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Collective Impact as a Novel Approach to Seeding Collaboration for Boundary Spanning

Cara Marie DiEnno, Victoria M. Atzl, Anna S. Antoniou, and Anne P. DePrince

Abstract

Responding to longstanding calls to develop institutional support for boundary-spanning faculty and staff in ways that enhance collaborative community–university engagement, our study investigated a novel, facilitated approach to building community–university collaboration derived from the collective impact framework. In particular, we present new research on faculty and staff perceptions of a collective impact process that was designed to seed community–university collaboration around pressing public problems. Through semistructured interviews, 23 faculty and staff shared reflections on their participation in the collective impact process. Faculty and staff narratives touched on four categories of boundary-spanning behaviors, including technical-practical, socioemotional, community, and organizational orientations. The presence of these categories of behaviors reinforces the centrality of boundary-spanning concepts to efforts to advance community–university collaboration. Based on this research, we recommend organizational practices that can support professional development innovations for boundary spanners to enhance public good impact.

Keywords: collective impact, boundary spanning, community engagement, professional development

Community engagement is an essential strategy through which research universities carry out their missions of public service, social responsibility, and advancing democracy (Harkavy, 2006; Staley, 2013). University–community partnerships play a critical role in bridging institution–community divides to tackle complex societal issues in mutually beneficial ways through shared resources and collaborative action (Cook & Nation, 2016). A substantial literature addresses organizational practices, technical assistance, and structural support necessary to engage in successful community–university partnerships (e.g., Beere et al., 2011; Cunningham & Smith, 2020). Nevertheless, significant institutional and structural barriers make it difficult for faculty to act as boundary spanners to create and maintain successful community–university partnerships (Purcell et al., 2020). Indeed, a persistent critique of higher education institutions is that department structures create silos (e.g., Bass, 2022) with the potential to negatively impact transdisciplinary collaboration and equitable community engagement. For example, faculty may have limited opportunities to meet potential collaborators from other disciplines, and community partners seeking to collaborate on projects that span disciplines may face insurmountable odds against finding multiple faculty partners across departments. Given the importance of boundary spanning to community engagement, the current study explored the potential for a novel professional development opportunity focused on seeding community–university collaboration to support faculty and staff boundary spanning.

The Boundary-Spanning Model

Boundary spanners are individuals who work at the nexus of community organizations and universities to create and sustain crucial partnerships (Weerts & Sandmann,

2010). A growing literature on boundary spanners has sought to operationalize the roles of individuals who work to form and maintain university–community partnerships (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). Recent work has explored competencies necessary for community engagement professionals (Dostilio, 2017); however, a less recognized but important area of exploration is how institutions can provide opportunities for skill development and general support enabling individuals to be successful and fulfilled in their boundary-spanning roles. This research requires understanding both university and community audiences, including the parlance, interests, and goals of each group, to bridge these two spaces to build productive partnerships. Such partnerships can support the historic public and civic purposes of higher education, especially in ways that are mutually beneficial and reciprocal, placing university and community voices on equal ground when collaborating to address wicked problems.

Boundary spanners can have a variety of roles across universities, organizations, or the community at large. As originally conceived by Weerts and Sandmann (2010), boundary spanning in higher education community engagement consisted of four roles at the intersection of two domains or axes: social closeness (institutional vs. community focused) and task orientation (technical-practical vs. socioemotional/leadership tasks). The four roles, positioned in the four quadrants of these domains, were Community-Based Problem Solvers (technical-practical tasks with a community focus), Technical Experts (technical-practical tasks with an institutional focus), Engagement Champions (socioemotional/leadership tasks with a community focus), and Internal Engagement Advocates (socioemotional/leadership task with an institutional focus).

Weerts and Sandmann (2010) recognized that these roles are dynamic, with some spanners exhibiting attributes of multiple roles simultaneously, and moving in and out of the four roles based on changes in responsibilities, expertise, and job titles. Subsequent work by Sandmann et al. (2014) that focused on operationalizing this boundary-spanning model altered two aspects of the original Weerts and Sandmann model. First, Sandmann et al. shifted their focus from *boundary-spanning roles* (i.e., types of people who found themselves inside Weerts and Sandmann's four quadrants) to *boundary-spanning behaviors* (i.e., the observable actions and cognitive processes these individuals engage in as they span boundaries). Second, Sandmann et al. moved away from Weerts and Sandmann's two-axes model that placed technical-practical and socioemotional/leadership as opposite task orientations and community and institutional focus as opposite social closeness. They posited that the two ends of axes may not be inversely related, and instead used four independent behavior categories to measure a boundary spanner's social closeness and task orientation. With these modifications to the boundary-spanners model, Sandmann et al. developed a survey instrument to assess the four categories of boundary-spanning behaviors and activities. Table 1 provides the definitions of the four behavior categories.

Table 1. Boundary-Spanning Behaviors Defined

Constructs	Definition
Technical-practical orientation	The degree to which an individual's behaviors focus on transforming inputs into outputs in a way that enhances the performance of an organization or group
Socioemotional orientation	The degree to which an individual's behaviors support developing the knowledge, skills, abilities, and needs of others as well as the rewards system and authority structures that exist in a group or organization
Community orientation	The degree to which an individual is aligned with the interests of the community, a unified body of individuals with common interests, external to the individual's organization
Organizational orientation	The degree to which an individual's behaviors are aligned with their own organization's overarching mission, vision, and interests

Note. From "Measuring Boundary-Spanning Behaviors in Community Engagement" by L. R. Sandmann, J. W. Jordan, C. D. Mull, and T. Valentina, 2014, *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 18*(3), p. 89 (https://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/jheoe/article/view/1137). Copyright 2014 by the University of Georgia.

Boundary-spanning behaviors require a fluid skill set that encompasses technical expertise, leadership skills, socioemotional intelligence, and advocacy skills. It also requires the ability to navigate both community and institutional contexts. Institutional characteristics also influence boundary-spanning behaviors (Mull, 2016; Sandmann et al., 2014), both negatively and positively. Such organizational dynamics include the structures, processes, and characteristics of the organization and its programs. Institutional barriers, such as siloed departmental communication, can inhibit boundary-spanning behaviors. Alternatively, policies, guidelines, and other organizational components, such as professional development opportunities, can offer the structured organizational support that can advance the diverse skill set needed for boundary spanning.

Support for Boundary-Spanning Faculty

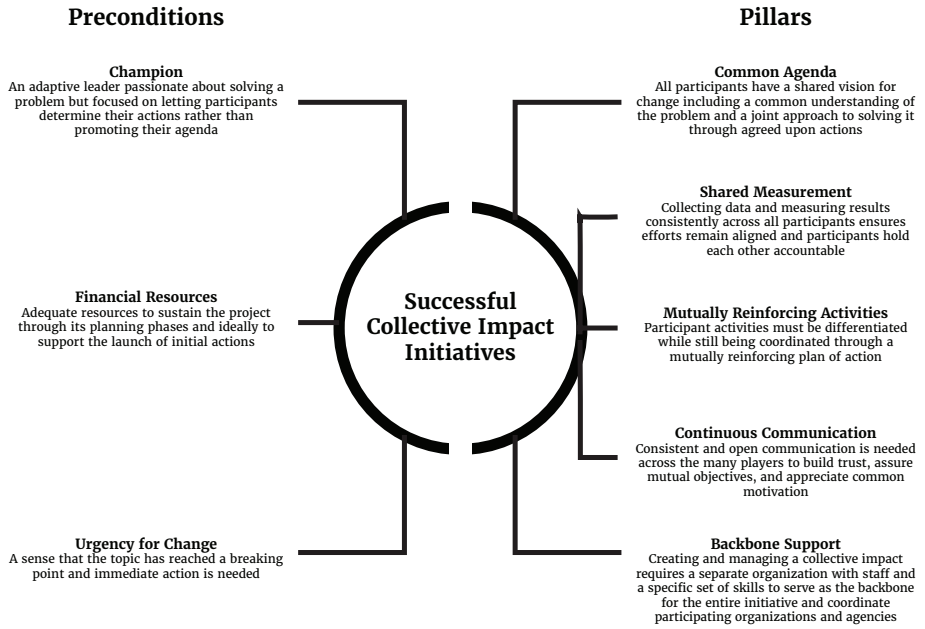
Faculty development programming focused on increasing faculty members' competency to serve as boundary spanners and advance higher education community engagement has increased. However, these programs often have limited assessment of outcomes, a reliance on one-time trainings instead of ongoing, collaborative practices, and often focus exclusively on tenure-track faculty at the expense of supporting the development of adjunct faculty and graduate students (Welch & Plaxton-Moore, 2017). Furthermore, when asked directly, boundary-spanning faculty have shared challenges balancing their multiple roles (i.e., administration, teaching, research, service), aligning their roles with their ultimate passions and goals as a professional, and receiving recognition for community-engaged efforts through promotion and/or advancement, including tenure (Purcell et al., 2020). Given the fluidity and complexity of the roles necessary for successful higher education community engagement, creative and novel approaches are necessary to support faculty in developing competencies as boundary spanners.

A Novel Approach to Seeding Collaboration for Boundary Spanning

We describe a novel model for seeding community–university collaboration grounded in collective impact. Unlike many professional development models that emphasize the individual skill-building of scholars to make contributions using community-engaged methods, by adapting the collective impact framework, we sought to build the collaborative capacity of participants to produce change. Collective impact is an approach to collaboration developed in the nonprofit sector to ensure the broadest and deepest impact possible when groups come together to work toward a goal. Kania and Kramer (2011) proposed the term "collective impact" to refer to the commitment of actors from different sectors to a common agenda to solve a specific social problem. The goal of the university-sponsored collective impact cohorts was to adapt the collective impact process to enhance community engagement. The hope was to shift away from the sometimes-isolated impacts of individual projects (e.g., one faculty member and one community partner), or what Cabaj and Weaver (2016) have called a "move from fragmented action and results to collective action and deep and durable impact" (p. 1). The creation of a shared agenda for public problem-solving still allows individuals to pursue their own projects, but in concert and alignment with others to achieve stronger outcomes. The integration of collective impact and community engagement frameworks can serve as a powerful way to elevate the public purposes of higher education while achieving transformational change (DePrince & DiEnno, 2019). The five pillars of collective impact include a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Hanleybrown et al. (2012) further detailed the essential preconditions for collective impact success: a strong champion, adequate financial resources, and a sense of urgency about addressing the issue at hand. Figure 1 illustrates these necessities for collective impact initiatives.

The overall approach, which aligned with the organizational orientation of the boundary-spanning model, was designed to realize goals from the university's strategic plan regarding interdisciplinary collaboration for public problem-solving. The university engagement office served as the champion and backbone support for the approach, with assistance from a university strategic plan implementation committee. To launch the process, faculty, staff, students, and community members were invited to apply to join "collective impact cohorts" in fall 2018. The call described four cohorts organized around broad issues where a sense of urgency existed (a collective impact precondition)—food and housing insecurity, crime

Figure 1. The Preconditions and Pillars for Successful Collective Impact Initiatives



Note. Based on the work of Kania and Kramer (2011) and Hanleybrown et al. (2012).

and safety, migration, and sustainability—and made explicit the intention to bring together individuals across disciplines, roles, and areas of expertise. Based on individual applications, cohorts were curated to bring together people who had not necessarily collaborated previously, and two faculty coleads were selected for each cohort.

The collective impact process was designed to disrupt typical approaches to collaboration. For example, faculty may have been trained to begin projects by centering questions that are fundable to outside agencies or involve collaborators already known to them or in closely related disciplines. Instead, this approach tested a structured, collective impact process facilitated by community engagement staff to support the cohort members in identifying shared goals and building action plans, grounded in the five pillars of collective impact, over a 6-month planning phase. Each of the four 3-hour facilitated sessions held during the planning phase incorporated activities that could build boundary-spanning skills. For instance, the first session's introductions were facilitated in a way to build connections among cohort members and allow participants to determine how they might leverage the roles, networks, and expertise of every member. Participants also engaged in mapping their existing activities/projects on their topic to surface connections across their work. These activities are reflective of boundary-spanning technical-practical and socioemotional orientations. Additionally, the inclusion of community partners from the outset was intended to ensure alignment with community interests in all elements of the cohorts' action plan designs. Following the planning period, cohorts then tracked their achievements over a subsequent implementation phase. The original timeline asked cohorts to commit to 2 years of collaboration, which would have concluded at the end of 2020; however, disruptions caused by the COVID-19 crisis led to extending work through 2022.

The Current Study

The cohort program described above was developed based on the belief that a collective impact process could seed community–university collaboration by helping faculty, staff, students, and community members connect across disciplines and roles, build shared aspirations, and ultimately take meaningful action together. The literature on boundary spanning suggests that a collective impact process should simultaneously support faculty and staff to develop the boundary-spanning skills necessary for high-quality community-engaged work. In our roles supporting community-engaged

work on campus, this potential to build faculty and staff boundary-spanning skills seemed essential to strong institutional community engagement, given the important role that faculty and staff play in creating opportunities for community–university collaboration. For example, faculty and staff willingness to mentor students and center community partners in community-engaged scholarship is essential. Thus, we sought to examine whether the collective impact cohort program supported faculty boundary-spanning behaviors. We took advantage of data collected as part of routine research and evaluation of the new program to examine whether the collective impact process elicited discussion of boundary-spanning behaviors in interviews with 23 faculty and staff collective impact cohort members.

Methods

Study procedures were approved by a university Institutional Review Board. The 37 faculty and staff who had participated in the collective impact cohort process at any point from 2018 to 2021 received email invitations to participate in the study. Notably, there was attrition of faculty and staff from the cohorts over time, due in part to COVID-19 disruptions to the timeline. Twenty-three faculty and staff agreed to participate in a one-hour, semistructured interview, conducted by a graduate research assistant. Participants responded to open-ended questions related to the strengths and limitations of this new approach to collaboration, the impact their collective impact cohorts had on the university and the community, and how their collective impact cohort experience influenced their teaching and research practices.

Interview responses were analyzed using content analysis principles (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006). To understand whether and how participants discussed the impact of the cohort process on their boundary-spanning capacities, we conducted two analyses. First, we looked for themes that arose within each of our interview questions—description and perceptions of the collective impact process, impacts on teaching and research, recommendations, and leadership. Then, using a deductive coding process grounded in the boundary-spanning framework, we examined the interviews for the four categories of boundary-spanning behaviors: (1) technical-practical orientation, (2) socioemotional orientation, (3) community orientation, and (4) organizational orientation (Sandmann et al., 2014).

We adapted the survey items identified by Mull (2014) to measure the four constructs, the categories of boundary-spanning behaviors. These items informed the descriptions of behaviors we were looking for when coding the interviews for the four categories (See Table 2). Interview participants were not asked explicit questions about these boundary-spanning behaviors; rather, we were interested in understanding whether or how such activities and behaviors might be described by the cohort participants. Additionally, we also looked for mentions of the organizational dynamics—that is, the institutional policies, practices, or structures that had an impact on participants' boundary-spanning capacity and/or their suggestions for future support.

Practicing Reflexivity

We share our reflections on our roles in the collective impact cohort process to shed light on the feelings, opinions, and experiences that shaped our approach to this study. Two of the authors are university staff and one is a tenured faculty member and administrator; all are in positions charged with supporting the professional development of faculty, staff, and students who seek to use community-engaged methods. At the time of data collection, the fourth author was a graduate student in a position focused on assessment of community-engaged work. Collectively, the authors' work focuses on supporting individuals in building the skills necessary to perform public good work using the best practices in community engagement and to advance inter- and multidisciplinary collaboration with community partners to address diverse public issues. They have provided essential backbone support to community-engaged collective impact efforts using adaptive leadership to advance both individual and collective work. Two of the authors led the design of the collective impact cohort process, including facilitating the planning sessions.

It is essential to recognize the inherent professional biases that may arise from our roles, particularly as facilitators and designers of the collective impact cohort process. Although our experiences inform the study's design, our intention is to critically examine the experiences and perceptions

Table 2. Items Measuring Boundary-Spanning Behaviors

Construct	Item
Technical-practical orientation	• Applying skills to new situations • Designing processes for projects • Determining solutions for challenges • Facilitating meetings between individuals or groups • Identifying barriers to success • Identifying issues in communication • Identifying resources to support projects • Managing projects
Socioemotional orientation	• Brokering resources among individuals or groups • Building capacity among individuals • Building trust with people you interact with • Identifying expertise in individuals • Maintaining relationships with a variety of individuals • Negotiating power among individuals • Resolving conflict among other individuals • Supporting others in their accomplishments and challenges
Community orientation	• Advocating for organizational policy that supports the community • Communicating the community's interests to others • Developing partnerships that benefit the community • Finding ways to meet community needs with organization partners • Identifying expertise in the organization to support the community • Representing the community's perspective • Translating organizational information to the community • Utilizing information to support the community
Organizational orientation	• Advocating for community policy that supports the organization • Communicating the organization's interests to others • Developing partnerships that benefit the organization • Finding ways to meet organization needs with community partners • Identifying expertise in the community to support the organization • Representing the organization's perspective • Translating community information to the organization • Utilizing information to support the organization

Note. Adapted from *Boundary-Spanning Behaviors of Individuals Engaged with the U.S. Military Community*, by C. D. Mull, 2014, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Georgia, pp. 78–79. Copyright 2014 by C. D. Mull.

of those who participated in the collective impact cohorts using rigorous methods. By acknowledging these potential biases, we strive for transparency and encourage a nuanced interpretation of our findings within the broader context of higher education community engagement and university–community boundary spanning.

Results

We describe the boundary-spanning themes that arose from the interviews with faculty and staff participants of the four collective impact cohorts, including overall perceptions of the cohort experiences as well as four categories of boundary-spanning behaviors (community orientation, organizational orientation, socioemotional leadership, and technical-practical skills), and the organizational dynamics that support boundary spanning.

Participants shared a strong sense of the collective impact process's potential to unite diverse university and community members to address complex and nuanced social issues in a new way. For example, one participant described the collective impact process as follows:

> This process was really thinking about the grand challenges or issues . . . [and] how we could, not only use and apply and maybe leverage expertise of various folks across campus but also working in collaboration with community groups who are already doing a lot of this work and seeing how we might align towards a common goal or purpose.

Furthermore, participants discussed the disruptive nature of the cohort approach insofar as it departed from conventional collaboration processes, which often focus on identifying the "right" people to bring together on a predefined project. They perceived this approach as original and challenging while also offering new modes of engaging diverse viewpoints, troubleshooting problems in large groups, and employing critical and adaptive thinking. Participants described the process as painful or tedious but worth sticking it out and trusting that the outcomes on the other side of the planning period were well worth the challenges.

Community Orientation

Of the behaviors relating to community orientation, the collective impact process might be particularly well-suited to support the development of the skills needed to represent the community's perspective while boundary spanning. The importance of ensuring that the community was represented, and community voices were present during all stages of the collective impact process, was a common sentiment. Participants stressed that listening to the community and ensuring that the community's perspective and expertise were represented was central to the process. As one participant said:

> I think we really deferred to community-based expertise . . . and leadership. And I so appreciated that . . . we had voices on our cohort who were constantly calling for local expertise, or on the ground expertise, or the expertise of lived experience to inform our next steps.

Participants also stressed that the collective impact process encouraged faculty to take a step back and follow the community's lead. A participant remarked, "[Projects] were driven directly by community members and partnerships . . . to kind of let go, to feel like [the university] was letting go but providing funding and some good backbone support." Another participant said they "gain[ed] confidence and ability to be able to lead from behind."

The centrality of community-identified interests and needs was then married with expertise from the university. Faculty and staff participants described how they expanded their capacity to find ways to flexibly meet community needs and to leverage university resources, both key community-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors as described by Mull (2014). One participant spoke to this directly, saying:

> I've been a [scholar] for 15 or 20 years, and this was a unique experience and one that I really appreciated. The flexibility, the ability to run a project, but to be able to pivot seamlessly throughout that project because the emphasis was on community needs rather than funder goals or proposal priorities was totally unique.

Organizational Orientation

Participants described positive institutional impacts of the cohort approach, such as supporting new, sustainable, and meaningful connections and reinforcing existing relationships among students, staff, and faculty across campus. Participants saw these impacts as long-term effects of the process that benefited the entire university. As one participant noted:

> It's brought together people from across campus who might not have otherwise had an opportunity to work with one another, and . . . there will probably be some lasting relationships, working relationships with folks . . . a potentially good outcome or impact on [the university] is seeing these working relationships flourish, which might lead to other things down the line.

Participants grew to appreciate, and in some cases became more enthusiastic about, collaborating with people across disciplines, institutions, and the community. One participant remarked:

> It's made a tremendous impact for me at [the university] in the sense that I've . . . gotten to know a lot more people across the university. I have found ways to work with people from across the university . . . [to] find projects that would bring more people together in a kind of collective impact way.

Others stated that this process has helped them find ways to meet institutional needs in collaboration with the community, especially in the context of the university's emphasis on student learning. One participant spoke specifically about how the collective impact approach "show[ed] how very local projects and local learning is also exceptionally good at teaching intercultural sensitivity and cultural humility and power and privilege."

Socioemotional Orientation

Another common theme participants reflected upon was the blurring of lines between the collective impact cohort process and other activities in which they were engaged. Participants shared how relationships were established and flourished through the collective impact process. These relationships led to a variety of activities within and beyond the cohort such that some participants at times felt unable to distinguish what activities could be uniquely attributed to the cohort. One participant said, "I have strong connections with people that I met in the cohort that have gone beyond the cohort and have been really great . . . the relationship building and network building was really phenomenal."

Such porous boundaries of projects may be a benefit in that participants demonstrate their ability to develop and maintain relationships that defy rigid categorization and instead use them to build trust and leverage expertise and support for the greatest community benefit. Identifying and allowing space for the expertise of others was an often-cited positive attribute of the process. One participant spoke favorably of the process's emphasis on "acknowledging that everyone was bringing something important to the group and trying to determine what those strengths were." Another said, "The group was really . . . welcoming additional skill and knowledge and expertise and . . . it's a beautiful thing when you can take an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary collaborative approach to a complex issue."

Participants spoke of the importance of collaborating with individuals with a diversity of expertise and viewpoints, whether reflecting lived experience, skill sets, or knowledge bases. Bringing together such individuals as part of the process helped them become more aware of how this diversity benefited their own work. Additionally, the cohort process allowed participants to develop new skills to negotiate power and navigate differences across disciplines and roles. For example, one participant said they "really appreciated the diversity of viewpoints and vantage points . . . [it] illuminat[ed] the ways that so many folks can care about a certain issue or topic area from such different vantage points."

Participants also shared advice for future cohort participants, which largely focused on socioemotional boundary-spanning skills. For example, the most common piece of advice was to join the cohort with an open mind. Participants said to "be open-minded about the process" and, "[it is important] having an open mind, knowing what skills you bring, what skills you could stand to develop," while bringing together "a group of people who are really dedicated

and capable and sort of seasoned or open to working collaboratively." Three additional recurring pieces of advice were to listen to others' viewpoints, provide input, and be flexible.

Technical-Practical Orientation

Participants drew inspiration from the design of the collective impact process itself, expressing interest in adapting the process of bringing multiple people and communities together to benefit their own work, especially teaching. A common theme expressed by participants was that they felt overwhelmed at first, but appreciated the broad scope of the process, starting with a big central idea, then diving into data, and then into action. The faculty coleads of each cohort reflected on how the experience impacted their understanding of leadership. Faculty described areas of learning and confidence-building ranging from how to facilitate diverse groups to using deliberative decision-making processes. One colead shared that they "learned how to incorporate different viewpoints and understanding how different disciplines approach issues and problem-solving." Participants described the flexibility offered in the planning process as a double-edged sword—great to have so much opportunity, but at times also paralyzing or fracturing. In the end, many participants viewed this process as an experience where they learned new collaborative skills and expressed interest in emulating the process moving forward. For example, one participant said:

> There's always talk about, you know, ensuring that everyone is participating and hearing all voices and all of that, but this process was one that really required that and there's no getting around it, you absolutely had to learn to work together and then again to evaluate everyone's strengths and differences, and so I think that's something that I can really reflect on in the classroom and leverage in some ways. . . . So that's something that's really got me thinking about different ways of bringing those types of opportunities into the classroom and the benefits that could result.

Taking part in the cohort allowed participants to gain skills in facilitating meetings between different groups grounded in reciprocity. For example, one participant said:

> I've been able to use a lot of what I've learned . . . from the collective impact cohort in talking to students about the importance of reciprocity and of making sure that the voices of the people that you're in collaboration with are heard and to really think through those power dynamics . . . being in the large cohort and watching how we engaged with community members and various other constituents helped me think through that.

Others indicated that they gained skills in identifying both barriers to success and how to overcome those barriers collaboratively. One participant stated, "There were learnings about blind spots and gaps in my own field's approach, as well as other fields," and another participant remarked, "We developed an intimate understanding of . . . issues . . . and from there, we identified . . . pain points . . . and other sort of design practices in order to identify courses of action for addressing need or pain points."

Participants also believed such boundary-spanning skills gained through the cohort experience would impact their teaching by fostering their commitment to community-engaged methods, boosting their confidence, and introducing new tools (e.g., language to describe collaboration) and experiences to share with students. The ability to apply the skills gained to new situations is a feature of the boundary-spanning technical-practical orientation. Faculty explored themes of growth and openness that would likely affect their teaching by promoting cross-disciplinary thinking and creating new ways for considering space for diverse perspectives and voices.

Participants also perceived that the cohort experience generated new projects and increased knowledge and confidence in approaching current projects. However, not all feedback reflected positive impact on research and creative work. For example, some participants expressed frustration over projects not aligning closely with their research focus. Others who were already

engaged in community-oriented methods before the cohort found less significant influence on their future scholarship.

Organizational Dynamics

The structures, programs, and processes of the university, the engagement office leading the program, and the collective impact cohort method itself influenced the experience of boundary spanning for participants. Faculty shared recommendations about the cohort process, such as increasing clarity and structure, centering community partners, and shortening the planning period. Participants also underscored the importance of backbone support. Backbone support was conceived of in several ways. Participants recognized and valued the logistical and administrative planning and the scaffolded, structured activities that brought everyone together and kept the process moving. For example, one participant said, "I really liked the way it was facilitated and it was just this perfect blend of having [the engagement office's] support to create a container and a structure but also letting the group kind of define itself."

Trust and a sense of being valued were common themes in the participants' discussion of backbone support. Participants expressed that the backbone support, which provided the structures but did not dictate the direction, conveyed an institutional belief that they could accomplish something big together. One participant said, "I felt valued in the process by the trust and freedom." Another participant noted that "the backbone support was really vital to our cohort . . . I felt like [the engagement office] was supporting us throughout the process and we were able to really live into our goals and the experience because we had that solid support." Investment from the university, in the process and the participants, reinforced this sense of being valued and trusted. One participant noted that they were "pleasantly surprised to realize that there was funding set aside." They continued to say,

> It felt like a wicked investment like, not just in a project . . . [but] investment in the process . . . and so it did feel like kind of an acknowledgment of trust in the process and what individual groups might have come up with.

Another participant remarked on all these aspects of backbone support:

> I think the selection of the leaders was really very smart and really great choices, so they really continued and didn't give up on the process and were, kept us on track. So, so that worked really well, but also that I never felt like [the engagement office] was looking over our shoulders or kind of pressuring us or trying to influence or shape the direction. And that that felt really meaningful like it really felt like, no, this is an investment in our ability to do this work with community members and with students and with other organizations and . . . I just felt really trusted like it.

This remark highlights the important role of the backbone support as an influential champion, a collective impact precondition, who trusts the people and the process and allows for the natural unfolding of the plan of action.

Boundary Spanning in the Context of COVID-19

Given the centrality of flexibility and fluidity to effective boundary spanning, it is important to note that the collective impact cohorts' work overlapped with the beginning of the COVID-19 public health crisis in 2020. Participants in the study were asked to reflect on how COVID-19 impacted their work, given the enormous effects of COVID-19 on society at large. A theme that emerged in line with the technical-practical orientation of boundary spanning was that COVID-19 substantially impacted cohorts' abilities to implement the action items they had developed in the planning phase: Community organizations had shut down for safety reasons, and in-person events became an impossibility. Although these changes were a major setback for some cohorts, others described being able to pivot and enact their plans differently. One participant said:

> We held a virtual forum. That was one of the things that our group brought to the community partners, the ability to sort of offer this experience and hosting a virtual conference . . . and it was amazing, and I think it like expanded the reach and accessibility.

Another theme that emerged, aligned with boundary spanning's community orientation, was how COVID-19 impacted the ability of continued community partnership. Participants described that cohorts were able to shift to online communication and meetings, which allowed for increased ease of communication with community partners, particularly regional community partners who weren't geographically close to the university. At the same time, participants described wanting face-to-face interactions. One participant said, "For campus or off-campus partners, it makes it easier for them to participate, but you still . . . miss something I feel by not having the in-person interaction."

A final theme that emerged related to community orientation was how COVID-19 underscored the necessity of the work they were doing. One participant expressed, "I think it brought more urgency to it," referring to the cohort's chosen issue. Another said, "Grand challenges that have a lot to do with structured inequalities are really heightened, were heightened in this moment . . . and continue to be." Overall, boundary spanning in the context of COVID-19 challenged faculty's boundary-spanning capacity in unique ways, leading to innovations in community partnership.

Discussion

Twenty-three faculty and staff shared reflections through semistructured interviews on their participation in a novel collective impact cohort process designed to advance community–university collaboration. The interview protocol, administered as part of program evaluation and research into this new program, was not explicitly designed to assess the boundary-spanning model. Nevertheless, participants' comments touched on all four categories of boundary-spanning behaviors articulated by Sandmann et al. (2014), including technical-practical, socioemotional, community, and organizational orientations. The presence of these categories of behaviors reinforces the centrality of boundary-spanning concepts to efforts to advance community–university collaboration. Furthermore, boundary-spanning concepts were relevant even in the context of activities affected by the COVID-19 crisis. Participant reflections demonstrate the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and underscore the importance of flexibility to sustain resilient community–university partnerships.

The reflections shared by participants have several implications for both theory and practice going forward. First, the presence of boundary-spanning behaviors in the participant narratives suggests that infusing elements of the collective impact process into community engagement trainings and opportunities can help faculty and staff develop the skills needed for high-quality boundary spanning. The responses from cohort participants described above offer invaluable insights to guide future collaborations. The 6-month planning phase emerged as a cornerstone of colearning, offering a "foundational" process for each cohort's work together. Because the planning phase gave time for teams to form relationships and spend significant time creating a common agenda and shared measurement before diving into action, cohort participants' boundary-spanning behaviors and skills across the four categories were enhanced.

In addition, boundary-spanning concepts can provide important checks on collaborative approaches adapted for university–community collaboration. For example, the collective impact process has been critiqued for favoring work by nonprofit organization staff over community members' lived experiences when addressing community issues (Cabaj & Weaver, 2016). A core skill for authentic community engagement boundary spanning is to honor the knowledge, skills, and traditions of community-based experts (Purcell et al., 2020). Thus, bringing the boundary-spanning framework into conversation with the collective impact process has the potential to bring attention to issues of power and the centrality of community voices in community–university collaboration. Indeed, the study results demonstrate that faculty and staff recognized changes in their own understanding of the importance of ensuring that community voices were central to the cohorts' process.

Although it is certainly clear that community engagement boundary spanners should possess adequate skills to center community voices, it is equally important to know how to network, connect, and leverage university expertise and resources. Engagement opportunities that provide ways for internal actors to align efforts, such that they might provide better value and greater impacts in

collaboration with communities, are needed (Smith et al., 2017). The faculty and staff narratives revealed that the cohort process supported faculty and staff to build connections across departments and disciplines to accomplish the work of the cohort—and beyond. Indeed, the narratives reflected ways that faculty and staff viewed themselves as having developed the important organizational orientation skills and behaviors of boundary spanning to support collaborative work more broadly. Although participants found it challenging at times to maintain continuous communication and identify shared measurement within their collective impact processes, they ultimately described gaining a deeper familiarity with other university actors and an increased ability to work together to advance community-engaged collaborative work.

Of course, advancing collaborative work requires socioemotional skills, particularly in terms of building authentic relationships. The data from this study reflected the potential for the collective impact process to foster socioemotional skills, particularly in terms of recognizing and valuing the time that building meaningful collaborative relationships requires as well as the importance of shared activities. For example, the narratives revealed that faculty and staff found the pace of the planning phase to be frustratingly slow on occasion. Nonetheless, participants also viewed the time that the cohort process allowed for relationship-building to be a highlight of the experience. Further, the socioemotional orientation skills and behaviors of boundary spanning were fostered through the cohorts' intentional focus on planning together and aligning participant activities. Collective impact's emphasis on mutually reinforcing activities makes space for individuals to contribute their engaged work in a coordinated way through an intentional plan of action, which inherently calls for skills in negotiating power and resolving conflicts.

Beyond the socioemotional orientation, participants reflected on a diverse set of skills related to the technical-practical orientation of boundary spanning, including their ability to identify and address issues to maximize impact, such as barriers to success, communication processes, and management of projects. The facilitated planning process of the cohorts emphasized the pillars of collective impact, including consistent communication that builds trust and collecting data to measure results and assess impact. Because the facilitators provided backbone support and led activities for each cohort to guide them in developing their common agenda, shared measurement strategies, and identification of continuous communication structures, it is not surprising that the skills and behaviors of the technical-practical orientation of boundary spanning were cited so frequently. Such skills not only supported faculty and staff participants' work within the cohort, but had reverberations for their teaching, scholarship, and other engagement projects, deepening their ability to serve as boundary spanners. However, some of the faculty who were already experienced in using community-engaged methods found the collective impact process to have less significance for their future scholarship, an aspect that suggests a potential drawback of the collective impact approach in fostering boundary-spanning leadership among seasoned faculty members.

A vital feature of successful collective impact initiatives is backbone support, or what Cabaj and Weaver (2016) referred to in their paper advancing "Collective Impact 3.0" as *containers for change*, the infrastructure required to ensure change is possible. Engagement offices often fill such a role, helping to mobilize resources, cultivate relationships, establish measurement practices, support aligned activities, and, with input from multiple stakeholders, determine a guiding vision and strategy for engagement across a university. Such backbone organizations walk a line between strong leadership and "behind the scenes" work that allows participants to own the success of the initiative (Hanleybrown et al., 2012). Our findings reaffirm the centrality of such containers or offices not only in collective impact efforts, but also in supporting the boundary-spanning capacities of faculty and staff. In this way, engagement offices may serve as the influential champion, a precondition of collective impact, in addition to providing backbone support.

Finally, the narratives revealed practical considerations for the future use of collective impact processes to advance community–university collaboration. For example, the 6-month planning phase emerged as a cornerstone of colearning, offering a "foundational" process for each cohort's work together. Because the planning phase gave time for teams to form relationships and spend significant time creating a common

agenda and shared measurement before diving into action, cohort participants' boundary-spanning behaviors and skills across the four categories were enhanced.

Limitations

We examined boundary-spanning behaviors in the context of interviews collected for program evaluation and research on faculty and staff experiences of a collective impact process; however, several limitations should be considered in interpreting the results. First, we interviewed 23 (62%) of the 37 faculty and staff who participated in cohorts; thus, the perspectives of a sizable minority of cohort members are not reflected here. That limitation is mitigated to some degree by the research focus, which was on whether the cohort process supported boundary-spanning behaviors. Second, the semistructured interviews were not designed to investigate the specific concepts articulated by Sandmann et al. (2014). Thus, this data set offered an opportunity to explore ways in which boundary-spanning concepts emerge in faculty and staff reflections following a professional development experience designed to advance community–university collaboration. We are able to comment on the centrality of boundary-spanning behaviors given the concepts emerged without prompting, though we are not able to draw conclusions about the frequency or impact of boundary-spanning behaviors in the collective impact cohort process. Third, we focused on interviews with faculty and staff because of the nature of the data set available, so community perspectives on boundary-spanning as it relates to faculty and staff development are absent.

Future research could address these limitations. Additionally, to address the potential drawback of the collective impact process that this research encountered with experienced community-engaged faculty, further investigation could focus on the efficacy of the cohort model in promoting boundary-spanning leadership relative to participants' previous familiarity with community engagement. Such research could explore whether providing additional leadership opportunities in the collective impact cohort process for experienced faculty, such as serving as faculty coleads, leads to additional boundary-spanning technical-practical skills and significant influence on these faculty members' future scholarship.

Summary and Conclusions

Faculty and staff participating in a collective impact cohort process designed to advance new collaborations for public problem-solving described positive changes in their perceptions of and confidence about their boundary-spanning capacity for successful community–university engagement. Research on their perceptions of the process revealed several key practices for institutions seeking to support boundary spanners, including the importance of backbone support from community engagement staff and a structured process to facilitate authentic collaborative planning and action. Furthermore, these data reinforce the centrality of boundary-spanning concepts to higher education efforts to seed community–university collaboration.

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Author Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Cara DiEnno, Center for Community Engagement to advance Scholarship & Learning, University of Denver, Community Commons, Suite 1100, 2055 E. Evans Ave, Denver, Colorado, 80208. Email: Cara.DiEnno@du.edu

About the Authors

Cara Marie DiEnno, PhD, *(https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8245-2948) is the executive director in the University of Denver's Center for Community Engagement to advance Scholarship and Learning (CCESL). Her research interests focus on environmental communication, concentrating on urban residents' interactions with city greenspaces. She holds a PhD in human dimensions of natural resources from Colorado State University.*

Victoria M. Atzl, PhD, *(https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2675-4313) is a licensed clinical psychologist and senior instructor in psychiatry at the University of Rochester Medical Center. Dr. Atzl serves as the assistant director of the HEAL Collaborative (Healing through Health, Education, Advocacy and Law), a multidisciplinary team which provides mental health treatment, advocacy, and legal consultation to those who have experienced intimate partner violence. Her research and clinical work focus on providing equitable and accessible mental healthcare to those who have experienced interpersonal trauma. She received her PhD in clinical psychology from the University of Denver.*

Anna S. Antoniou, PhD, *(https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5680-2382) is an assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology, and the assistant faculty director of the Center for Braiding Indigenous Knowledges and Science, at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Her research uses community-based participatory methods to mobilize archaeological research so that it best serves Indigenous communities' interests, needs, and priorities. She earned her PhD in anthropology from the University of Michigan.*

Anne P. DePrince, PhD, *(https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5913-9793) is a distinguished university professor in the Psychology Department and associate vice provost for Public Good Strategy and Research at the University of Denver. Anne's research interests focus on trauma and intimate violence with an emphasis on working with community partners to identify research questions that can inform policy and practice. Anne earned her PhD in psychology from the University of Oregon.*

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