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Institutionalizing Community Engagement in Higher Education: A Case Study of Processes Toward Engagement

Kristi Farner

Abstract

This qualitative single-case study examined the institutionalization of community engagement at a selected land-grant university by melding individual and organizational perspectives and examining the process as an adaptive challenge. Specifically, the study applied Holland's (1997) assessment matrix for institutionalizing community engagement and Weerts and Sandmann's (2010) boundary-spanning framework. Thematic analysis and constant comparison were used to examine data from transcripts from open-ended survey questions, focus groups, and semistructured interviews. Findings showed that institutionalizing community engagement represented an adaptive challenge that required a critical mass of boundary spanners enacting a variety of roles inside the university. Three conclusions resulted: (1) The case institution created conditions for personnel to safely experiment with community engagement; (2) the university engaged in strategic thinking and planning around the sustainability of community engagement; and (3) in its institutionalization efforts, the case institution fostered an "adaptive braid" model encompassing organizational and individual actions and motivations.

Keywords: Community engagement, higher education leadership, boundary spanning, institutionalization, change agents, adaptive challenges

Since colonial times, American higher education has been based largely on a three-part mission of teaching, research, and service (Glass & Fitzgerald, 2010). Integrating the community into this historic mission emphasizes the public value of colleges and universities. Today, many higher education institutions (HEIs) collaborate with communities to address societal needs, thereby fulfilling the civic component of their mission. Indeed, a growing body of literature (e.g., Boyer, 1996; Kellogg Commission, 1999; Sandmann, 2008) has documented that community engagement—the "collaboration between [HEIs] and their larger communities . . . for the . . . exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" (Swearer Center, 2018)—can generate mutual benefits for both entities. However, many HEIs struggle to *institutionalize* community engagement.

Societal needs are complex, requiring new knowledge that involves partnerships within and outside the academy. Instilling a collective mind-set that values community engagement is not an easy or straightforward process in the context of organizational priorities, structure, resources, and culture, and it requires changing routines and ways of thinking (Holland, 2005). Moreover, implementing community engagement as an integrated strategy rather than as a renaming of service or as an extra volunteer activity is challenging (Furco &

Miller, 2009; Sandmann & Weerts, 2008) because individuals often resist new practices (Holland, 2009). Specifically, it is an adaptive challenge—one that is systemic and whose solution involves multiple stakeholders (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001).

The loosely coupled nature of higher education, combined with challenges related to the diffusion of innovation, add strands of complexity unique to HEIs. Weick (1969) described loosely coupled HEIs as those that can constantly evolve based on symbolic interactions among individuals as they create and interpret meaning from shared experiences. This concept helps explain the high level of autonomy of individual faculty and departments, why some rules within HEIs are followed more closely than others, and why information does not flow predictably along a chain of command.

Diffusion of innovation describes how change takes root when it is channeled through individuals' actions and interactions. An innovation can be a concept, action, or object that is new to the adopter. Diffusion is the movement of an innovation from its source to the adopter through communication and influence (Strang & Soule, 1998). When it comes to the adaptive challenge of diffusing community engagement practices in loosely coupled HEIs, *boundary spanners* can play a vital role. These are individuals who expand their formal institutional roles by operating beyond an organization's parameters (Aldrich & Herker, 1977; Miller, 2008).

The qualitative single-case study discussed in this overview explored community engagement as an innovation diffused throughout a selected university. The purpose of the research was to understand how leaders at the university institutionalized community engagement therein. Three research questions (RQs) guided the study: (1) What are key characteristics of the institutionalization of community engagement? (2) In what ways do university leaders address the institutionalization of community engagement as an adaptive challenge? (3) According to university leaders, what qualities do community engagement boundary spanners possess?

Literature Review

Previous studies have examined individual- and organizational-level work around the institutionalization of community engagement. This study sought to enhance the understanding of how that process occurs by melding individual and organizational perspectives and examining the institutionalization of community engagement as an adaptive challenge. As Heifetz and Laurie (2001) explained, "adaptive work is required when our deeply held beliefs are challenged, when the values that made us successful become less relevant, and when legitimate yet competing perspectives emerge" (p. 6). Expertise alone cannot resolve adaptive challenges, because they involve changes in behaviors and technical strategies (Corazzini & Anderson, 2014; Heifetz & Linsky, 2004). In addition, Levine (1980) found that the acceptance of institutionalization in higher education requires boundary expansion. Accordingly, this study's conceptual framework incorporated Holland's (2006) assessment matrix of institutional commitment to community engagement at the organizational level and Weerts and Sandmann's (2010) boundary-spanning framework at the individual level.

Change agents—individuals who negotiate power, information, and relationships—are needed to facilitate institutionalization (Torres et al., 2013). Boundary spanners are a type of change agent uniquely positioned to address adaptive challenges because they "negotiate the wants and needs of parties involved in the process of creating and disseminating knowledge" (Hutchinson & Huberman, 1993, p. 79). Weerts and Sandmann's (2010) framework identifies four roles of individual boundary spanners: engagement champions, community-based problem solvers, technical experts, and internal engagement advocates. The gap between HEIs and communities can be narrowed by individuals assuming boundary-spanning roles that enhance community engagement strategies.

Identifying the activities of boundary spanners at the individual level is important for operationalizing the institutionalization process; at the organizational level, understanding how separate institutional factors come together to affect this process is critical. Holland's (2006) matrix was among the first "to describe and interpret the dimensions, approaches, and levels of institutional commitment to community service and service-learning and thereby to facilitate institutional planning decision-making and evaluation" (p. 33). Specifically, the matrix

identifies seven institutional components (mission; promotion, tenure, hiring; organizational structure; student involvement; faculty involvement; community involvement; campus publications) and relates them to four levels of integration (low relevance, medium relevance, high relevance, and full integration) to help leaders determine the actual state of engagement in their unit or within the larger institution relative to their goals for the institutionalization of community engagement.

Methods and Data Source

In this study, community engagement was viewed as a bidirectional, constructivist paradigm of systematic change through social learning comprising an active network of experiences and interactions (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). The selected university met two criteria. First, it allocated funding and time for campus leaders to attend the Engagement Academy for University Leaders (EAUL)—a program dedicated to developing institutional capacity for community engagement in higher education—every year it was offered (i.e., 2008–2014). Second, it earned the Carnegie Foundation's elective Community Engagement Classification, another indicator of institutional commitment to community engagement.

The researcher utilized purposeful sampling to yield the most in-depth understanding of the subject matter (Merriam & Simpson, 2000; Patton, 2002). Study participants included 21 people from the case study site. Participants were identified as university leaders because of their formal titles (e.g., vice provost, department head, director of programs, and associate dean) or if they held informal roles as internal conveners of community engagement. Data sources included responses to EAUL prework questionnaires; transcripts from focus groups and semistructured interviews; and documents describing the university's history, structure, and current activities. The case was bounded temporally, taking place between the time of participants' preparing for the first EAUL in 2008 and the study interviews in 2015.

The interviews and focus groups addressed all three of the research questions (RQ). Participants shared examples of each level of institutionalization they had experienced or observed (RQ1) using a handout of Holland's (2006) assessment matrix as a visual aid. They were asked to describe the adaptive challenge of community engagement integration at institutional and individual levels, and to consider how beliefs and values had been tested in the process (RQ2). Participants also mapped out where they fit within Weerts and Sandmann's (2010) boundary-spanning framework, identified their boundary-spanning roles outside the framework, and noted specific boundary-spanning roles and activities they observed in others (RQ3).

Raw data were analyzed to address the study's research questions (Yin, 1994). Thematic data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and constant comparison were used to examine data and continued throughout the data collection process (Ruona, 2005). Memos and methodological notes were taken to demonstrate transparency of the researcher's thought processes. Coding and theme revision continued until saturation of themes was reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Basic themes were combined into organizational themes and then synthesized into global themes, all of which illuminated participants' perceptions of elements necessary for institutionalizing community engagement.

Results and Conclusions

The study findings showed that participants perceived the institutionalization of community engagement as an adaptive challenge requiring a critical mass of boundary spanners enacting a variety of roles within the university. The data analysis offered insights into how the institutionalization process was operationalized at the case study site. At the institutional level, the university created an "incubator" for community engagement innovation, a space in which faculty and staff not only felt safe to explore engagement but were supported in doing so. To generate this space, the university actively adapted several institutional components (Holland, 2006): infusing engagement language into its mission; increasing access to leadership; restructuring organizational networks and funding mechanisms; expanding opportunities for student involvement; and officially recognizing service-learning in the curriculum. Campus leaders also built a "coalition of the willing," a critical mass of internal supporters with a shared philosophy who utilized strategic integration of new employees into the organization, the intentional placement

of community engagement conveners, and community member testimonials to effect change.

Individual roles and activities identified by participants aligned with Weerts and Sandmann's (2010) boundary-spanning framework. Boundary spanners at the case study site advanced community engagement efforts through action (rather than rhetoric). They were community-based problem solvers, engagement champions, and internal engagement advocates who exercised deep listening; solution-focused, big-picture thinking; and a willingness to make the hierarchical boundaries of the institution more permeable, encouraging a leadership culture of openness, accessibility, and approachability. As contributors to a coalition of the willing, internal engagement advocates served as conveners with expertise to motivate, and technical experts were embedded in communities as public service faculty (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010).

Many aspects of the organizational and individual levels of institutionalizing community engagement were found to be intertwined in this study, as evidenced by the theme agreement between RQ1 and RQ3. Data highlighted the interplay among individual and organizational perspectives, activities, and roles. Much of the data analysis around RQ1 and RQ3 focused on how activities fit into specific categories or roles within the guiding frameworks, but the findings suggested that, intrinsically, institutionalizing community engagement does not fit neatly into individual or organizational frames. With respect to RQ2, this study also found that university leaders addressed institutionalization of community engagement as an adaptive challenge by (1) empowering others, (2) helping themselves and others question routines, (3) shaping institutional norms, (4) honoring work in progress, and (5) acknowledging all roles as important, complex, and interdependent.

Significance of the Study

Ultimately, this study added to the literature by illuminating that the adaptive challenges of community engagement institutionalization can be addressed using a complex "braid" of organizational and individual actions and motivations. This adaptive braid of several intertwining elements was responsive to the loose coupling and diffusion of innovation patterns within the change environment of the case study site (Levine, 1980; Weick, 1969). Individual strands of the braid (e.g., mission, organizational structure, university council on community engagement, leadership/individual decision makers) moved toward or away from other strands, creating a weave of varying "tightness." The braid reflects the complexity of adaptive work and supports the conclusion that there is no single technical solution for achieving full integration of community engagement (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001). Such complexity cannot be understood by examining individual and organizational perspectives separately.

The adaptive braid model is transferable since an institution can customize the strands to reflect its unique context in an effort to become stronger as more strands are woven together. The findings have implications for organization-level change, including curriculum development; recruitment and hiring; and other policy changes, such as mission language and organizational structure, captured by Holland's (2006) matrix. The findings of this study could also be built upon in future studies by broadening the sample (to capture additional types of boundary spanners) and the scale of the research (see Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). The institutionalization process is complex and messy, but if stakeholders acknowledge that this messiness is the norm, they may find utility in adaptive strategies that enhance—and make more imperative—the critical connections between institutional mission and the public value of higher education.

About the Author

Kristi Farner *is a program and staff development specialist for Extension at the University of Georgia (UGA). Her research areas include organizational development, institutionalization, community engagement, and facilitating adult learning. She received her Ph.D in adult education at UGA.*

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