Transforming Campuses and Communities through Public Engagement: The Critical Role(s) of Boundary Spanners

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Topics for this session

• Working definition of public or community engagement: What do we really mean by the term, “engagement?”
• Barriers and facilitators of engagement at research extensive universities
• Boundary spanning as a key engagement facilitator: central concepts
• A model of boundary spanning and engagement at research universities
• Implications for UW-Madison?
What do we mean by the term “public engagement?”
Public Engagement: A very PUBLIC marriage proposal?
What is public or community engagement from your perspective?

How do we understand the terms ‘public engagement’ or ‘community engagement’ in the context of higher education?

Your own definition?

Unique understandings throughout UW-Madison?
Definition of Public Engagement from the CIC Engagement Committee (Committee on Institutional Cooperation, 2003)

“The partnership of university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors 1) to enrich scholarship, research and creative activity; 2) enhance curriculum, teaching, and learning; 3) prepare educated, engaged citizens; 4) strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; 5) address critical societal issues; and 6) contribute to the public good.”
Definition of Community Engagement from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2006)

Community engagement is 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.”
What do we REALLY mean when we say public engagement?

A Lesson from East St. Louis and the University of Illinois-Urbana/Champaign
# Community-university engagement and models of knowledge flow

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Epistemology</th>
<th>Linear, unidirectional model (one-way expert approach)</th>
<th>Integrative model (engagement: two-way approach)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Epistemology</td>
<td>Positivist: knowledge is value neutral, detached and “exists on its own.”</td>
<td>Constructivist: knowledge is developmental, internally constructed, and socially and culturally mediated by partners</td>
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<td>Role of higher education institution and community partners</td>
<td>University produces knowledge through traditional research methodology (labs, controlled experiments, etc). Roles and functions of labor, evaluation, dissemination separated from researcher and community.</td>
<td>Learning takes place within context in which knowledge is applied (community). Knowledge process is local, complex, and dynamic. Knowledge is embedded in a group of learners (community and institution).</td>
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<td>Boundary spanning roles</td>
<td>Field agents deliver and interpret knowledge to be used by community members.</td>
<td>Field agents interact with community partners at all stages: design, analysis, implementation</td>
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Definition of boundary spanners

- Boundary spanners are a “bridge between an organization [college/university] and their exchange partners, competitors, and regulators [community partners]” (Scott, 1998, p. 196).
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<th>Dissemination philosophy and strategies (Huchinson &amp; Huberman, 1993)</th>
<th>Linear, unidirectional model (one-way expert approach)</th>
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<td><strong>Dissemination paradigm</strong>&lt;br&gt;Spread: One-way broadcast of new knowledge from university to community&lt;br&gt;Choice: University produces alternatives for users to choose</td>
<td><strong>Systemic change paradigm</strong>&lt;br&gt;Exchange: Institutions and community partners exchange perspectives, materials, resources&lt;br&gt;Implementation: Interactive process of institutionalizing ideas</td>
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<td><strong>Metaphors</strong>&lt;br&gt;Community partners as “empty vessel” to be filled. Knowledge as commodity.</td>
<td>Community and university equal partners in a “community of learners.” Universities become a learning organization.</td>
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<td><strong>Challenges and concerns</strong>&lt;br&gt;Little attention to users, does not take into account motivations of intended recipients. Innovation less likely to be adopted.</td>
<td>Power struggles between community and institution—consensus through negotiation and strife. Requires significant culture change.</td>
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Utility of this framework to think about outreach, engagement, and boundary spanning at UW-Madison?

How do we think about the Wisconsin Idea in this context?
Moving toward engagement at major research universities…

Barriers and facilitators of engagement at research extensive universities: Evidence from a recent study

Research questions

- What practices and strategies do leaders of public research universities employ to advance a two-way interactive model of engagement on their campuses?
- What factors promote or impede the progress of institutions seeking to define themselves by the characteristics of engagement?
- How do institutional mission, history, and role in a state higher education system shape campus efforts to adopt an engagement agenda?
- How do community partners understand and evaluate institutional efforts to establish a two-way interactive partnership with their communities?
Methodology

• Multi-case study (Yin, 2001) of 3 rural/suburban land-grant institutions and 3 urban research universities.
  – Institutions that are “working towards” or “espouse” engagement (pre-Carnegie classification)

• Data
  – 80 interviews in 3 phases: campus executives, campus engagement leaders, community partners
  – Documents review
Key findings: Facilitators, barriers, and engagement leverage points

• Engagement facilitated or stalled by dominate epistemology on campus (culture, context, and leadership)
• Organizational structures make a difference
• Boundary spanners: Most important to community partners in assessing campus commitment to engagement.
Epistemology, Culture, Context, Leadership

- Land-grant universities (rural/suburban)
  - Older, established institutions, founded on agrarian traditions, cooperative extension
  - Language and mission of outreach typically one-way. “Deliver products to the people.”
  - Faculty more likely to be “cosmopolitan” in large research enterprises (Birnbaum, 1994), inhibiting work with community. Engagement less likely to be rewarded in these settings.
  - Leadership views of “reciprocity,” roles of the university in the context of engagement still emerging.
“The original articulation of the land-grant mission is to bring the knowledge of the university to the state. Now we extend this idea nationally and internationally, literally reaching out to anyone with our products of scholarly and creative work.”

-Provost, Great Lakes State University
Epistemology, Culture, Context, Leadership

- Urban research universities
  - Younger, differentiate themselves from sister flagships.
  - Faculty more likely to be “local” (Birnbaum, 1994) compared to research intensive land grants in our study. Engagement more likely to be rewarded in these settings.
  - Embedded in city
  - Language of engagement very intentional, used as a branding strategy.
Organizational structures

- Community partners: Complex, confusing structures perceived by community partners at both land grant and urban research institutions (Barrier to engagement)
- Campus partners: Porous boundaries of partnerships are flexible, supportive of engagement work. Typically found at the urban/ non-land grant institutions. (Engagement facilitator)
Critical role of Boundary Spanners

• In the eyes of community partners, spanners ARE the university! Spanning behavior most important to community partners in assessing campus commitment to engagement.

• Characteristics of effective spanners:
  – Good listeners
  – Model a service ethic
  – Effectively manage power
    • “Equitable, but not equal”
  – Maintain neutrality

But spanning roles more complicated than we originally conceptualized. Not a single role or job description!
Two functions of boundary spanners
(Friedman & Podolny, 1992)

• Convey influence between constituents and partners: negotiate power and balance among the institution and community partners to achieve mutual objectives.
• Represent the perceptions, expectations, and ideas of each side to the other: perform teaching and learning functions to promote mutual understanding among organizations.
• Spanners in the audience? What are your roles?
Spanners not a single entity? (Friedman & Podolny, 1992)

• Spanners not a “stable, identifiable, unitary entity” (p. 28).
• Boundary spanning roles more accurately viewed as a composite entity, comprising multiple types of relationships and roles relating to external partners.
• Differentiation of roles understood through task orientation and social closeness.
Task orientation

• Individual’s formal job role, skill set, and how they influence one’s relationship with external constituents.

• Range from technical to socio-emotional tasks and differ in their overall objectives.

• “Idea” person focuses on task/technical activities, helps the group to adapt to environment to solve problems (Bales & Slater, 1955)

• “Most liked” person focuses on socio-emotional ties to help the group become internally integrated (Bales & Slater, 1955)
Social closeness

- Degree to which the spanner is aligned with the external partner versus the organization that he or she represents

- **Gatekeepers**: often perceived as more aligned with outside organizational interests (community). **Representatives**: more representative of the institution (Friedman & Podolny, 1992)

- Alignment based, in part, on own personal values, beliefs, and expectations

- Can create role conflict

- Examples in the audience?
Task orientation and social closeness as a framework to examine boundary spanning practices and university-community engagement
Themes and evidence from our data…

• Boundary spanning and community engagement a *composite* entity, comprising multiple types of relationships and roles relating to community partners

• Institutional roles may range from technical to socio-emotional to symbolic

• Each set of roles provide community access through engagement, but in different ways (based on task orientation and social closeness)
“Community based problem solver”

• “Sandy”, Midwest Metro University (MMU), director of the neighborhood initiatives program, assistant dean of community health, College of Nursing. “Ed,” outreach specialist, Great Lakes State University (GLSU)

• Task orientation: technical, practical, facilitate community involvement

• Social closeness: community integrated, gatekeeper

• Background: outreach/academic staff appointment, may or may not hold terminal degree, community-based, high socio-emotional skill base in addition to some technical (may vary in skill levels)
“Technical expert”

- “Mary,” Professor, Great Lakes State University
- Task orientation: technical, scholarly expertise to address a community problem
- Social closeness: institutionally integrated
- Background: traditional faculty member, Ph.D., high technical proficiency, applied expertise, facilitated by community advocate
- Technical experts may or may not posses same degree of socio-emotional skills leading to conflict, bounded by traditional academic culture
“Institutional engagement advocate”

• “Frank” Dean of Public Policy School, Southern Urban University (SUU)
• Task orientation: socio-emotional, leadership to support engagement
• Social closeness: institutionally integrated, yet recognized as important outside
• Background: Provost, academic deans
• Primarily support engagement internally (bridge to technical experts)
• IEA less evident at land-grants in our study
“Engagement champion”

• “Don” VP for Public Engagement, Southern State U; “Kathy” Center Director, Midwest Metro University

• Task orientation: socio-emotional, high profile leadership to support engagement

• Social closeness: community integrated

• Background: Wide range: government or community leader, technical expert, problem solver turned champion?

• Close to needs of the community, main champion of external efforts to support engagement, bridge to internal engagement advocates
Figure 1: University-community engagement boundary spanning roles at public research universities (© Weerts & Sandmann, 2008)

Community-based problem solver

Focus on site based problem support, resource acquisition, partnership development

Field agents, outreach staff, clinical faculty

Technical, practical tasks

Emphasis on knowledge creation for applied purposes (disciplinary or multidisciplinary)

Faculty, disciplinary based

Technical expert

Community focused

Engagement champion

Focus on building external, political, intra-organizational support, roles may be symbolic

Presidents, Vice Presidents for Engagement, Center Directors, Deans

Socio-emotional, leadership tasks

Build campus capacity for engagement (rewards, promotion, tenure, budget, hiring)

Provosts, academic deans

Institutionally focused

Internal engagement advocate
Four key points from our framework

1) Spanners do not occupy blunt categories, may lean in one or more directions (e.g., technical expert may largely occupy content-oriented roles and be closest to the university, he or she may lean toward community integration or socio-emotional leadership responsibilities)

Can you plot yourself on the graph?
2) Spanning roles are not static.

Spanners may float in and out of the four roles based on changes in their responsibilities, expertise, and overall role in the community partnership or the university.

**Key:** More “hats” you wear, more central you are to holding campus engagement efforts together!
3) Spanners experiences/values may conflict with organizational responsibilities

- **Community-based problem solvers**: community integrated but employed by the university. Allegiances?
- **Technical experts**: community sensitivity and alignment with traditional academic culture?
- **Engagement champions**: can become disconnected with problem center and outpace internal advocacy (symbols over substance?)
- **Internal engagement advocates**: face conflicts in changing the academic culture
4) For engagement to work effectively, multiple boundary-spanning roles must work in harmony!

Totality of internal/external leadership, expertise, and competency!

(Community-based problem Solvers, Technical Experts, Internal Engagement Advocates, and Engagement Champions)
Asking the “So what…?”
Accessing the utility of our framework

- What are the strengths and limitations of this framework as a diagnostic tool to assess boundary spanning/engagement practices at UW-Madison?
- To what degree does this framework help campus leaders understand roles and potential conflicts among spanners?
- What are the implications of this framework for coordinating boundary spanning roles/strategies and advancing engagement, internally and externally? (Plot analysis? Training for roles?)
Thank you!

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Slides from:

Weerts, D. J. & Sandmann, L. R. (revise and resubmit). Community engagement and boundary spanning roles at public research universities. *Journal of Higher Education*