

Boundary-Spanner Role Conflict in Public Urban Universities

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Abstract

It is common for universities that seek community partnerships to employ full-time staff, formally sanctioned as boundary spanners, to develop and manage such partnerships. These staff are frequently administrative or allied staff rather than tenure-track faculty or academic unit administrators. Given the multiple interests of universities and their community partners, it seems likely that boundary spanners attempting to design mutually beneficial relationships will experience role conflict as they seek to align diverse community and institutional agendas. This qualitative study explored the experience of role conflict as reported by university staff boundary spanners. This study found that role conflict was an integral part of the boundary spanner role and that boundary spanners exhibited two responses to role conflict: formative responses, directed toward continuing to seek mutual benefit, and adaptive responses, wherein mutual benefit was not pursued. External factors impacting role conflict were also identified.

Introduction

A growing number of colleges and universities are seeking value-added partnerships with external organizations to promote student learning and interorganizational access to resources. The Carnegie Foundation labels the process of forming and maintaining such partnerships *community engagement* (NERCHE, 2015).

Universities are inherently complex organizations (Szekeres, 2011). Given the complex nature of urban universities and their larger diverse communities, it was deemed likely that university staff attempting to fashion mutually beneficial university–community partnerships would experience role conflict.

The potential for role conflict among boundary spanners within higher education has received little attention in the literature and is not well understood. Little is known about the conflict experienced by boundary spanners and how it might affect both institutions of higher education and the communities in which they reside. The purpose of this research was to explore the possible experiences of role conflict by nonacademic university staff members

who work across organizational boundaries in urban universities to address the needs of both their host institutions and their communities. This qualitative research study addressed the following questions: (1) What is the nature of role conflict as experienced by nonacademic administrative staff serving as university–community boundary spanners in urban universities? (2) How does the experience of role conflict impact the processes of partnership formation and community engagement? (3) What individual and institutional strategies have been identified by boundary spanners to assist with the management of role conflict?

Literature Review

Community engagement is defined by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2007) as “the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (*para.* 3). Sandmann (2007) emphasized the two-way, reciprocal dimension of such relationships as the critical element distinguishing community engagement from typical community service or outreach activities.

The key to differentiating community engagement from traditional community service and outreach is not the overt nature of the project—a community health project, for example—but the nature of the processes that guide the project. It could be a fine service project for a medical school, working unilaterally, to start a free medical clinic for area residents. However, to involve community resources, residents, and organizations in active partnership for the planning, operation, and/or evaluation of the clinic is more reflective of the principles and processes of community engagement. It is this notion of shared partnership that distinguishes engagement from community service and from one-way outreach and service programs that make campus resources available to the community.

In *Scholarship Reconsidered: The Priorities of the Professoriate*, Boyer (1990) affirmed higher education’s history of service while issuing a challenge for engagement: “Can America’s colleges and universities, with all the richness of their resources, be of greater service to the nation and the world?” (*p.* 3). Boyer is acknowledged by Sandmann (2006), McNall, Reed, Brown, and Allen (2009), and others as a defining influence on the concept of community engagement within higher education.

Community engagement has many different faces. Fisher, Fabricant, and Simmons (2004) list four primary types of contemporary community engagement: service-learning, local economic development, community-based research, and social work initiatives. Using the alternate label of *university outreach*, Altman (2006) distinguishes six different roles for community-engaged universities within their communities: “1) student voluntarism and service learning courses, 2) academic department based partnerships, 3) university–business partnerships, 4) general community relations, 5) comprehensive issues-based partnerships, and 6) real estate development” (p. 13). Both frameworks identify dimensions of community engagement that allow for benefits to institutions of higher education and their host communities.

For urban universities, the practice of community engagement is enriched and challenged by the complexity of urban environments. Such urban environments are increasingly “fragmented by race, social class, and economic function and spread over a huge territory, further divided into at least several counties and perhaps dozens of independent political subdivisions” (Brownell, 1995, p. 22). Altman (2006) pointed out that institutional relationships with communities are further complicated by existent relationships within communities such as “local government and community organizations (including religious entities), residents and organizations [and] universities and communities (town–gown affairs)” (p. 184). The complexity of these environments established a broad landscape for partner formation and divergent perspectives on possible interventions. Such complexity may further challenge the creation of agreed-upon partnerships. Fermin and Hill (2004) affirmed that boundary spanners promoting university–community partnerships frequently have to deal with potential conflicts between the individual, professional, and institutional agendas of university participants and the community objectives of obtaining and leveraging resources, accessing networks, and increasing perceived legitimacy.

Individuals who work across organizational boundaries to connect institutions with their communities may be referred to as *boundary spanners* (AASCU & NASULGC, 2004). Institutions frequently employ formally sanctioned, full-time university staff to serve as boundary spanners (Holland, 2009). It is common, though not universal, that such staff members are administrative or allied staff rather than tenure-track faculty or academic unit administrators (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008, 2010). Although titles of such staff vary, these roles share the purpose of fostering relationships valued

by their employing institution. For the purposes of this study, the label nonacademic administrative staff was used to describe those with boundary-spanning responsibilities who were not tenure-track faculty or academic administrators (e.g., academic department heads, deans, provosts, or presidents). It was important to focus on such staff members since they were frequently called upon to carry out boundary-spanning roles and because little attention has been paid to such staff in the literature (McInnis, 1998; Szekeres, 2004).

Even though university–community engagement initiatives may frequently reflect noble principles, many such efforts also stem from “real or perceived threats confronting the campus” (Reardon, 2006, p. 106). If such threats are accompanied by specific solutions preferred by the university (for example, new student housing and retail to replace blighted buildings), this may pose further barriers to the creation of mutually agreed-upon solutions by universities and the communities that house them.

Elliott (1994) examined the emergence of the urban university, noting both the growing population in urban centers and the overall nature of the economy. With over 80% of the United States population living in cities as of 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015) and the broader economic shift “from an industrial base to a knowledge base” (p. 6), urban universities will have a growing impact on the overall quality of life within these communities and the nation as a whole. Given such shifts, it is important that boundary-spanner role conflict be understood within the urban context. Thomas Bonner (1981), president of Wayne State University in Detroit, wrote about the nature of urban universities and their relationship to their communities:

What exactly is an urban university? It is not merely a university located *in* a city; it is also of the city, with an obligation to serve the needs of the city’s diverse citizenry. It has a special concern with issues of urban life. It does research and provides intellectual leadership in efforts to deal with urban problems. (p. 48)

Role conflict can have adverse consequences for both boundary-spanning staff and their host institutions. Within university administration roles, Rasch, Hutchinson, and Tollefson (1986) identified boundary spanning and role conflict as major sources of stress. For a midlevel administrator within the university, a role which frequently includes boundary-spanning duties, structural alignment

is also a source of stress, anxiety, role conflict, and psychological strain (Amey, 1990; Hellowell & Hancock, 2001; Lazaridou, Athanasoula-Reppas, & Fris, 2008; Rosser, 2004).

Looking at role conflict in historical perspective, Stryker and Macke (1978) pointed out that the concept of role conflict is grounded within the two approaches to role theory: structural-functional and interactionist. Structural-functional “role conflict is caused by the simultaneous occupancy of conflicting structural positions. The role expectations or norms associated with these positions are assumed invariant across situations” (Stryker & Macke, 1978, p. 70). For example, the role expectation of a parent to attend a school event could conflict with the role expectation of a worker to come to work; a university staff boundary spanner may have to choose between going to evening community meetings as a representative of the university or taking evening classes to finish an advanced degree. Stryker and Macke further pointed out that a specific status, such as supervisor, may actually encompass a number of roles such as disciplinarian, confidante of subordinate, or colleague to other supervisors; such separate roles could be another source of conflict.

“Interactionist role theory . . . emphasizes the individual’s experience of conflicting expectations, not simply the existence of the structure. The focus shifts from the impact of the structure on person via position and role to the influence of one person on another via role-making and negotiation” (Stryker & Macke, 1978, p. 71). Within interactionist role theory, role expectations are negotiated and socially constructed. Role conflict results when common meaning is not established by the individual and others in the same social space. Stryker and Macke further stated:

Role conflict takes five basic forms: Structurally competing demands of various parts in a role set; conflicting reactions of the same individuals to the same behaviors; differences or lack of clarity in others’ expectations; and conflict between role expectations and self-concept. (p. 72)

This typology appears to affirm both the structural-functional and interactionist scaffolding of role definition and role conflict; it incorporates both external role definitions alongside the individual’s internal experience.

Stryker and Burke (2000) wrote about the concept of identity, in which each individual has a specific experience of self in relationship to each group to which they belong:

In identity theory usage, social roles are expectations attached to positions occupied in networks of relationships; identities are internalized role expectations. The theory asserts that role choices are a function of identities so conceptualized, and that identities within self are organized in a salience hierarchy reflecting the importance of hierarchy as an organizational principle in society. (p. 286)

Although the concept of salience as a directive principle might lead the reader to understand role choice as a cerebral, nonemotive process, Stryker and Burke (2000) acknowledge the impact of emotions and related stress as individuals seek to reconcile conflicting identities. Stryker (2007) positioned identity theory within the construct of symbolic interactionism: “society shapes self, and self shapes social behavior. The proposition not only admits to, but insists upon, the possible reciprocity of its components: social behavior can impact self, and society and self can impact society” (p. 1089).

The progression of Stryker’s (2007) work above—proceeding from separate, almost mechanical views of role behavior and related possible conflict, to more continuously interactive processes between the individual and the societal context—reflects and perhaps parallels the development process of partnerships wherein discrete partners enter into a process of negotiation of new meaning in which each partner influences the other and the work. This is consistent with the views of Weerts and Sandmann (2008), who pointed out that the work of university–community engagement is best understood within a constructivist paradigm of knowledge creation.

Hecht (2001) defined role conflict in terms of competing roles; she wrote of family obligations versus work obligations. This focus reflects an important distinction in the definition of role conflict to be used in this study. Hecht’s description of “competing demands” (p. 112) helps to differentiate the idea of competing roles or interrole conflicts (Love, Tatman, & Chapman, 2010) from other dimensions of role conflict.

The intent of this study was to explore the concept of role conflict as experienced by boundary spanners solely within the role

of a university staff member and not amid the full myriad of personal, family, social, and professional roles. This research relied on the work of Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) to provide a starting point for the study of role conflict. This typology represents a blending of structural-functional and interactionist theories. Rizzo et al. defined role conflict to include four scenarios: conflict between an individual's values and the demands of a role, conflict stemming from insufficient resources and role expectations, conflict between multiple roles assigned to the same individual, and role conflict stemming from competing external expectations.

Although at first glance the work of Rizzo et al. (1970) seems dated, contemporary references in the literature appear to support its foundational nature and current relevance. It is recognized in two separate meta-analyses of role stress (which include the concept of role conflict) as carried out by Fried, Shirom, Gilboa, and Cooper (2008) and Ortqvist and Wincent (2006). Fried et al. found that 80% of the studies they reviewed relied on the 1970 work of Rizzo et al. Similarly, Ortqvist and Wincent relied on the same work to help frame their meta-analysis of 300 journal articles on role stress, which included the concepts of role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload.

Weerts and Sandmann (2010) examined university–community boundary spanner roles and indirectly acknowledged that current literature is deficient regarding the study of role conflict among boundary spanners in higher education through their heavy reliance on the work of Friedman and Podolny (1992), who studied role conflict as experienced by labor union boundary spanners. Friedman and Podolny stated that “the standard way to resolve conflict is either to ignore the role expectations of one side or the other or to create rituals that allow negotiators to convince each side that the negotiators are playing the roles required of them” (p. 29).

It is supportive of the core principles of community engagement that the emergence of such role conflict be better understood. If this role conflict is not well understood and well managed, it may result in decisions that reflect a paternalistic view of the community or an inadequate regard for the needs of the institution. Such conflict also poses challenges to the daily work of boundary spanners seeking to develop mutually beneficial partnerships. From our brief literature review, it is clear that the experience of role conflict among boundary spanners within higher education has received little attention within the literature and is not well understood.

Research Methods

A qualitative, constructivist grounded study design was utilized to explore potential role conflicts as experienced by boundary spanners. Marshall and Rossman (1989) support the use of a qualitative approach for “research on informal and unstructured linkages and processes in organizations” (p. 46). This research project was approved by the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board.

Boundary-spanning activities and related role conflict appear to be complex inter- and intrapersonal processes operating within organizational contexts characterized by diverse formal and informal connections and processes. Given these factors, a qualitative grounded theory approach was deemed an appropriate strategy for our research. Charmaz (2006) advocates a constructivist approach to grounded theory research. She contends that meaning is socially constructed: “Research participants’ implicit meanings, experiential views—and researchers’ finished grounded theories—are constructions of reality” (p. 10). Creswell (2007) differentiates Charmaz’s approach from the traditional understanding of grounded theory, as identified by Strauss and Corbin (1998), by stating, “Instead of embracing the study of a single process or core category approach, Charmaz advocates for a social constructivist perspective that includes emphasizing diverse local worlds, multiple realities, and the complexities of particular worlds, views, and actions” (p. 65).

The work of university–community engagement may be best understood within a constructivist paradigm of knowledge creation (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008): “Constructivism suggests that knowledge process is local, complex and dynamic” (p. 78), and “boundary spanners act as conveners, problem solvers, and change agents who negotiate the wants and needs of parties involved in the process of creating and disseminating knowledge” (p. 79). The use of a constructivist grounded theory approach was determined appropriate for the following three reasons. First, there is little evidence in the literature of applied theory to describe or explain the experience of role conflict as experienced by university boundary spanners. Second, a constructivist approach to understanding the experience of boundary spanners aligns with the interactive nature of role definition (Stryker, 2007) and the nature of boundary-spanning work wherein “boundary spanners act as conveners, problem solvers, and change agents who negotiate the wants and needs of parties involved in the process of creating and disseminating knowledge” (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008, p. 79). Charmaz (2000) states, “A con-

constructivist grounded theory assumes that people create and maintain meaningful worlds through dialectical processes of conferring meaning on their realities and acting within them” (p. 521). Finally, the constructivist grounded theory approach does not ignore the impact of the researcher on the research process but instead affirms the knowledge-mediating role of the researcher by encouraging the establishment of relationships with study participants, reflection, and interpretation (Charmaz, 2006).

Selecting Research Participants

There were two levels of sample selection (Merriam & Associates, 2002): the organizational context of the participant and the actual participants. We limited our study to urban universities that were 4-year institutions of higher education that in mission statement, philosophy, or manifest programs conveyed an urban purpose, as defined by Bonner (1981), and were located within the boundaries of urbanized areas as defined and listed by the U.S. Census Bureau; such areas are defined as “densely settled territory that contains 50,000 or more people” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Copies of institutional mission statements, philosophy, or program descriptions reflecting a commitment to an urban purpose were collected by the researchers to document institutional conformity to this definition. Although the initial recruitment process identified representatives of both public and private institutions, ultimately only boundary spanners from public institutions agreed to participate.

Participants were university employees who were nonacademic administrative staff with boundary-spanning duties, developing and/or managing community partnerships, as primary job responsibilities. Initial study participants were recruited at the 2012 National Outreach Scholarship Conference Pre-conference Session for outreach and engagement staff. This session was specifically targeted to non-tenure-track faculty and administrative staff with responsibilities to develop and manage community partnerships, so potential research participants self-identified as boundary spanners or had job responsibilities consistent with boundary-spanner definitions. Such purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) is justified by the identification of “information-rich cases” (p. 169) and thereby advanced the intent of this study. Workshop attendees also helped to identify other potential participants who met the study criteria. Such individuals were in turn contacted by the lead researcher to solicit their interest in participating in the study.

These boundary-spanner participants came to their university staff roles with a diversity of background experiences: for example, human services, K–12 education, choreography, nonprofit management, and military command. Although the purposes of their positions varied—service-learning, community outreach, revenue generation, teacher education, research, minority health promotion—in all cases, their formal job responsibilities involved developing and/or managing university–community partnerships.

Table 1. Description of Participants

Name	Focus of role	Organizational context
Anna	Student service-learning partnerships and coordination of a campus peer support network for staff boundary spanners	Student services at Midwestern research university
Betty	New role to coordinate a campuswide community engagement program	University administration at a Southern university
Candice	Development of partnerships in response to faculty and community request for service-learning and technical assistance	Team of staff boundary spanners at regional urban campus of Midwestern research university
Donna	Student service-learning projects	University administration at Midwestern university
Ed	Regional campus director	Regional urban campus of Midwestern university
Fred	Community outreach and education partnerships	Speciality science research center at a Midwestern research university
Guen	Development of profit-generating partnerships	Team of staff boundary spanners within the business school at a Midwestern university
Henrietta	Management of community health partnerships	Hospital at a Midwestern research university
Ida	Project management support for faculty and community projects	University administration at a comprehensive public university
Janice	Director of social policy research center	Specialty research center at a Southern university
Kevin	Community outreach and arts education partnerships	Center city outreach facility of a Southern university

Table 1 provides a brief description of the organizational role and organizational context for each participant. Of the 11 participants, 10 were women and one was male. One participant was

African American, and one was Hispanic. The rest of the participants were Caucasian. The listed names are pseudonyms and may not correspond to the respective participant's gender.

Data Collection and Analysis

The primary method of data collection was the intensive interview, as recommended by Charmaz (2006). Individual intensive interviews were conducted with nonacademic staff university boundary spanners. Intensive interviewing seeks an "in-depth exploration of a particular topic or experience, and . . . fosters eliciting each participant's interpretation of his or her experience" (p. 24). Eleven interviews were completed in person or by telephone.

Based on the work of Charmaz (2006) and Bazeley (2007) and utilizing NVivo coding software, a three-phase process of coding was carried out. The three phases consisted of initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding. Clarke's (2005) social worlds/arenas mapping was also utilized to help interrogate the data.

In initial coding, interview transcripts were coded in sections with gerund and noun phrases. According to Clarke (2005), the use of gerunds helps to identify specific actions, processes, and topics. Focused coding "means using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data. Focused coding requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). Theoretical coding was used to posit possible relationships between the categories identified via focused coding (Charmaz, 2006).

Clarke's (2005) social worlds/arenas analysis builds on the earlier work of Strauss (1978), providing a mapping of the worlds and arenas within which the actors of a situation negotiate meaning. "Such maps offer mesolevel interpretations of the situations, engaging collective action and its social organizational and institutional and discursive dimensions" (Clarke, 2003, p. 559). Mesolevel systems include both community and institutional spheres of influence that help to shape norms, standards, rules, and policies (Gregson et al., 2001). According to Clarke and Star (2007, p. 113), "An arena . . . is composed of multiple worlds organized ecologically around issues of mutual concern and commitment to action." Social worlds are "shared discursive spaces" (p. 113) that "generate shared perspectives that then form the basis for collective action" (p. 115). Social worlds and arenas analysis has been used effectively in the study of emerging disciplines.

This mapping technique was completed twice in the current research analysis process to assist in interrogating the data. The maps that emerged from the data displayed the social worlds and actors whose actions, processes, and topics (Clarke, 2005) were reflected within the gerund-based free codes. The graphic representation of the maps, coupled with memo writing about each social world, assisted with the iterative interpretation of data. The mapping process identified 14 distinct worlds within the arena of university and community engagement. Those worlds reported by participants as most influential on partnership formation are discussed below: tenure-track faculty, senior university administrators, academic structures (e.g., colleges and divisions), and community and civic groups.

Tenure-track faculty. Staff boundary spanners formed, expressed, and negotiated their roles within a complex human arena with many subordinate and interrelated subgroups. Such processes and contextual forces were consistent with the construct of symbolic interactionism wherein “society shapes self, and self shapes society behavior. This proposition not only admits to, but insists upon, the possible reciprocity of its components: social behavior can impact self, and society and self can impact society” (Stryker, 2007, p. 1089).

Ida, a study participant who provided project management support for faculty and community projects, described tenure-track faculty as artists. Their core commitments are to teach, to research, and to publish. These commitments are not mere duties or assignments. For most tenure-track faculty, they reflect personalized and highly valued investments of time, energy, and hard work. Ida offered a metaphor that assisted her in better understanding the relationship of faculty to their work; it is their “art”:

I think there are a lot of things that I’ve learned about working with faculty, about Ph.D. faculty, that have helped me reframe my discussions . . . I kind of equate it to they are artists and this is their artwork and you can’t really judge a piece of art. I mean, people take it very personally when you judge their art, and I never really understood that piece of it from a faculty’s perspective.

Senior university administrators. Universities have relatively weak command and control functions, as authority is diffuse (Birnbaum, 1988). Even those university administrators who may want their institutions to reflect greater engagement may not

be able to accomplish this quickly. Senior university administrators may themselves have multiple roles within their universities and may be present within multiple worlds as described herein, including the university colleges/academic division world. These multiple roles, with perhaps sometimes competing objectives, may cause further complications and constraints for the creation of community partnerships.

Academic structures. Study participants reported that the separateness of colleges and other academic divisions was a source or orienting basis for competition for resources, student enrollment, relationships, campus buildings, and other markers of academic prestige. More than one boundary spanner interviewed spoke of the additional challenges of promoting university–community partnerships that included more than one academic unit. Ida described her experience as “like herding cats.” Fred, who engaged in community outreach, described his university structure as a “bunch of fiefdoms.” Individuals within such structures may themselves represent multiple organizational identities within a program specialization, teaching structure, administrative structure, or other formal on-campus professional or support staff roles.

Community and civic groups. The world of community and civic groups includes nonprofit organizations and government-run functions like education and human services, which may see universities as a source of free or low-cost help. The perception frequently exists that universities have significant resources that are underutilized. Fred reported,

I think when people approach the university, . . . [they] see us having a lot of money; it's seen as having a lot of people that sit in their offices and could just have free time to come out and do stuff for free.

In addition to being potential university–community partnership members, community and civic groups have multiple roles in relationship to universities; they may also be funders, critics, and/or employers of credentialed university students. Their voices may be in alignment or conflict with area businesses and other groups. Many of the same observations were true for outside funders, business and industry groups, and government.

When using social world/arenas mapping, Clarke (2005) points out the utility of identifying “implicated actants,” which are “non-human actors in situations of concern” (p. 47); an actant may be a discursive construction, event, material good, or process. An

example could be the weight a university places on engagement work as perceived by a faculty member seeking tenure. Issues related to funding were consistently present in the discourse of university–community boundary spanners. Funding issues appear to be powerful actants in the arena of university–community partnerships. For Guen, who develops profit-generating partnerships, the creation of profit for the university is the reason her job exists. Fred has to obtain his salary from grants, which directly influences what partnerships can be pursued: “So I’ll have to consciously think about we could do X or we could do Y; X isn’t fundable but really beneficial; Y is fundable and I keep my job.” Candice’s job developing partnerships is not in the core university budget but funded with soft money. This seems to make her very aware of feedback the campus provost receives from faculty about her work.

Analysis of Findings

Role conflict was found to be an inherent element of boundary-spanning roles as carried out by nonacademic administrative staff participants in urban universities. Although some participants questioned the use of the term *role conflict*, all participants provided examples of role conflict consistent with the framework defined by Rizzo et al. (1970): conflict between an individual’s values and the demands of a role, conflict stemming from insufficient resources and role expectations, conflict between multiple roles assigned to the same individual, and role conflict stemming from competing external expectations.

The organizational settings within which participants worked and their educational backgrounds varied. Janice and Fred worked at specialty research centers. Anna was situated in student services, and Henrietta worked out of the university hospital. Guen was in the business school. Others were structured within various administrative units. Some worked as solo staff; others worked with teams charged with developing partnerships. There was no evidence indicating that organizational setting impacted the experience of role conflict as reported by study participants; however, boundary spanner participants who had strong vertical linkages to their immediate superior or other campus engagement leaders seemed to experience greater role clarity and less role conflict.

The balance of this section discusses the themes that emerged to address the study research questions. These themes are the nature of role conflict, the impact of role conflict on partnership formation, boundary-spanner responses to role conflict, and strategies to

address role conflict. External factors influencing the participants' experiences of role conflict are also discussed.

The Nature of Role Conflict

The experience of role conflict seemed to vary widely, reflecting the rigidity or flexibility of job-related expectations placed on a given boundary spanner. Individual boundary spanners who had very specific role requirements, such as being self-supporting, seemed to experience less role conflict and seemed less personally troubled by it when they did experience role conflict. Guen's role was to create and manage ongoing, profit-making partnerships with businesses: "When we work with a corporate partner, it's not about them just being a corporate sponsor or providing this . . . we really look to them to provide value at all levels." Candice was part of a university team of professionals focused on a few primary partnerships while also attempting to assist all faculty members and potential community partners who asked for help. The relative flexibility of her role seemed to create more opportunities for role conflict and to make conflict resolution more challenging. She reported being publicly criticized by a faculty member who had asked her to set up a series of poetry workshops as adult literacy interventions. Community partners did not see the value in such an approach and would not help to implement the workshops.

For boundary spanners who had a clearly defined role, it was also important to communicate the dimensions of that role to on-campus and community partners as a way to minimize role conflict. The majority of the examples of role conflict identified by study participants were situated at the points of exploration or initiation of a partnership, but other conflicts also arose during the ongoing operations of the partnership. For example, Betty, whose job was to coordinate campus–community engagement, chose to continue working with a refugee assistance project on her own time, despite her boss telling her to terminate the project. She felt such a strong personal commitment to the work that she was unwilling to end the partnership.

The experience of role conflict was frequently found to be both very personal and highly emotive. Anna, a coordinator for student service-learning projects, contended that "taking responsibility . . . having to take responsibility for some of those failures makes you feel like a failure." Henrietta, who managed community health partnerships, shared her distress in having to support her employing institution in a disagreement with her own African

American community. Candice regarded her boundary-spanning work and dealing with her role conflict as a “spiritual calling.”

Even in settings wherein a boundary-spanner participant served as part of an engagement team, there seems to be the potential for the boundary spanner to feel isolated. Some boundary spanners described having been able to build personal support systems on campus, whereas developing methods of support for coping with role conflict was a continuing struggle for others.

Impact of Role Conflict on Partnership Formation

In this research study, the impact of role conflict on the processes of partnership formation and community engagement appeared to be mediated through the boundary spanner’s overall experience of role conflict. Aspects of this experience include identity as a boundary spanner, environmental factors driving boundary-spanner role clarity and ambiguity, and boundary-spanner responses to role conflict.

This research identified a concept of boundary-spanner identity as emerging from the previously described use of theoretical coding. This concept was used to posit possible relationships between the categories identified by focused coding (*Charmaz, 2006*). The subordinate elements of boundary-spanner identity are professional background, self-identified role framing, claiming of personal power, Ph.D. status, and amount of experience as a boundary spanner.

Although each boundary spanner described how previously acquired content knowledge, such as K–8 teaching or data interpretation, was influential to her or his role, most participants also had concrete examples of how their prior professional background had given direction to their current roles in more subtle ways. Anna connected her social-work training to her current focus on “systems thinking” and “root cause[s] of community problems.” Henrietta currently oversees university–community health care partnerships. Her knowledge of what is possible pushes her work: “So, looking at how we would setup hospitals . . . in the middle of the desert, it just doesn’t make sense that this whole issue of access to healthcare can’t be addressed through partnerships and working within the community.” Ida is an engineer by training and was initially surprised by the extent to which the personal agendas of project partners influenced approaches to the work. Such agendas might include funding a position, getting a grant, or receiving pro-

fessional recognition. Having now adopted an approach she characterizes as a little more “patient” and “sensitive,” she is able to focus more clearly on the objectives and component processes of partnerships.

The term *claiming personal power*, as an element of boundary-spanner identity, is used to describe a boundary spanner’s assertion of the appropriateness of a personal position, presence, or role choice stemming from personal values or other personal characteristics. For Janice, who directs a social policy research center, it’s her personal connection to the value of data that drives her partnership work: “I love data, I know that sounds so weird . . . the thing that pulled me to this job was how I could marry my really deeply instilled belief that simple data can shift big pieces of our policy problems.” For Henrietta, her work and its importance are a reflection of her “moral compass, doing what’s right, understanding that I’ve been so blessed, that I need to give back; I think that’s probably what drives me.”

The Ph.D. status of the study participants varied. Three had earned a Ph.D., and the balance had not. The non-Ph.D. status of the majority of participants seemed to both create and circumvent power and credibility issues. Ida’s experience was that “there are faculty that . . . don’t value my work as highly because I’m not a Ph.D.” This perceived bias seemed to be obviated when boundary spanners were able to articulate their roles as facilitators of the process of partnership as opposed to being evaluators of faculty work.

The experience of having a Ph.D. seemed to also evoke opportunities for conflict. Although Janice had earned a Ph.D., she intentionally tried to minimize her outward identification with the academy while claiming academic skills: “I refuse to make a vita; I get asked for a vita and I’m like, you can have my resume. . . . I did receive these letters behind my name, I know the methodology.” Candice is clearly aware of her own biases related to having earned a Ph.D. later in life:

I admit, I have a big huge chip on my shoulder, I got my Ph.D. late, so that’s . . . later than typical, I was in my mid 40s when I got it, so there’s a chip. . . . I’ve been out in practice and you all are teaching about stuff you’ve never done.

Fred, who works at a very large research university, found that his lack of a Ph.D. served to minimize others’ expectations of his role: “so I’m not quite office staff, not quite research because I don’t

have a Ph.D., so I live in this gray space that I kind of like. I like the way it is.”

Given the perceived distinction that doctoral degree status frequently conveys within universities, it seems highly questionable to say that educational background does not matter. What seems more important than a boundary spanner’s educational background is that there is an understanding of how that status may be perceived by others and the boundary spanner’s awareness of when they are claiming an expert evaluative role versus a facilitative role. Equally important is the boundary spanner’s clarity in communicating this role choice to partnership participants.

The last element proposed as part of the concept of boundary-spanner identity is the length of boundary-spanning experience and time in this role. Three participants had been in their positions less than a year. Although all three had at least one example of role conflict, they were less likely to see such circumstances as posing role conflict. Boundary spanners with longer tenure in their positions were more likely to have identified role conflicts and to have reflected on them. The amount of experience as a boundary spanner is important because the role of boundary spanner is constructed in interaction with partners. To the extent a boundary spanner is less experienced, their understanding of their role may be less fully developed.

The concept of boundary-spanner identity is relevant to the experience of role conflict for two reasons. First, the boundary spanners’ experiences of their own identity are part of the lens through which they view the world generally and their work specifically. Second, the attributes of a boundary spanner’s identity may reflect, on the one hand, useful assets for creating alignment and stronger partnerships and, on the other, potential sources of conflict between the boundary spanner and external parties. Anna’s stated practice of looking at individual problems within a broader systems perspective was likely an asset, whereas her strong belief about sharing university resources with community partners sometimes put her at odds with others within her organization. It was very important for the boundary spanner to be aware of how her or his constructed identity may either support or restrict partnership formation and the work of university–community engagement. It was equally important to make the boundary-spanner’s role explicitly understood by potential project partners.

Boundary-Spanner Responses to Role Conflict

Boundary-spanner responses to role conflict had significant implications for the formation of community partnerships. When participants were asked how they responded to the experience of role conflict, they reported behaviors that these researchers labeled and categorized as *responding formatively* or *responding adaptively*. Behaviors labeled as responding formatively were directed toward continuing to seek agreement and alignment of the parties' positions. Behaviors labeled as responding adaptively seemed to indicate that the role conflict was not readily resolvable by reaching agreement, hence the boundary spanner needed to adapt or adjust his/her behavior, expectations, or attitude while accepting terms that were not mutually agreeable.

Behaviors categorized as responding formatively were listening, translating, mediating, expanding problem-solving space, or creativity. Participants identified additional formative responses, characterized as reflecting internal choices to depersonalize the experience of conflict and displaying patience and trust.

Behaviors categorized as responding adaptively included boundary-spanner responses identified by the researchers as *acting in* or *acting out*. Adaptive behaviors identified as acting in consisted of internalizing conflict, feeling vulnerable, and becoming more cautious. Acting-out responses included picking one side and advocating.

When the boundary spanner chose adaptive responses to role conflict, partnership formation and community engagement were not supported. The specific adaptive responses of internalizing conflict, feeling vulnerable, and becoming more cautious appeared to have at least short-term negative consequences for the boundary spanner and potentially longer term negative consequences for partnership formation and community engagement. Anna reported feeling like a failure at times when she could not enlist her university's help for a community partner. Although the process of becoming more cautious may be a very appropriate response for the staff boundary spanner as an individual, it also seemed to lessen the possible solution space for partnerships and the overall work of engagement. For example, Betty reported that she created a book drive for a community partner who did not want the books, because her boss told her to do the project anyway. She felt she could not press further for a mutually agreeable project.

Figure 1 adapts Clarke's (2005) concept of positional mapping to align boundary-spanner responses to role conflict in relation-

ship to their perceived benefit to the university and community partners. Picking one side typically meant the boundary spanner defaulted to her/his employing institution's view. Advocating typically meant promoting the needs or wants of the community partner. Adaptive responses of feeling vulnerable, becoming more cautious, and internalizing conflict were seen as having low value to both the university and the community. Formative responses of expanding problem solving, listening, mediating, and translating were seen as having high potential value to both the university and community partners.

Figure 1. Behavior mapping of boundary-spanner responses to role conflict in relationship to value to university and value to community partners. Adapted from Clarke's (2005) Positional Map.

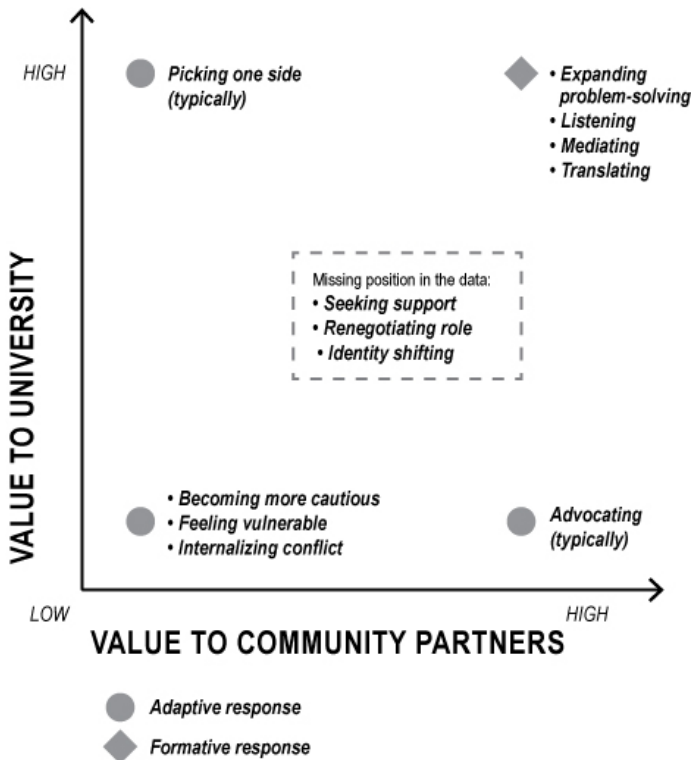


Figure 1 also shows three additional types of responses to role conflict—*seeking support*, *renegotiating the boundary-spanning role*, and *identity shifting*—which there was insufficient data to label as formative or adaptive. Behaviors labeled as seeking support included reaching out to coworkers and community partners for advice or direction. Renegotiating the boundary-spanning role meant that the boundary spanner adjusted internal expectations and/or a partner's expectations as to process or outcome. In identity shifting, the boundary spanner altered outward aspects of her or his identity as reflected in dress, speech, or presentation of self to better align with either a community partner or institutional constituency. Donna described how her business attire identified her with the university and made it difficult to connect with community residents:

“Oh, here's the university walking into our meeting.”
And so I'd actually go home from work. . . . I'd take off my suit, and I'd put on a pair of blue jeans, tennis shoes, and a sweatshirt, and then I'd go to the neighborhood meeting. And then I would be more accepted. I'd walk into those meetings in my suit; they absolutely didn't want to talk to me.

Strategies to Address Role Conflict

Participants did not identify any formal institutional strategies or procedures to assist staff boundary spanners when they were experiencing role conflict. However, some of the participants described strong vertical linkages with their immediate supervisors and senior university officials who provided personal support, mentoring, and tangible help as being of great assistance in resolving instances of role conflict.

Other individual strategies explicitly identified by participants included organizing peer support partnerships with other boundary spanners, sharing decision making with boards and committees, redefining the area of focus or boundary-spanning role, using participants in past partnerships as endorsers and encouragers of current prospective partners, listening for deeper understanding of perceived conflicts and disagreements while keeping the parties talking, affirming the value of the work or the relationships, and defaulting to the adaptive response of supporting one side of the dialogue.

Of all the above strategies, listening for deeper understanding seemed to be the most effective. This seemingly simple task was repeatedly referenced as a conscious and deliberate strategy supportive of the interests of all the parties to the conversation. Ida spoke about the importance of “understanding that everybody at the table is right, we’re just right in our own way and nobody’s wrong.” Although no individual boundary spanner grouped responses in the following manner, there appears to be a natural congruence and unity to the processes of listening, keeping parties talking, affirming the work, and affirming the relationships.

External Factors

Two external factors were identified that appeared to impact boundary-spanner role conflict. These are the specificity of the university’s community engagement program purpose and strength of the boundary spanner’s vertical linkage with superiors.

Anna worked at a university that had “not as explicitly as they could, stated a concrete engagement or concrete commitment to community engagement.” Although Candice’s institution has committed a number of professional and support staff to help implement university–community partnerships, budgeted funds for faculty grants, and identified some specific partnerships to support, the overall engagement program is still in the process of definition. She stated, “So, we’re still . . . every conversation we’re having is, who are we, what are you doing? That question the other night of, ‘What the hell do you do?’ is something we hear every day.” Her office made the deliberate decision to attempt to assist all community partners and faculty who knocked on their door. Ida’s role of providing project management support to faculty seemed relatively straightforward, but the range of potential engagements seemed wide open: “We don’t have a specific focus, so if there’s a community need, we will try to figure how to [respond].” University settings that are open to a broader range of engagements can be a good thing for the community and the university. However, when engagement programs had very broad or unclear purposes, this condition caused the boundary-spanner’s role to be less clearly defined or bounded and increased the opportunities for unmet expectations and related role conflict. As Fred reflected on the flexibility within his environment, “There’s enough rope you can hang yourself.”

Some of the participant boundary spanners had very specific partnership requirements stemming from their institution’s

authorization to develop partnerships. In framing community health partnerships, Henrietta had to show a return on investment as measured in reduced emergency room visits, lessened use of intensive care services for newborns, or related measures. Fred had an explicit role requirement of supporting his work in K–12 education with grant funding: “If I don’t get revenue coming in through grants, I lose the position.” Donna worked to develop partnerships that provided service-learning opportunities. The presence of these institutionally mandated requirements limited the range of possible partnerships and provided greater role clarity for the boundary spanner.

Boundary spanners with strong vertical linkages to their immediate superior or other campus engagement leaders seemed to experience greater role clarity and less role conflict. The presence of a strong vertical linkage between the boundary spanner and her or his supervisor was also identified as a factor supporting the boundary spanner’s formative response to role conflict. Strong supervisory relationships were experienced as support for risk taking and the provision of tangible assistance. Fred reported that his director actively urged him to take risks and offered tangible support when he did so: “The good thing is that our director and other people that are way senior to me, world-renown, were willing to say, we’ll help you through it.” Guen reported that her dean was openly supportive of her work, and she gave an example of how she used that influence to improve alignment between faculty members and community. In this instance, the faculty member was asked to decline a project due to the perception that it was not a good fit. The supportive position of her dean was active and immediate: “What do you need for me to get . . . what you’re doing moved forward?” In addition to strong supervisory support being of direct assistance to the boundary spanner in resolving conflicts, it also seemed likely that strong supervisory support lessened feelings of boundary-spanner vulnerability and enabled boundary spanners to continue to push university and community partners to mutually beneficial solutions.

Discussion: Recommendations for Engagement Practice and Further Research

Recognizing that the experience of role conflict is inherent to the role of university–community boundary spanners, universities should work to reduce the experiences of role conflict when possible. Toward this end, universities should seek to implement community engagement initiatives that are linked to overall institutional priori-

ties. Moreover, these initiatives should reflect the core principles of university–community engagement, especially the importance of reciprocal benefits, and also be defined in such a way as to offer guidance to prospective community partners and university staff members. Universities should strive to define boundary-spanner roles with clear measures of success. Strong supervisor–boundary spanner vertical linkages should also be implemented. Although individual management and supervision styles will always vary, supervisors should be attentive to the specific risks faced by subordinate boundary spanners; further, they should be clear as to their performance expectations and provide regular feedback and support. To the extent possible, formal boundary-spanning roles should not be combined with other university staff roles and should be supported with adequate, ongoing funding. Finally, universities should seek to hire experienced professionals with a diverse skill base, personal maturity, and values that align with (or at least do not conflict with) those of the university to serve as sanctioned university–community boundary spanners.

Individual boundary spanners can also modify their practices to reduce the experience of role conflict and support themselves in responding formatively to these challenges. They should be clear and direct in describing their roles. Perhaps most important, they should work toward greater self-awareness in their responses to role conflict, both seeking to avoid personalizing the negative stresses of role conflict and making explicit choices as to when to respond formatively and when to respond adaptively. Such increased self-awareness may also allow the boundary spanner to challenge her- or himself to respond formatively. Finally, staff boundary spanners should seek out the company of other university–community boundary spanners for peer support, discussion, and learning. This can be done through the formal use of communities of practice and informally via personal contacts. Opportunities to engage in formal or informal mentoring relationships may also support novice and experienced boundary spanners.

The key principle, central to the questions asked in this research, is that university–community partnerships should be of mutual, reciprocal value. When asked how they assess whether partnerships are mutually beneficial, study participants responded with widely varying measures. For some, it was simple agreement of the parties. Some thought of it in terms of equitable financial investment and return. Others saw it as more of a process wherein there was shared planning and decision making. Further explor-

atory work to better define applicable dimensions of mutuality and reciprocal benefit is also recommended.

As pointed out in this research, a few of the boundary-spanner participants worked in settings where their broader purposes and metrics were crystal clear; the need to generate profit for a business school was one such example. However, most of the participants worked in settings and roles where success was less clear. Much time, attention, and scholarship has been devoted over the last few decades to the importance of university–community engagement and the diverse facets of the scholarship of engagement. There has been less attention given to frameworks that universities could use to evaluate their own effectiveness in addressing Boyer’s (1990) challenge for engagement: “Can America’s colleges and universities, with all the richness of their resources, be of greater service to the nation and the world?” (p. 3). Additional research in this area would benefit universities and the communities with whom they seek to partner.

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