

Foreword: Special Issue on Community-Engaged Scholars, Practitioners, and Boundary Spanners: Identity, Well-Being, and Career Development

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We write this foreword at a time of growing concern about the future of American higher education. Recent surveys indicate that public confidence in U.S. higher education has reached a historic low (Blake, 2023), with persistent skepticism about the value of a college degree (Fry et al., 2024). Compounding these challenges, the college-going population is shrinking (Bauman, 2024), and the U.S. political landscape has become more polarized, partisan, and toxic (Hunter, 2024). Amid these pressures, the very notion of the fundamental purposes of higher education is being questioned.

In this eye-opening moment, we are compelled to consider (and perhaps reconsider) the role of community-engaged scholars, practitioners, and boundary spanners in a rapidly changing society. The invitation to write this foreword has prompted us to reflect on the work we conducted on boundary spanning over two decades ago. What assumptions did we embed in our original scholarship on boundary spanning related to university-community engagement? How might we view this earlier work today? How do the contributions within this special issue broaden our understanding of community-engaged scholars, practitioners, and boundary-spanning theory and practice? What investigations remain to be explored?

Our research collaboration began in 2003 through our participation in the Kellogg Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good (later the National Forum). Hosted by the University of Michigan, the initiative was created to catalyze research and leadership to strengthen the relationship between higher education and U.S. society. Forum leaders were motivated by studies in the 1990s that sounded the alarm about trends that are now accelerating: the loss of public faith in higher education, declining public investment in higher education, and

a retreat from traditions that valued opportunity, the free flow of ideas, and civic engagement (Burkhardt & Merisotis, 2006).

We began to see these growing pressures through the lens of the ecological perspective on organizations, grounded in open systems theory, which emphasizes the reciprocal ties that bind an organization (e.g., colleges and universities) with its surrounding environment (community and the broader public). We particularly resonated with Scott's (1992) discussion of symbiosis, which declared that "the environment is perceived to be the ultimate source of materials, energy, and information, all of which are vital to the continuation of the system" (p. 93). Simply put, we conceptualized our studies with the view that university-community engagement was critical to building a better society and essential to the health and survival of colleges and universities.

Guided by this broader perspective, we encountered boundary spanning as a concept that could be practically applied to understanding the organizational roles of engagement leaders and practitioners. We benefited from the work of organizational theorists who explored issues such as social boundaries, environments, and bridging strategies (Scott, 1992); the relationship between people and their environments (Kerson, 2004); the role of boundary spanners as mediators (Leifer & Huber, 1977) and innovators (Tushman, 1977); and the perception of oneness that spanners have with the organization they represent (known as organizational identification; Bartel, 2001). Among the many sources we reviewed, an article by Friedman and Podolny (1992) stood out. It introduced us to the idea that boundary spanning could be understood as differentiated functions across an organization rather than as a single role. This insight led us to develop a schematic for understanding how boundary-spanning roles manifest

within universities prioritizing engagement as an institutional practice. This schematic became the basis for our 2010 article focused on boundary spanning at research universities (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010).

Over the years, we have been heartened to see numerous scholars build upon our 2010 article by introducing new methodologies and applications that expand and deepen our understanding of the complex nature of boundary spanning in university–community engagement. These subsequent works have grown increasingly sophisticated and influential, nationally and internationally.

Specifically, certain research projects have enriched our understanding of the theoretical components of the Weerts–Sandmann Boundary Spanning Conceptual Framework (2010), such as power dynamics (Sandmann & Kliewer, 2012). Additionally, studies have examined the roles of boundary–spanning actors during organizational change, with implications for community–university engagement. Examples include analyses of presidential transitions (Jones & Sandmann, 2019), the creation of an organizational community engagement identity (Wheel Carter, 2021), and the advancement of an institutional model of distributed leadership (Purcell, 2014). Farner (2019) introduced the metaphor of a braid to represent the interweaving roles of boundary spanners in institutionalizing community engagement under conditions of adaptive complexity. Tino (2021) recently examined the activities of organizational boundary spanners during the COVID–19 pandemic.

Another body of work has explored the boundary–spanning behaviors and influences of community engagement professionals working with various external stakeholders, such as military personnel (Mull, 2016) or volunteers (David, 2014). Extending our understanding further, Adams (2014) and Davis (2018), as well as others, have investigated the perspectives of higher education organizations’ external partners, stakeholders, and constituents—the other dimension of the boundary–spanner dynamic.

Various empirical methodologies, including action research, case studies, narrative inquiry, and survey research, have been employed to advance our understanding of boundary spanning in community engagement. Mull led a team in operationalizing the Weerts–Sandmann Boundary Spanning Conceptual Framework (2010) by

developing and testing a survey instrument to measure community engagement boundary–spanning behaviors (Sandmann et al., 2014). This instrument applies to campus–based actors—leaders, faculty, staff, and students—as well as community–based or external stakeholder boundary spanners in different contexts. It has been translated into at least three languages and employed in studies across Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and North and South America and has been adapted for use in various sectors, including business, research and development, health care administration, K–12 education, and higher education community engagement. For example, it has informed the mediation efforts between city governments, local citizens, and IT companies in Ireland (Karimikia et al., 2022). The instrument has also been adapted for professional development and training contexts, such as in Tino’s (2018) professional development of teachers as boundary spanners between systems in Italy, or S. R. Laney’s (personal communication, November 5, 2023) training workshop for specialists seeking to become more effective at interdisciplinary Arctic studies, or Wallace et al.’s (2019) work with Australian health services collaborating with community boundary spanners to reach marginalized populations.

These collective efforts not only underscore the versatility and applicability of the Weerts–Sandmann Boundary Spanning Conceptual Framework (2010) but also illuminate the critical role of boundary spanners in fostering resilient and adaptive partnerships that bridge the gap between academia and community, driving meaningful and sustained impact across diverse contexts and geographies.

As discussed above, the study of boundary spanning related to university–community engagement has progressed considerably. In exploring the content for this special issue, we see three ongoing contributions to this literature. First, critiques of traditional boundary–spanning models can generate new thinking about the very notion of partnerships between universities and communities. Such new thinking is illustrated in Ania Payne’s calls for incorporating a beneficiary–centric view of value creation that disrupts the notion of resource–rich institutions (e.g., universities) as central to creating value in a community. Second, this special issue highlights the importance of investigating how boundary–spanning prac-

tices may be expressed differently across various models of partnership work. This perspective is exemplified in Cara DiEnno's investigation of boundary-spanning practices through a collective impact framework. Finally, there is a strong and growing interest in understanding how one's identity shapes boundary-spanning practices and relationships with the community. Several contributions in this special issue explore how personal and work characteristics relate to boundary-spanning practices (Casey Downs Mull) and the relationship between boundary-spanner roles and identity-based constructs such as race, ethnicity, gender, immigrant status, motherhood, cultural heritage, and other identities (Chelsea Wentworth Fournier, Emily Henry, Jayoung Choi, Lorinda Riley, Jey Blodgett, Jonathan Garcia). Kathryn Clements reminds us that boundary-spanning roles are demanding and require attention to one's health and well-being. In her reflective essay, she promotes ways to encourage professional and personal resilience in these challenging roles.

We envision several additional avenues for expanding and deepening boundary-spanning research in the future. For example, further research might consider how boundary-spanning roles and practices vary in stable versus turbulent environments. We propose several possible key questions: How might boundary-spanning roles, expectations, skill sets, and practices change in environments with intense economic, social, and political pressure? How does a community or region's stability or turbulence shape boundary-spanning philosophy and practice? These questions seem particularly timely as colleges and universities increasingly serve stakeholders with divergent agendas, interests, and resources. In political arenas, organizational actors operate under conditions with various rules that "shape the game to be played, the players

on the field, and the interests to be pursued" (Bolman & Deal, 2021, p. 246). Applying these political metaphors to the boundary-spanning literature, future research might explore how spanners operate under unique conditions that set the terms of their work with community partners.

Another line of future questioning is the unique challenges and opportunities posed by digital transformations in the context of boundary spanning. How do digital, virtual, and artificial intelligence environments influence the nature of boundary-spanning roles, particularly in terms of collaboration, communication, and the development of trust between academic institutions and community partners?

In closing, we are inspired by the progression of boundary-spanning literature and its contributions to understanding the people and practices that bring institutions and communities together for mutual benefit. During one of the early Kellogg Forums hosted by the University of Michigan, a prominent nonprofit and business leader, Frances Hesselbein, made this declaration about our collective work in higher education:

This is a time for leaders. We are fellow travelers on a long journey toward an uncertain future where the challenges will be exceeded only by the opportunities to lead, to innovate, to change lives, to share the future. (Kellogg Forum, 2002)

Indeed, we are fellow travelers toward an uncertain future in higher education and our broader democratic project. However, we believe colleges and universities offer hope by cultivating thoughtful, imaginative, and courageous community-engaged scholars, practitioners, and boundary spanners who can help our institutions and communities move forward during these uncertain times.



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