship of

campus resources intended to help their communities. According to one champion, the structure aims to help the institution sense and respond to public needs and act in more flexible ways to connect university personnel and community partners. In short, champions work through these offices to promote engagement as a strategic priority and to position the institution to develop mutually beneficial relationships with communities.

The backgrounds of champions at the vice presidential level varied significantly. They included faculty who had experience in engagement (technical experts with well-developed socio-emotional and leadership skills), academic deans who assumed increasing external roles related to engagement (internal engagement advocates), and academic-professional staff who previously held important posts either inside or outside the university (community-based problem solvers). In all cases, engagement champions who held executive posts developed strong credibility with community and university partners.

Like their presidential counterparts, champions who held roles as vice presidents played important facilitation roles in forwarding engagement. One community partner associated with MSU explained, “We tried for two years for people to work with us and nobody would even talk to us. Our opportunities expanded when the Vice Chancellor [for Public Engagement] got involved.” Others echoed the importance of executive leadership and how this has made the university more personal. As one interviewee said, “We don’t have a problem now because we have the contacts. We now have the home phone numbers of leaders.”

One challenge that engagement champions face is staying connected with activity at ground level in order to be fully aware of current engagement efforts underway. In some cases, champions were not fully integrated into current engagement efforts, which created conflicts with “the right hand knowing what the left hand is doing,” as one interviewee said.

Finally, in addition to their external roles, engagement champions worked closely with internal engagement advocates to make community-based work a priority within the university. At LCU and MMU, champions collaborated with advocates to organize university-wide engagement initiatives as cross-unit, cross-disciplinary efforts. For example, in partnership with the community, LCU developed seven themes related to education, health, the environment, and economic development and structured its engagement brand around them.

Our analysis suggests that champions are not just operating at the rhetorical level but are also essential to bringing about organizational change. As the examples in this section indicate, champions are high profile mouthpieces for engagement, but also work closely to align programs with rhetoric. The presence and leadership of champions have

important implications for the sustainability of boundary spanning activity, since the absence of a strong champion may result in initiatives that falter or lose momentum. Overall, engagement champions are critical to supporting the work of multiple boundary spanning roles, which keeps engagement programs viable over the long term.

Toward a Model of Community Engagement and Boundary Spanning at Research Universities

We conclude our findings section with a model illustrating how community engagement boundary-spanning practices can be understood through the concepts of social closeness and task orientation as articulated in our conceptual framework. As Figure 1 illustrates, we view spanning roles and practices on a continuum. On the x-axis, boundary-spanning roles can be understood through a range of task orientations; from technical, practical tasks to socio-emotional or leadership tasks. Where a spanner sits on this continuum depends on his or her expertise, position in the organization, and overall skill set. On the y-axis, spanners may be examined via their closeness to the community or the university (social closeness). That is, spanners may be more integrated with the community or institution based on a number of factors, including professional or personal background, experience, disciplinary expertise, and position or overall role in the organization. Spanners can be classified in one of four roles based on where they align with the x- and y-axes: community-based problem solvers, technical experts, internal engagement advocates, and engagement champions.

We make four important points about the utility of this framework. First, we emphasize that the four types of spanners identified in this figure do not occupy blunt categories; rather, spanners may lean toward one direction or another. For example, while a technical expert may largely occupy content-oriented roles and be closest to the university, he or she may also lean toward community integration or socio-emotional leadership responsibilities based on a variety of aforementioned factors.

Second, we do not view these categories as static. Spanners may float in and out of the four roles based on changes in their responsibilities, expertise, and overall role in the partnership or the university. A given spanner may at times exhibit attributes of an engagement champion, technical expert, internal engagement advocate, or community-based problem solver. This was the case with center directors (service learning, civic engagement, other) who often wore multiple hats in advancing engagement on their campuses. For example, some of these directors came out of community based problem solving roles, and in their new positions as directors they took on new roles as engagement champions.

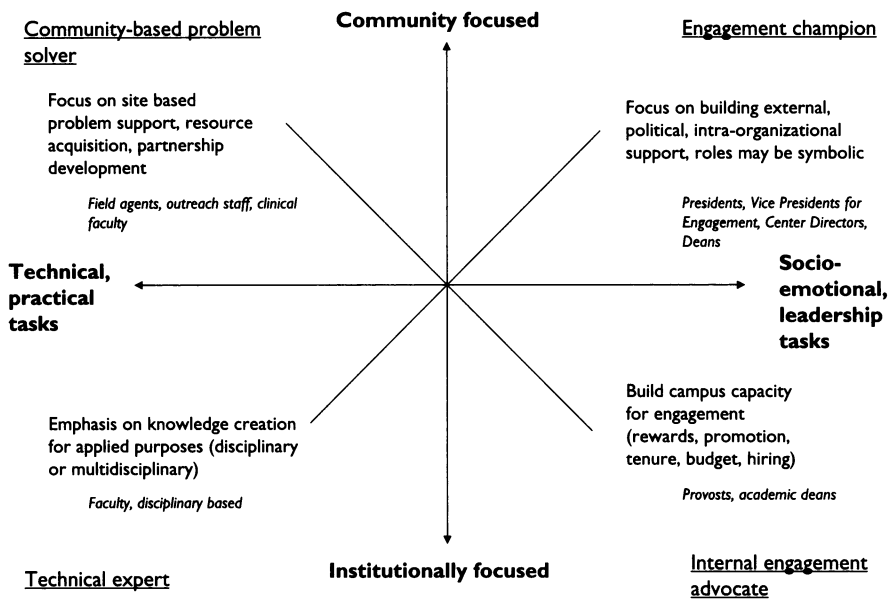


FIG. 1. University-community engagement boundary-spanning roles at public research universities.

At the same time, center directors played important roles in advocating for service learning/other civic programs among technical experts (i.e., internal advocate role) and in some cases possessed technical expertise themselves (i.e., technical expert). Campus actors involved in engagement may play multiple roles at various times, depending on their skill sets and current organizational responsibilities. Furthermore, these findings suggest that some spanners, such as center directors, may be most central to boundary spanning efforts, and are the “glue” that holds all of the spanning roles together. In this finding we support Friedman and Podolny (1992), who suggest that boundary-spanning roles may be more accurately viewed as composite entities that subsume multiple types of relationships with external agents. Simply put, boundary spanning is not confined to an individual job description, but applied to broader institutional strategies to engage with external partners.

Third, our findings suggest that for engagement to work effectively, multiple boundary-spanning roles—community-based problem solvers, technical experts, internal engagement advocates, and engagement champions—must work in harmony. Institutional leaders must recognize that building relationships with community partners is complex and not confined to the jobs of community relations staff.

Fourth, our framework suggests that spanners' values may conflict with their organizational responsibilities. For example, community-based problem solvers—those who are community integrated but employed by the university—may face difficulties in remaining neutral while negotiating needs of the community and university. Technical experts, when involved in engagement, may face conflicts due to lack of experience or sensitivity with community partners (socio-emotional skills) and incompatibility of the role with traditional academic culture. Engagement champions, on the other hand, may become disconnected from the problem center and must be careful to retain contact with the technical core to accurately represent institutional capacity and engagement activities. Finally, internal engagement advocates face conflicts in changing the academic culture to accommodate an engagement agenda. In short, our framework sheds light on points of conflict that may emerge as spanners assume various roles within the continuum.

Conclusions and Implications for Practice and Future Research

How does our emerging model contribute to greater understanding about engagement in theory and practice? Before we discuss study contributions, we acknowledge that more research is needed to assess whether the findings from these six cases can be generalized to a broader field of research institutions. For this reason, we consider our framework as one that is “emerging” and in need of more research in order to make more convincing claims about its utility.

Despite these limitations, we suggest that our work contributes to existing literature and institutional assessment tools in several important ways. First, our study complements assessment tools mentioned in our literature review by clearly articulating roles and responsibilities of spanners in moving their campuses forward in engagement. For example, while Furco's (2003) and Holland's (1997) institutional assessments focus on helping institutional leaders envision a sequence of steps toward deeper engagement with community, our emerging model helps leaders understand the roles of key players—working internally and externally—to help institutions take these steps in a practical way. Similarly, while the CIC/CECEPS taskforce on benchmarking and Campus Compact Indicators of Engagement Project focus on creating standards by which institutions can measure their progress toward engagement, our study takes their work a step further by creating portraits of institutional actors who play critical roles in helping their campuses successfully meet these benchmarks.

Furthermore, our analysis is unique in that it deconstructs the roles of various boundary spanning actors, and thus reveals how conflicts can occur in relation to differences in task roles and distance the community or university. While there is extensive writing and growing research on university-community partnerships (e.g., Amey, Brown, & Sandmann, 2002; Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, 1998; Jacoby, 2003; Maurrasse, 2001; and many more), boundary-spanning roles have not been conceptualized in such a detailed way as the present study. Our analysis helps practitioners consider how individual identities, skill sets, and distance to university/community may contribute to successful or unsuccessful boundary spanning efforts. Practically speaking, this knowledge may help practitioners create role differentiation strategies in order to develop more effective engagement practices both internally and externally. Such strategies may help leaders better mitigate conflicts with communities they serve and among spanners themselves.

Finally, our study opens multitude of avenues for research on this topic. Most importantly, we suggest that future studies be conducted to validate whether the findings from our case studies can be held up among a larger set of research universities. With additional research, our model could be developed into a diagnostic tool to assess strengths and weaknesses of engagement and spanning practices: where efforts are working and where they fall short. For example, an instrument could be developed to investigate the extent to which engagement is supported at the institutional level (internal advocate role) and whether relationships with the community are being adequately managed at the partnership level (community-based problem solver). Additionally, the tool could be used to analyze the source of conflict between or among roles within an institution and to subsequently suggest problem-solving strategies.

This study also raises questions about the specific backgrounds, values orientation, preparation, socialization, and point in career development of those who accept each of the boundary-spanning roles. While Miller (2008) has profiled a couple highly-effective boundary-spanning leaders in university-school-community contexts, more research is needed. Thus, future research focusing on values, preparation, and socialization of spanners could lead to a continuously developing, well-prepared pool of individuals able to skillfully act on the complex, multifaceted demands posed by engagement programs. This work might draw conceptually on Quinn and Rohrbaugh's (1983) competing values framework which suggests that conflicts might be understood by examining the values that underpin spanner orientation in reference to community-based work.

In addition, future research might investigate engagement boundary-spanning strategies at other institutional types—liberal arts universities,

regional comprehensive universities, and community colleges—to understand how their unique missions, structures, and cultures may influence boundary spanning strategies with community partners. Finally, since our analysis is university-centric, future studies might reconstruct our framework with community partners as the salient object of investigation. In other words, one may ask how community partners build bridges to institutions based on their unique skill sets and social distance to the university. By examining community partner boundary-spanning roles into the university, university and community partners might more effectively match roles and assemble teams based on the backgrounds and skill sets of both university and community members.

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