

# ***A Dissertation of Boundary-Spanning Actors Within Community Engagement***

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## **Abstract**

Unique individuals serve in critical roles in the planning and implementation, institutionalization, and support of service-learning and community engagement within higher education institutions. These individuals, identified as boundary spanners, operate at the nexus of the higher education institution and the selected community. This dissertation focused on development and use of an instrument that measured a previously developed qualitative model. Results indicated that personal characteristics do not significantly influence boundary-spanning activities; in fact, organizational characteristics were more significant than previously thought. The individual, organizational, and societal implications of these findings, as well as directions for future research, are discussed.

## **Introduction and Purpose**

Service-learning and community engagement scholars have focused attention on faculty members, organizational units, students, and even community partners as more research emerges toward institutionalization of this model of engaged scholarship. Those acting in the critical roles of boundary spanner, however, are less studied. Boundary spanners utilize skillsets or roles to work between and among groups and organizations and leverage the internal functions and boundaries of an organization. Boundary spanners permeate society in numerous fields. The government sector, including public higher education, utilizes boundary spanners frequently and in multiple capacities. The activities of boundary spanners in this arena informed this dissertation study in important ways, theoretically and operationally. Boundary spanners support effective networked governance structures.

In networked governance, solutions can be identified and implemented through a network of collaborating producers and providers, rather than requiring that an entity provide direct services. Localized boundary spanners create their own individual networks inside and outside the formal structure of networked governance in order to be effective. To mobilize their networks for influence and action, boundary spanners bridge different agencies

and buffer threats through communication while building trust and understanding.

University–community partnerships can be viewed as one type of contributing entity in networked governance. This study examined the phenomenon in which higher education and a community come together in ways that include boundary spanning for the delivery of educational efforts. The purpose of this study was to investigate boundary-spanning activities and behaviors of individuals who are employed by higher education institutions who build partnerships between higher education and the U.S. Department of Defense. These individuals are university employees but to members of the Department of Defense community, they may appear as contractors, or employed through the military-industrial complex to provide goods and services for the military community. Four research questions guided the process: (1) What specific boundary-spanning behaviors are prevalent in the population of university–military contractors? (2) To what extent are boundary-spanning behaviors explained *individually* by personal or work/organizational characteristics in the population of university–military contractors? (3) To what extent are boundary-spanning behaviors explained *jointly* by personal or work/organizational characteristics in the population of university–military contractors? (4) Is it possible to derive empirically a conceptual structure for the instrument used in this study that differs from the logically derived constructs used in the three preceding research questions?

## Theoretical Framework

The study was based on a theoretical and conceptual framework that used an interdisciplinary approach to examine the phenomenon of individuals operating between organizations and communities within higher education institutions in a networked governance context. First, the framework introduced interorganizational relationships. Specifically, the framework first described how organizations operate in a networked system; this description was informed by agency and stewardship theories derived from the public and private management literature. Second, the framework examined community engagement, in particular its individual actors and organizational systems. Finally, the concept of boundary spanning was introduced with a comprehensive review of how organizational theory and human behavior disciplines used boundary spanning to describe behaviors, antecedents of boundary-spanning behaviors, and effectiveness of these behaviors.

## Methods and Data Sources

This quantitative study employed a selected response instrument created as described in Sandmann, Jordan, Mull, and Valentine (2014). The instrument was adapted for and distributed to higher education employees engaged with the military community. The instrument separated the initial Weerts and Sandmann (2010) model from two constructs of task orientation and social closeness to four constructs: technical-practical, socio-emotional, community and organizational orientations. The military community included service members and their dependents as well as the other professionals supporting them. Data were collected through an online data collection tool.

Higher education employees engaged with the military served as the population of the study. Of this population, 413 unique collection links were distributed through publicly available electronic mailing lists to individuals known to be working with the military community. The unique collection links allowed for the modified snowball sample by equipping the researcher to determine how many times each link had been used. A modified snowball sample resulted in 178 usable surveys. To answer the four research questions, statistical analyses of these 178 surveys were performed through descriptive statistics, rank ordering of means, bivariate correlations, multiple regression analysis, and exploratory factor analysis.

## Results and Conclusions

The most surprising conclusion suggested by the evidence was that personal characteristics do not significantly influence the boundary-spanning behaviors of these individuals engaged in the community. This is surprising because many of the qualities embodied in effective boundary spanners reflect individuals' skills, behaviors, or experiences (Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2011; Williams, 2002).

The only personal characteristic found to influence boundary-spanning behaviors was an individual's educational attainment. Also, boundary spanners' length of service with the community or the organization has been found to influence boundary-spanning activities (Miller, 2008). Many previous studies of boundary-spanning behaviors have not examined personal characteristics as predictors of boundary spanners. This research suggested that these characteristics are not relevant for future study.

A second conclusion from this study reinforced the importance of communication to boundary-spanning activities. This study affirmed that the single greatest contributor to boundary-spanning behaviors is communications among a variety of groups. Miller (2008) defined boundary spanners as effective collectors and disseminators of information. This study found frequency and type of communications to be predictors as well as tools for developing and sustaining partnerships.

A third conclusion was confirmation that boundary-spanning work with the community significantly influenced the boundary-spanning behaviors of all four construct orientations (technical-practical, socio-emotional, community, and organizational). The greater a boundary spanner's perception of being valued and supported, the higher the frequency of boundary-spanning activities occurring across each of the operationalized model's constructs.

As a final conclusion, this study provides support for the Weerts and Sandmann (2010) model. The Weerts and Sandmann (2010) model relied on two constructs rather than four constructs created from the two axes in the original model of task orientation and social closeness. Through factor analysis, the four constructs applied in this study were conjoined into two. The two-construct rotation mirrored exactly the Weerts and Sandmann (2010) model. This two-construct model aligns with past research. Richter, West, Van Dick, and Dawson (2006) and George and Chattopadhyay (2005) indicated that a dual identity forms in boundary spanners and contract workers. This study confirmed these researchers' conclusion: Individuals can feel affiliation toward both their parent organization and a second group or community.

### **Significance for Theory, Research, and Practice**

This study has both theoretical and practical implications. The implications for practice and policy are presented, organized by sphere of influence from the individual level to the societal level. Beginning with building awareness among individuals, the significance expands to the societal level.

At the individual level of influence, any specific boundary spanner can use self-awareness of boundary-spanning behaviors in tailoring their performance and roles based on their unique skillsets, attributes, and qualities. The instrument developed in this study can be used in conjunction with other self-assessment scales to augment fulfillment of personal or organizational needs in understanding how boundary spanners serve in the work-

force. Boundary spanners experience a dual identity (*George & Chattopadhyay, 2005; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Richter et al., 2006*), sharing the identity of not only their organization, but also their community or other group with which they span a boundary.

At the organizational level, not all organizations have the same readiness to utilize boundary spanners. Traditional hierarchical organizations may not be prepared to embrace high levels of boundary-spanning activities. Flexible, entrepreneurial organizations that understand the collaborative versus competitive landscape may use boundary spanners to their fullest potential. This study illustrated the changes occurring within higher education institutions as community engagement continues to develop. As higher education institutions desire more community engagement, boundary spanners can assist in bridging previously segmented colleges, schools, units, and projects in an entrepreneurial manner so long as support exists in the managerial and executive ranks.

Change occurs more slowly at the system and society levels. Policy changes and influences at the federal level, particularly relating to networked governance, can encourage the use of boundary spanners within the federal sector. Results from this study indicate that individual boundary spanners' experience and background are less influential in network formation than characteristics of partnering organizations.

In addition to the above practical implications, an expanded research agenda exists. This study was an extension of a qualitative study conducted by Weerts and Sandmann (2010). Examining specific populations involved in higher education community engagement, individuals operating in roles other than that of university-military contractor, and nonemployees (volunteers) operating between organizations and communities will assist in determining the validity, reliability, and applicability of this quantitative boundary-spanning behavior measurement instrument. Additional studies will aid in discovering generalizable findings.

Using this instrument combined with other qualitative and quantitative tools in future research could provide clarity in the refinement or expansion of boundary-spanning theory. Williams (2002, 2011) described diplomacy, tact, and political acumen as skills and qualities of a competent boundary spanner. Negotiating power was the least noted boundary-spanning behavior among this study's respondents. In networked governance, power is distributed horizontally across the network. Future research focusing on power dynamics and boundary spanning may indicate that negotiating

power was the least used behavior because of the distributed sense of power.

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