Fluid Practices of University–Community Engagement Boundary Spanners at a Land-Grant University

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Abstract

Research on higher education community engagement (HECE) rarely places university or institutional voices in conversation with the community partners' voices. Boundary-spanning frameworks such as Weerts and Sandmann's (2010) for universities and Adams's (2014) for community partners help boundary spanners, but such models draw boundaries between community and university spanners and the beneficiaries of their work. Contrary to a resource-based view of value creation, which posits that organizations with more resources create more value, beneficiary-centric views see the beneficiary as central to value creation (Lepak et al., 2007). In this essay we incorporate a beneficiary-centric lens into HECE boundary-spanning practices to advance a critical theory of value creation that considers for whom, for what, and to what effect beneficiaries may create value (Le Ber & Branzei, 2010). We advocate for an integrated framework that unites university and community partners and places the beneficiary at the center of all engagement efforts.

Keywords: community engagement, beneficiary voice, university boundary spanning, community boundary spanning, public engagement

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L and-grant universities have historically led higher education community engagement, since land-grant institutions were "founded to serve the public through their education, research, and engagement work, [and] they provide life-changing education to students, advance society-shaping innovations, and engage communities to tackle our most stubborn challenges" (APLU, 2023, para. 1). Aligning academic research and teaching to tackle community challenges requires boundary spanners, understood here as individuals who can represent the university in the community and represent the community in the university (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). A wide array of practitioners, educators, advocates, and leaders identify as boundary spanners and must navigate the intersection of knowledge, practice, and community dynamics as they operate in a "third space" between academic and professional spheres (Whitchurch, 2013). Two authors of this essay identify as higher education community engagement boundary spanners, and two authors identify as community boundary spanners, and all four of us are deeply committed to our double lives where we seek to advance the civic mission of our land-grant university while advancing change in our community. Each author has written a portion of this essay individually to unpack our distinct relationships to our boundary-spanning practices.

Weerts and Sandmann (2010) outlined four types of higher education boundary spanners in their formative boundary-spanning framework—the community-based problem solver, the engagement champion, the technical expert, and the internal engagement advocate. Weerts and Sandmann acknowledged that these four types of spanners do not occupy blunt categories and may lean toward one direction or another;

however, their framework focuses only on academic boundary spanners. Recognizing this gap, Weerts and Sandmann called for further boundary-spanning research that is community-centric and examines how community partners build bridges to institutions. In response, Adams (2014) created a framework for community spanners in engaged partnerships, identifying four roles that community boundary spanners may fit into: the engaged employee, the reciprocity recipient, the community champion, and the connection champion.

Adams's (2014) model starts to illustrate the ways that community spanners contribute to boundary-spanning activities, responding to critiques that community-engaged scholarship has a disproportionate focus on the university partner. However, we argue that even when community-engaged scholarship does include community voices, community partners' perspectives are often not in conversation with university partners' perspectives. These existing boundary-spanning models represent university and community goals as divergent; the models fail to align community and university priorities within the same framework, even though in practice, university and community spanners must be in alignment in order to accomplish the shared goals of their mutually beneficial partnerships. We find potential alignment in the theoretical concept of the beneficiary. In this essay, we advocate for an integrated framework that merges the Adams (2014) and Weerts and Sandmann (2010) models, emphasizing the need for a beneficiary-centered, practice-based approach. In doing so, we propose reimagining the boundary-spanning framework, placing the community's benefits at the forefront of university partnerships.

Literature Review

In this literature review, we will briefly outline current work on boundary spanning in higher education community engagement (HECE) before expanding our scope to the concepts of organizational change and leadership. Emerging from fields of management studies in the 1970s, boundary spanning has been understood using an insider/outsider framework in which the primary goal has been to communicate internal priorities to an external audience. Boundary spanners may also serve as external representatives of their organization's mission, values, and priorities (Aldrich & Herker, 1977). Boundary-spanning practices have been described as functioning at both the organizational and individual levels, and those who practice them inhabit influential roles within their organizations (Friedman & Podolny, 1992; Williams, 2012). There have been several efforts to categorize boundary spanners in HECE based, in part, on individual competencies and motivations, including the seminal work by Weerts and Sandmann (2010), who distinguished boundary-spanning roles based on a community or university focus and leadership or practical task orientation, as well as more explicitly competency-based roles defined by Williams (2012) and profiles as described by Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos (2018). Historic and emergent scholarship on HECE competencies was synthesized by Purcell et al. (2020), providing a foundation for future work on engaged practices from the competency-based perspective.

The concept of the organization, as one of the two dominant contexts within which boundary spanning is discussed, has the potential to shift discussions of boundary spanning to allow for more fluid frameworks for boundary-spanning practices. Since early writings in organizational studies, scholars have recognized the organization as a space for praxis (Thompson, 1967). More recent work has continued to advance the question of how organizations maintain their competitive advantage through changing circumstances, referred to as the organization's "dynamic capability" (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008). In this view, organizations serve as an agreement or relationship between publics, in line with what scholars in public relations call an organization–public relationship (OPR; Cheng, 2018). To view organizations in this manner is to commit to a social constructionist epistemology, where knowledge is coproduced through social relations, and through which the organization can be understood as a discursive formation between publics holding agreement. This framework for understanding the organization as discursively produced is also seen through a critical lens whereby the organization reflects power relations. To consider boundary-spanning practices in this way recognizes a more fluid set of relations constituting community organizations, organizations of higher education, and emergent organizational forms, formal and informal.

Similarly, theoretical developments in leadership studies have the potential to challenge competency-based paradigms of boundary-spanning roles and advance critical frameworks for boundary-spanning practices. The practice of boundary spanning has been understood as a function of leadership since early scholarship (Aldrich & Herker, 1977). Because it is a contextually dependent practice, theories of boundary spanning should also recognize work in the field of leadership studies, which has problematized entitive, competency-based models of leadership to advance relational models of leadership and models of leadership-as-practice (Carroll et al., 2008). Pertinent to the practice of boundary spanning in HECE, contemporary work on leadership also explores how specific entities or practices in organizations can best position an organization to adapt to changing conditions so that it may survive in the face of complex challenges, including wicked problems. The complexity leadership framework for organizational adaptability offers one perspective on how change emerges through complex adaptive systems (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018), which can be understood as networks of semiautonomous agents who interact in ways that produce systemwide patterns influencing future interactions through feedback loops (Dooley, 1997; Eoyang & Holladay, 2013; Lichtenstein, 2014). Individuals experience complex adaptive systems relationally. In line with much engagement literature, leadership scholars recognize systems of power and view knowledge as emerging from leaderful community practices rather than flowing unidirectionally from institutions of higher education to the community (Raelin, 2011). By considering leadership as practice, competency-based engagement paradigms can become practice-based paradigms from which knowledge emerges from within community settings (Carroll et al., 2008).

Although advancements in organizational and leadership studies have significant implications for boundary-spanning frameworks, the phenomenon of cross-sector collaborations reveals a theoretical gap that may be bridged by centering a particular public, the beneficiary, and the way their voice is represented in the organizational praxis. This development would have implications for leadership and organizational theory and practice for the development of mutually beneficial cross-sector collaborations, including HECE activities. To develop a concept of the beneficiary within HECE frameworks is to recognize a sense of value produced within and by HECE and recognize that stakeholders garner value from boundary-spanning activities, often in unequal and inequitable ways (Lepak et al., 2007). Beneficiaries are themselves valuable, contributing to the production of value by organizations, but are often ignored or underutilized (Coff, 1999). Contrary to the resource-based view of value creation, which posits that those organizations with more resources create more value, beneficiary-centric views see the beneficiary as central to value creation (Lepak et al., 2007). By incorporating a beneficiary-centric lens into HECE boundary-spanning practices, our work continues to advance a critical theory of value creation that considers for whom, for what, and to what effect beneficiaries may (or may not) create value (Le Ber & Branzei, 2010, p. 600). With a more developed concept of beneficiary voice in the field of organizational adaptability, scholars and practitioners may apply a critical leadership framework in the context of cross-sector collaborations, including boundary-spanning practices involving HECEs. In the next section, we share insights from our unique experiences bridging university and community domains, advocating for boundary-spanning models that prioritize beneficiaries' voices in order to build truly impactful and genuine campus–community relationships.

Incorporating Fluidity Within Boundary-Spanning Models

Prioritizing Beneficiaries in Our Community-Engaged Work

Beneficiaries of Veterinary Community Outreach

As a veterinarian and postdoctoral fellow at a land-grant institution, I, Ronald Orchard, have an ethical obligation to provide for my animal patients. However, I am ultimately working with a human to make decisions regarding diagnostics and treatment plans based on the role of the animal and the resources of the human. I am primarily a small animal veterinarian focusing on companion dogs and cats; however, colleagues of mine focus on animals for commercial or competition purposes. In any of these practice contexts, these animals are "central to the value creation" of the community engagement. Due to the limited, albeit still present, agency of these animals, it would

be inappropriate to refer to them as community partners or clients, but still they benefit from the partnership.

I have taken an oath "to use my knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through protection of animal health and welfare." Historically, this gave us the concept of One Health, a public health framework that saw the connection between healthy people, healthy animals, and healthy environments. The concept has now evolved to One Welfare, which works in concert with One Health. The emphasis for this new phrase was to increase inclusivity, because One Health was criticized for still being focused on humans. One Welfare also emphasizes positive affective states, not just a bare minimum of being healthy. The new triad is now animal welfare, human well-being, and environment conservation.

In practice, I provide essential health care services to animals and One Welfare transdisciplinary teams. A beneficiary of my work may be a practitioner of a different discipline who is able to have a breakthrough with a pet owner solely because of the trust I built and shared. A beneficiary may be the employer who hires one of my pet owners after receiving job placement assistance at our One Welfare event. A beneficiary may even be the local ecosystem that gains biodiversity from fewer free-roaming, unowned cats thanks to spay and neuter.

These types of spay/neuter programs can also be viewed through a public health lens. The cats that are seen by programs like this often receive treatment for intestinal parasites, which could be acquired by humans via fecal to oral transmission. Additionally, these cats are vaccinated against the rabies virus. The United States has seen greater success than other countries in controlling this disease in part due to programs where animals are vaccinated concurrently with spay or neuter.

Recognizing the reach of work like this does not just give us a more accurate understanding of our impact, but also allows us to foster new partnerships. When I am able to explain to human medical practitioners the big picture motivations for our work, like ecology and public health, it begins to open their minds to the potential for partnership. This practice orientation creates the conditions for a space to vision creatively. Moving from a competency-based analytical framework (Williams, 2012) focused on individuals' causality and performance to one where cause and effect are acknowledged as the product of a team allows us to more accurately describe the work (Carroll et al., 2008). Recognizing multiple beneficiaries allows me to build transdisciplinary partnerships more effectively than if I were to share a narrow view of my practice. This broader view then expands our options for funding opportunities. Many of the grants that I have received have been awarded because of the multidisciplinary focus of our work, which has sometimes made our work eligible for funding opportunities historically unavailable to us. By reframing our work's focus on these pluralistic beneficiaries, we can more accurately share the scope of our work, increasing the opportunities for our scholarship and society.

Beneficiaries of Social Work Partnerships

My story as a social worker and community partner starts with a simple invitation that was extended to me, Cassidy Moreau. In May 2022, I was approached by a friend to come speak to veterinary students taking a community outreach elective course that he taught. What came of that simple visit evolved into a beautiful partnership between me as a social worker and Dr. Orchard, a veterinarian. The original plan was simply to share my experiences of working with unhoused individuals to help veterinary students with limited experience working with disenfranchised populations—such as those in a lower socioeconomic class, those with substance use, as well as those living with severe and persistent mental health diagnoses—be better able to communicate and work with these populations. Many of these students had limited exposure to the populations described. The hope was that sharing my experience would give insight to students to see and hear a perspective they had not heard before.

However, when viewing the partnership between me and Dr. Orchard through a beneficiary-centric lens, it is clear that many groups benefit. Students gain essential knowledge and skills from my expertise as the social worker, which enables them to work effectively with populations they might not typically encounter. This experience not only impacts these communities positively by being served by compassionate, empathetic veterinary students, but also enriches the students' future professional practices, allowing them to influence even more communities. Additionally, the

communities that the students engage with benefit from their inclusive practices, by being seen and validated as clients worthy of access to care for their animals regardless of their circumstances, which helps them to reflect positively on the university's ability to provide practical, inclusive, real-world training. This partnership goes beyond a transactional relationship; it is mutually beneficial, with each interaction creating value for all involved.

Similar to the partnerships described by Le Ber and Branzei (2010), where value creation is significantly enhanced by involving beneficiaries, our collaboration ensures that both students and the communities they serve are actively engaged in the process, leading to more meaningful and impactful outcomes (Le Ber & Branzei, 2010).

Beneficiaries of Community Writing Partnerships

I, Ania Payne, first began incorporating community-engaged projects into a course that I teach, Workplace Writing, after realizing that such a course could not adequately prepare students to write for a workplace without an experiential learning component. Courses in technical writing—especially at a land-grant institution—have always been a good match for service-learning partnerships due to the practical nature of the course. For technical writing students, "not even the best-written case study or end-of-textbook-chapter-exercise can duplicate the rhetorical complexity that comes from a real human reader trying to solve a problem using a real document" (McEachern, 2001, p. 211). Like McEachern, I initially viewed my students as the beneficiaries of this collaboration, envisioning that the experience of writing and editing documents for these animal shelters, food pantries, wellness coalitions, and community housing developers would provide them with a more valuable experience than they would ever get out of a traditional course.

The first semester of these collaborations functioned on a clientlike model, and the students acted as consultants to their nonprofit partners. The nonprofit clients set a few parameters for the projects, but the students were largely self-directed and presented their final deliverable to their clients at the end of the semester. Afterward, I asked the nonprofit partners to evaluate the students' projects and learned that some of the clients found the students' work valuable, particularly if their organization had flexible guidelines for their written documents. However, many clients mentioned that they were happy to have the experience of mentoring and working with students, but were ultimately unable to use the students' projects because these documents had formatting inconsistencies or did not accurately represent the organization's work, mission, or brand. The students, however, seemed less concerned about their project's usefulness to the organization, and were mostly satisfied if they received a decent grade and got new experiences from working with their nonprofit partners.

Noticing how much time and energy our nonprofit partners were investing in the students, often without getting a usable document in return, I redesigned the project with the nonprofit's staff and community recipients centered as the beneficiaries. Instead of collaborating with four nonprofits a semester, I cut the partnership down and focused on one organization, Habitat for Humanity of the Northern Flint Hills. After several meetings with Habitat's development manager, we arrived at a project that would actually add capacity to the organization: having the students interview and write profile articles about the Habitat homeowners, staff, and board members, rather than having students create more brochures that just filled their dusty filing cabinets. Reenvisioning the project to place the interviewee—the Habitat homeowner, board member, or staff member—as the project's beneficiary, ensured that the community partner played a significant role as a cocreator and coeditor in this newest iteration of the project.

Refocusing the project to place the community partner at the center, rather than the student, resulted in more articles that Habitat could actually share on their social media platforms, and this reframing did not detract from student learning at all. In fact, in final reflections, students recounted how writing this closely with their community partners raised their project's stakes significantly, since they knew that their interviewee would be reading and editing each draft of their article. When the community partner is located solely as an ancillary component to an engagement model, the partnership may replicate what Arnstein (2019) called "consultation" on the ladder of citizen participation, wherein powerholders "restrict the input of citizens' ideas" (p. 28). Unfortunately, many

of my early community partnerships placed my partners on the consultation rung of Arnstein's ladder, since my students and I controlled much of the direction of these early projects. But by refocusing the project on the community beneficiary and involving Habitat staff, board members, and homeowners as active participants who cowrote their profile articles *with* my students, my community partner's level of engagement moved to the top of Arnstein's ladder, toward "citizen control," since the community shared ownership in writing and editing their narratives. In the end, Habitat staff received articles that accurately portrayed their homeowners', board members', and staff members' voices, and the students learned valuable lessons in collaborative community writing.

Connecting Beyond Boundaries: Building Genuine Campus–Community Relationships

Cultivating Trust and Creating Enduring Relationships

As a veterinarian and a postdoctoral fellow at a land-grant institution, I, Ronald Orchard, focus on creating the curriculum and pedagogy for a clinical course called Community Outreach. In this course, senior veterinary students practice veterinary medicine in nontraditional environments, working with populations historically excluded from the benefits of a veterinarian–client–patient relationship. In order to accomplish this mission, this course exclusively works with community partners. We currently have agreements with over 40 partner organizations spanning four states.

My role as boundary spanner in veterinary community outreach extends beyond the immediate benefits of animal health care. In Weerts and Sandmann's (2010) model my role would be categorized as a "technical expert," performing technical–practical tasks with an institutional focus. However, I will argue that assigning this category is an oversimplification; I am both institutionally and community focused, but my focus may tend more toward the community. I recognize the importance of cultivating trust and the need to build enduring relationships with the communities I serve. Whether I am working with a community deeply rooted in agricultural traditions or one shaped by urban complexities, the ability to adapt my approach to align with the specific needs and cultural nuances of each setting is paramount.

In order to build trust, I must understand the layers of beneficiaries my work touches. One example is our work with the Santee Sioux Nation. With their reservation abutting the Nebraska–South Dakota border, it is nearly 70 miles to the nearest veterinarian. We were recruited to work with the tribe thanks to the hard work of one tribe member who works in environmental health. Building trust with this community partner meant aiding in grant applications through writing and data sharing. It also required a willingness to speak with the elders of the tribe to receive approval.

The first two times we came to work with the tribe, the participation was lower than expected. We received many visitors, answered many questions, but did not see as many tribe members as the environmental health officer knew were seeking services. By the third visit something changed and we were busier than ever. The data we collected at that visit showed us three important themes toward building trust with this community: among the community, the power of word of mouth; for us, the importance of follow-through and consistency. A tribe member with a positive experience tells another and transfers some amount of trust for us. Trust is essential for the enduring relationships required for lasting, substantial change at the heart of community-engaged scholarship (Henisz, 2017; Ninan et al., 2024). Trust can be seen as the ultimate manifestation of power (Lukes, 2005; Ninan et al., 2024). By saying we will do something, like return a pet to its owner after spay surgery, we developed loyalty. Showing up at consistent, predictable intervals indicated to the tribe members that this was not a "one and done, feel good event" for us, but we were committed to their community. Understanding and utilizing the power of these beneficiaries is crucial to fully realizing the potential of our work (Coff, 1999; Le Ber & Branzei, 2010).

Even when just looking at this single community partner organization, we can see how a framework with a taxonomy and codification for beneficiaries aids in trust building. In my work, developing this trust is not merely a by-product of my veterinary skills; it is a testament to a commitment to understanding and respecting the cultural intricacies that shape the perspectives and decisions of the individuals I interact with.

Listening to Beneficiary Voices

As the executive director for a Habitat for Humanity affiliate working in Northeastern Kansas, I, Joshua Brewer, am a community housing developer and, in that capacity, organize for social change that empowers low-income residents of my community. Habitat for Humanity International is a nongovernmental organization (NGO) best known for its integrated home construction and mortgage finance operations. Habitat for Humanity affiliate organizations are governed by a local board of directors and perform construction, repair, and mortgage operations in compliance with Habitat for Humanity International policies. I serve as the executive director of an intermediate-sized affiliate in northeast Kansas in a region home to Kansas State University, a historic land-grant institution, and Fort Riley, a large U.S. Army base. In my capacity, I identify as a boundary spanner, responsible for creating and stewarding partnerships, including several partnerships with educational institutions. In my role, I am focused on a clear mission that all of my neighbors have a decent place to live, which guides my decisions. In our most significant boundary-spanning community development efforts—Front Porch Conversations and the Workforce Solar Housing Partnership—we partner with faculty members committed to engagement practices that are mutually beneficial and reciprocal. In both cross-sector collaborations, we seek to empower the beneficiary of our work through pragmatic processes of voice making (Le Ber & Branzei, 2010).

Front Porch Conversations is a neighborhood-level series that operationalizes the Habitat for Humanity Quality of Life Index for Neighborhood Revitalization. This conversation series was the result of a consultation with a Habitat board member who works as a faculty member at Kansas State University. Together, we reviewed the objectives of Neighborhood Revitalization and developed a document called the Front Porch Development Procedure to define roles in the conversations and to ensure that neighbors' voices were appropriately represented. This document functioned as both a mode of development and a mode of inquiry using asset-based community development and participatory action research approaches (Brewer & Kliewer, 2023). The Front Porch Conversation Series engages neighbors to surface community assets so that our agency can join with partner agencies to advance community development alongside or by the neighbors themselves. Our team at Habitat for Humanity of the Northern Flint Hills has also partnered with faculty member Ania Payne from the Kansas State University English Department to incorporate community writing into the Front Porch Conversations, which will be published using an ArcGIS StoryMap.

In each case, the beneficiaries of our work—neighbors and skilled trades students—are at the center of our collaboration with educational partners. Each beneficiary has a voice in the process and shapes the outcomes by their actions. For example, in the Workforce Solar Housing Partnership, students design and construct the homes. Students also address affordability in ways that are important to them, which privileges their values over those of the university or the nonprofit organization within which I work. By centering this particular beneficiary, we have developed homes that are more energy efficient, more durable, and more attractive for community members who will purchase these homes. Similarly, when we engage neighbors in a Front Porch Conversation, our facilitation model centers the neighbor and the gifts, dreams, and concerns that those neighbors may hold. For example, when we pursued a community redevelopment project in a small community, we chose to begin our work by purchasing and demolishing a derelict property across from an elementary school because the neighbors identified that school as the most significant asset in their community and housing as their primary concern. Had we centered our organization as the primary beneficiary or the university as a beneficiary, we would have chosen differently.

These examples speak to a tension that I find between my experience working as a boundary spanner and the Framework for Community Boundary Spanners in Engaged Partnerships (Adams, 2014). In both cases, our nonprofit practitioners worked in coalition with neighbors, university faculty, and students while centering a community-based beneficiary in one case and a student beneficiary in the other. As a community-based boundary spanner and a practitioner of asset-based community development, I see our work as being focused on particular groups who realize value through our partnership, rather than being community *or* university focused. Although those groups may be affiliated with university or com-

munity groups, a model that accounts for beneficiaries and their voice would better reflect how I see my boundary-spanning partnerships.

Incorporating Fluidity Within the Boundary-Spanning Models

Evolving the "Technical Expert"

As a veterinarian, I, Ronald Orchard, am deeply committed to delivering vital health care services to animals in need. Situating back within Weerts and Sandmann's (2010) boundary-spanning literature, I most comfortably operate within the technical expert and community-based problem solver roles. In doing so, I become a bridge between the academic knowledge accrued during my veterinary training and the real-world challenges faced by communities and the partner organizations striving to help. These partners possess attributes described within the Weerts and Sandmann model, and in my experience they have done more to build external political support, or provided more site-based problem support, than those whose jobs assign them such roles at certain institutions. Our communities and the work should be the "bounds" of this scholarship. Admittedly, this model is useful for academics to study academia, which is why, of the four roles described, a community partner does not neatly fit into any. The discourse within this scholarship has evolved to the point where editors of journals focused on this work yearn for the voices of community partners. We need contemporary models adept at describing the nuanced, and not so nuanced, roles these collaborators play.

My sense, as someone working as hard as possible to reify the commitments of a land-grant institution, is that Weerts and Sandmann's (2010) scholarship reflects a bygone era. Hoffman (2016) argued that two forces, social media and demographic shift of scholars, have brought about a sea change. On the one hand, social media has opened the discourse to include historically excluded perspectives, for better and for worse; on the other, the demographic shift has ushered in scholars with a focus on seeking more impact from their work rather than checking the boxes required for tenure and promotion.

Adapting to this twofold change does not mean giving up entirely on Weerts and Sandmann's (2010) model, but it does mean shifting its focus to practitioners and the beneficiaries of their work. "Scholars suffer from an equal inability—or at times even an unwillingness—to span boundaries and translate their work for those who can most benefit; those who will take it and make it real: practitioners" (Hoffman, 2004, p. 213). Although this quote does not convey the reciprocity in knowledge-sharing, it is crucial to community-engaged scholarship. As Wowk et al. (2017) recommended, we need "institutional frameworks that offer more detailed guidance on engaging in complex issues, deepening collaboration with researchers outside of an institute" (p. 4). In the context of their work, "outside" means community partners and beneficiaries.

One recommendation I have for modifying Weerts and Sandmann's (2010) model is to evolve the role of technical expert. For one, as the framework stands, it implies a knowledge dynamic that is incongruous with our tenets as community engagement professionals. We believe that the community also creates knowledge, even technical knowledge, worthy of study and dissemination. Just within my work, the community partner veterinarians have all shown me acceptable alternative diagnostic and therapeutic strategies. My interdisciplinary partners, such as social workers, have given me frameworks for explaining phenomena I see in practice but lacked the language to accurately analyze. My grassroots partners have taught me more about community organizing than any structured course. My Indigenous partners have allowed me to embrace other ways of knowing within my scholarship. As an accomplished technical expert, I give permission to disavow the notion that to be a technical expert is to be "without the strongest social integration skills." On the contrary, my social skills are the attribute that has allowed me to become the effective technical expert and practitioner that I am. The term "technical expert" can be retired and either moved under community-based problem solver or given an updated view of engaged "knowledge creation." As Hoffmann (2016) discussed, if academics are permitted the disciplinary tunnel vision that was the context for Weerts and Sandmann's (2010) "technical expert," "irrelevant" work with limited to no practical applications is developed.

Empowering the Community Partner

After bringing me, Cassidy Moreau, on as a community partner to serve as a social worker for students, faculty, and patients

of the institution's community veterinary services, Dr. Orchard proposed growing the student experience to empower them to develop more skills, including effective communication and basic trauma-informed approaches to care. Eventually, I began to help build a new curriculum that would empower and educate students to work with marginalized populations. Drawing from my social work expertise, I incorporated social work frameworks and person-centered approaches into the curriculum, offering students unique opportunities to learn different methods of working with marginalized individuals. This interdisciplinary approach was a novel addition to the veterinary medicine curriculum at Dr. Orchard's institution.

We adapted my role as a community partner to contribute directly to the university's efforts. Instead of focusing solely on students partnering with community organizations to serve broader community needs, we invited community partners into the university to enhance its capabilities. This shift challenges the model of Weerts and Sandmann (2010), which primarily views the university as a boundary spanner giving to the community, overlooking the reciprocal potential for community partners to significantly contribute to the university itself.

Reflecting on Adams's (2014) model of community engagement roles, it is evident that community partners may find themselves fitting within this framework, as it emphasizes the dynamic roles individuals play in fostering community connections and leadership. However, the model still has gaps. For instance, my role involves providing leadership, strategic direction, and trust-building, aligning with the "community champion." I help veterinary students understand and engage with disenfranchised populations, developing their skills and empathy. Simultaneously, I foster meaningful interactions and relationships between the students and the community, ensuring a reciprocal and impactful partnership, which aligns with the "connection companion." Recognizing the potential for partners to occupy multiple roles simultaneously and adapting these boundary-spanning frameworks to reflect this complexity would enhance these models' applicability to community partners, while also capturing the reciprocal nature of community–university partnerships.

Aligning Knowledge Creation With Community Goals

After 7 years of including nonprofit partnerships in the Workplace Writing course that I, Ania Payne, teach, it has become evident that community-based learning partnerships will only waste a community partner's time if the assignments being taught do not align with the community partner's goals. Planning a community-based learning project with a nonprofit partner early on, before the semester begins, has been the best way to ensure that my community writing projects will actually meet our beneficiary's goals. However, planning a community-based learning project without incorporating insights and feedback from my community partner into the planning process resulted in projects that aligned with our textbook's learning objectives, but failed to meet our community beneficiary's practical needs.

As Purcell et al. (2020) argued, "The current global climate and societal context indicate a significant need for faculty who are adept at collaborative, applied research that addresses the pressing challenges of the 21st century" (p. 2). This applied research—and teaching—can be truly collaborative and applicable to all intended beneficiaries only if those beneficiaries' voices are included and centered in the "technical expert's" planning process. A boundary-spanning model that orients the technical expert—especially in the context of faculty who teach community-based learning projects—in an opposing quadrant from the "community focused" axis, may unintentionally communicate that a technical expert's goals are simply disciplinary-focused, not community focused. However, aligning the technical expert with the "community focused" axis could imply that these boundary-spanning faculty situate their curricular goals within community goals to ensure mutually beneficial and reciprocal engagements that are built upon full community partner participation (Arnstein, 2019).

Embedding Practice in Leadership

As an executive director of a Habitat for Humanity affiliate and a practitioner of asset-based community development, I, Joshua Brewer, see knowledge as emerging from community practices. Every day our build sites host community volunteers, students, and future homeowners who hope to learn how to build a home, but our organization also learns a considerable amount

in the process, as do our university partners. In 2021, while forming our Workforce Solar Housing Partnership between agencies, each educational entity came to the work site to help build a new model for housing in our region. As summer break approached, we realized that to ensure full participation from our university architecture and technical college students, we would need to build our house in 2 weeks—a feat for any professional construction firm, much less our coalition of students, professors, and nonprofit professionals. When we launched the build week, students stayed close to their classmates and teachers to their area of expertise, but soon I watched as the groups began to mix and teachers began learning from one another and from students enrolled in different programs. As the house was built, we all began to realize that each group held some of the knowledge required to build a new home, but it took collaboration for knowledge to emerge from our collective activities. This memorable experience shaped how I understand leadership, as a phenomenon that is relational, emergent, and found in everyday activities or practices that shift the expected course of action.

Contrary to my experience as a boundary spanner, the Framework for Community Boundary Spanners in Engaged Partnerships (Adams, 2014) presents a clear division between technical or practical tasks and leadership tasks. Instead, I believe that leadership is embedded in the practices that shape group activities. These activities exist in complex adaptive systems where actions shape relationships, which affect the organization in new and unexpected ways. In my work, the actions that I and my partners take together create new ways of understanding housing issues that disproportionately benefit the low-income residents of our community through our homeownership programming. These collaborations also benefit the students from skilled trades programs who have access to experiential and applied learning experiences. Centering the beneficiary group in each of these partnerships would cast light on how boundary-spanning activities or practices function as leadership themselves, thereby shifting the outcomes expected by a community.

Going forward, I welcome new frameworks for boundary-spanning practices that center the beneficiary and follow organizational studies' turn toward applying principles of practice in leadership (Carroll et al., 2008). I hope to see these frameworks attend to power in ways that reflect how change efforts emerge, adapt, and are implemented to the benefit of some beneficiary groups over others, and would expect to see some explanations of how networked relationships bridge and bond through the process of emergence. I support advancing from a competency-based model of boundary spanning to one more in line with concepts of leadership, which may be relational, collectivist, networked, and/or leadership as practice. Finally, I hope that future frameworks can move beyond the false divide between university and community actors with the centering of the beneficiary of collaborative efforts. In my university partnerships, I do not see a divide between my priorities and those of my partners. We are working together to ensure that everyone has a decent place to live.

Conclusion

Addressing the wicked problems that plague our world requires the fluid practices of boundary-spanning scholars and practitioners. A technical expert alone cannot solve these problems; instead, we need socially cultured academics *and* an intellectually curious public. Weerts and Sandmann (2010) are due acknowledgment and praise for providing a model and language to start this conversation. Additionally, Adams's (2014) community boundary-spanning model begins to address the missing perspectives of community partners in community-engaged scholarship. However, like all theoretical frameworks with social constructionist commitments, these models can evolve as HECE scholarship evolves. A framework that unites university and community partners and places the beneficiary at the center of all engagement efforts can remind each partner *why* we are doing this important work.

Organizational literature presents boundary spanning as a fluid leadership practice. It is the type of leadership best suited for the complex adaptive systems where lasting change must occur to address these wicked problems. Evolving from competency-based engagement paradigms to practice-based paradigms addresses gaps in the current literature. By focusing on collaborative practices, rather than competencies, we can remain anchored on the beneficiaries

who make our community-engaged work possible.

As seen in these reflections, we view the beneficiaries of our work as changing with each circumstance—they may be pet owners, unhoused neighbors, students, nonprofit organizations, municipal governments, or even ecosystems and the various species they support. Without an understanding of the beneficiary of each practice, our work struggles, and without placing the beneficiary at the center of our commitments, our work's impact is weakened. We offer three recommendations to expand boundary-spanning models:

- Center the concept of the beneficiary voice within boundary-spanner literature.

- Consider the impact of relational, collectivist, and practice-based forms of leadership, rather than competency-based models.

- Embrace fluidity within the model by evolving roles like the "technical expert."

Weerts and Sandmann's (2010) and Adams's (2014) boundary-spanning models provide a helpful starting point for how academic and community partners can locate their roles within axes that are institutionally or community focused, but as HECE scholarship evolves to emphasize collaborative outputs, and the boundaries between academia and the community continue to blur, academic and community partners will search for models where their unique contributions to our societal challenges are united. Once a more consolidated model is developed, scholars, students, community partners, and all beneficiaries will make the most of it to impact this complex world.

About the Authors

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