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Review by Miles McNall

This special issue of the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* highlights the importance of boundary spanning to university–community engagement (henceforth "engagement"). No concept could be more central to engagement than boundary spanning as engagement requires the successful spanning of several kinds of boundaries including the horizontal boundaries that separate the knowledge bases of disciplines, professions, and communities; the vertical boundaries formed by organizational and institutional hierarchies; and the boundaries created by differences in race, gender, culture, and power.

Janice Langan-Fox and Cary L. Cooper's book *Boundary-Spanning in Organizations: Network, Influence, and Conflict*, although not written with engagement in mind, contains a wealth of theoretical frameworks, concepts, and practices related to boundary spanning. Anyone concerned with engagement would do well to familiarize themselves with them. Because the book was written largely for a business management audience, many of the frameworks, concepts, and practices will need some degree of translation and elaboration to be more directly applicable to the engagement context. The book consists of 15 chapters, each focused on a different aspect of boundary spanning in organizations with theoretical concepts clearly illustrated through compelling case studies on topics ranging from the experiences of teachers who cross boundaries by teaching "out-of-field" subjects to infection control in hospitals.

This review highlights five key concepts in the book that are likely to be of interest to those concerned with engagement: boundary spanning, boundaries, boundary objects, boundary spanners, and conditions and practices that support boundary spanning.

First, what is boundary spanning? In his chapter, David Wilemon defines boundary spanning as "the process of working across various organizational lines or boundaries to garner support, resources, or information needed to complete assigned tasks" *(p. 230)*. From the perspective of boundary spanning in organizations, this definition is undoubtedly suitable. However, from the

perspective of university–community engagement, it requires some elaboration. Although university–community engagement does frequently involve the completion of tasks, it also involves developing ongoing partnerships to achieve more general aims and establishing the infrastructure, resources, and trusting relationships necessary to achieve those aims. An expanded definition of boundary spanning for engagement might be "the process of working across boundaries within and between universities and community-based agencies, organizations, and groups to garner support, resources, and information and to establish the relationships, infrastructure, and processes necessary to achieve mutually agreed-upon goals."

According to contributors Anit Somech and Anat Drach-Zahavy, boundary spanning activities can be classified by type, target, and valence. In terms of type, boundary spanning activities include scouting, coordination, buffering, and bringing up the borders. Scouting refers to actions taken to find and acquire information, resources, and support in the environment. Coordination refers to actions taken to achieve interdependence among teams through various forms of coordination and collaboration. Buffering refers to efforts to insulate teams from unwanted or disruptive exposure to the environment. Bringing up the borders refers to activities undertaken to secure the commitment of team members to pursue a common goal. Regarding targets, lateral boundary activities are aimed at units at comparable levels of hierarchy; vertical boundary activities are those aimed at units at different levels of hierarchy. Valence refers to the emotional content, positive or negative, of boundary activities.

Second, what kinds of boundaries are spanned in boundary spanning? In their chapter, Charles Palus, Donna Chrobot-Mason, and Kristin Cullen offer the following typology of boundaries: (a) vertical (hierarchical), (b) horizontal (cross-unit), (c) stakeholder (external), (d) demographic (e.g., race, class, and gender), and (e) geographic. A majority of chapters in this volume are devoted to various forms of intraorganizational or interorganizational vertical or horizontal boundary spanning. From the perspective of engagement, a limitation of this volume is the paucity of attention paid to crossing stakeholder, demographic, or geographic boundaries, all of which are of critical importance to engagement. The typology above also misses an important boundary that appears throughout the book, namely the boundary that separates distinct areas of knowledge and practice. For example, Linda Hobbs discusses the "discontinuities" experienced by schoolteachers who cross bound-

aries of knowledge and teaching practice when they teach "out-of-field" subjects (i.e., subjects for which they hold no special qualification to teach). Preeta Banerjee and Rafael Corredoira explore how the evolution of technology is driven by the boundary crossing that occurs when new patents recombine existing areas of knowledge that have not been combined in prior patents. Drawing on Bourdieu's practice theory *(Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992)*, Natalia Levina and Emmanuelle Vaast explore the dynamics of transactive and transformative boundary spanning within shared fields of practice. In the former, existing relationships within fields of knowledge and practice are reproduced; in the latter, they are transformed, creating new joint fields of practice. From the perspective of engagement, attention to boundaries around areas of knowledge and practice is critical, as engagement involves crossing a number of such boundaries within and between universities and communities. Within universities there are boundaries that divide areas of knowledge into disciplines, departments, and units. Within communities there are boundaries that divide the knowledge of the professional practitioner or expert from the lay knowledge of community members. And finally, there is the boundary that separates discipline-based university-generated knowledge from community-generated local and indigenous knowledge.

Third, what are boundary objects, and what is their role in boundary spanning? According to contributor Jacob Vakkayil, boundary objects are artifacts that serve as carriers of knowledge and expertise across the boundaries of communities. Most authors in this volume who discuss boundary objects draw on Star and Griesemer's *(1989)* definition, which holds that boundary objects are "objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites" *(p. 393)*. Vakkayil identifies three ways in which boundary objects facilitate boundary spanning. First, they serve as tools of coordination. For example, blueprints serve as boundary objects around which the different trades involved in building construction can coordinate their activities. Second, boundary objects can facilitate the transfer of knowledge across communities. For example, the Mayo Clinic website is a boundary object that allows for the transfer of medical knowledge to the general public. Third, boundary objects can serve to facilitate collaboration across significant differences by enabling multiple interpretations of how superordinate goals are defined. In the context of community-engaged research, boundary objects

might include grant proposals, logic models or theories of change, memoranda of understanding, or shared measurement systems.

Fourth, what are boundary spanners, and what role do they play in boundary spanning? In their chapter, Natalia Levina and Emmanuelle Vaast define boundary spanners as "people who have been designated and/or who de facto reach beyond group boundaries in order to build common ground between separated parties" *(p. 294)*. Boundary spanners play multiple roles in and between organizations including representative, gatekeeper, advice or trust broker, scout, or ambassador. Contributor Fiona Buick argues that the core competencies of boundary spanners include managing complexity and interdependencies; building sustainable relationships and networking; communication and information sharing; managing through influence and negotiation; and managing roles, accountabilities, and motivations. The ability of boundary spanners to manage complex interdependencies across teams and organizations rests on their prior interorganizational experience, their transdisciplinary knowledge, and their cognitive capability. In other words, to be an effective boundary spanner requires a diverse set of advanced interpersonal, organizational, and cognitive skills as well as relevant experience. This is a tall order indeed and given the centrality of boundary spanners to engagement, it suggests that hiring and training qualified boundary spanners, as well as establishing supportive environments in which they play their boundary spanning roles, will be essential steps for universities to take in supporting engagement.

Finally, what are the conditions and practices that support boundary spanning? In his chapter, David Wilemon makes the case that these factors facilitate boundary spanning: (a) credibility of both the boundary spanner and the boundary spanning task; (b) accessibility of senior management and others who support the project; (c) priority of the project to relevant stakeholders; (d) visibility of the project to potentially interested parties; (e) the interpersonal skills of boundary spanners including listening skills, communication skills, empathy, and ability to manage conflicts; and (f) an organizational culture that is sufficiently open and flexible to support boundary spanning projects.

Establishing trust across boundaries is another essential condition for effective boundary spanning work. Contributors Frens Kroeger and Reinhard Bachmann discuss how "transitory boundary systems" operate to convert interpersonal to organizational trust, enabling the building of trust across organizational boundaries. Transitory boundary systems consist of the interac-

tions among boundary spanners which create "a new institutional context that differs from either organization" *(p. 254)*. It is within this transitory boundary system that boundary spanners engage in the symbolic exchanges and interpersonal "facework" that builds trust.

Given the importance to university-community engagement of boundary spanners, their boundary spanning activities, and the infrastructure necessary to support their work, further elaboration of the frameworks, concepts, and practices discussed in *Boundary-Spanning in Organizations: Network, Influence, and Conflict* for the engagement context is essential. This book is a good place to begin that work.

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About the Reviewer

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