

Communities of Practice: Implementing a framework for supporting engagement practitioners



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Assess the state of your campus community of outreach and community engagement staff?



- Are there formal and in-formal networks?
- What is the goal?
- How often do you convene?
- Level of organization (leadership, defined roles)?
- Institutional support? Funding?
- Is it sustainable?

Research Universities Lagging in Engagement



- In the past three decades, American higher education has expanded commitments to serving the public good (Chambers, 2005; Jacoby, 2009; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011).
- Much of the conversation has centered on the institutionalization of community-engagement (Battistoni & Longo, 2011).
- As a result of this call for a deeper commitment to the public good, there has been an increase in the number of the academic staff and non-tenure-track faculty members recently hired to facilitate community-university partnerships (Kiyama, Lee, & Rhoades, 2012).
- However, research institutions have been lagging their private college and public community liberal arts college and university counterparts in commitments to community engagement (Stanton, 2007).
- The complexity and decentralized nature of research universities contribute to uneven resource allocations of engagement resources and therefore “despite strategic steps taken by institutional leaders to advance engagement at research institutions, the level of implementation on these campuses is likely to vary considerably across units” (Weerts & Sandman, 2010, p. 703).
- **Consequently, community engagement practitioners at research institutions work in isolation in unique roles compared to their co-workers, often in new and innovative positions.**

Engagement Staff: Invisible in Engagement Literature



- While recent research is rich regarding the impact of civic or community engagement initiatives on students (Jacoby, 2009) and faculty (Boyte and Fretz, 2011; Presley, 2011; O'Meara, 2011), the implications of the expansion of the engagement mission on staff is less known (Kiyama, Lee, & Rhoades, 2012).

What is known about outreach and engagement staff roles relies on relatively small samples and case studies. Still, these findings indicate that staff play critical roles in advancing community engagement on their campuses.

Emerging Professional Identity



- Recent studies indicate that the work of engagement requires unique functions, skills, and values (Weerts & Sandman, 2010).
- Specifically when studied, engagement initiatives at research universities were primarily executed by outreach and engagement staff with backgrounds as practitioners and strong connections to the community partners served (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008).
- Outreach and engagement staff are profiled as “boundary-spanners,” as they responsible for the interacting with partners outside of the institution and “community-based problem solvers,” implying that the skills characterizing the work of outreach and engagement staff are largely technical and hands on, managing the daily tasks involved with advancing the partnership (Weerts & Sandman, 2008, 2010).
- As a result of these relationships, community partners base their evaluation of institutional engagement on the quality of their relationships with who they identify as the boundary-spanners, most often the outreach and engagement staff at research institutions (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008).
- Outreach and engagement staff also play important roles internally within their campus engagement efforts. Managerial professionals involved with engagement activities, as defined by outreach and engagement staff at the mid-level of the university hierarchy, were the coordinators of social networks of other managerial professionals on campus that helped sustain outreach efforts and maintain strong community-university ties (Kiyama, Lee, & Rhoades, 2012).

Research Questions



- Do these roles constitute a cohesive professional identity for *outreach and engagement staff* which can be used in clarifying professional development opportunities and assessment of institutional impact?
- If so, can this group of workers connect in ways that overcome positional isolation and improve their practice, both on their campuses and within national engagement networks?

In this workshop, we describe the emergence of a unique professional identity for outreach and engagement staff and common set functions, skills, and values in these roles at a large, research university enhanced by developing a *community of practice*. This model for connecting and organizing outreach and engagement staff has expanded to other universities and a national network and annual conference, the National Outreach Scholarship Conference.

Community of Practice Model



- As described by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002), communities of practice are “groups of people who share a common concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p.4).

Three Elements of Communities of Practice



1. Domain of Knowledge
2. Social Experience
3. Learning: a shared practice that makes work within the domain more effective and efficient.

Natural and Organic in Emerging Fields



- Communities of practice help to create a sense of belonging, encourage a spirit of inquiry, and instill confidence.
- “communities of practice are a natural part of organizational life. They will develop on their own and many will flourish, whether or not the organization recognizes them” (p. 12).

Learn to harness and leverage the desire for community.

Stages of Development for Communities of Practice



1. Inception
2. Potential
3. Coalescing
4. Maturity
5. Stewardship
6. Transformation

COP Start-Up



- Inception, Potential, Coalescing -characterized by a loose, informal social network of people who begin to discover common issues and interests and explore the idea of creating a more formal association. The greatest challenge for a community of practice is establishing a scope for the domain around the passions and interests of founding and potential members. The group must explore a vision that imagines greater value from the collective association, after which the association begins to discuss the potential areas for knowledge acquisition and learning. As communities of practice coalesce, members grow trust in their association and formulate a value proposition for the ongoing community (Wenger et al., 2002).

COP Sustaining



- Maturity, Stewardship, Transformation – an established community of practice begins to influence the broader organization through the collective power of informed practice. As the community of practice begins to build and validate core competencies and knowledge, members begin to transfer that knowledge within their work units and the benefits of the community of practice to the broader organization become apparent. It is at this point that the voice of the community of practice begins to be heard outside of the community of practice (Wenger et al., 2002).

Case study: UW-Madison Community Partnerships and Outreach Staff Network



The Context of UW-Madison



- At the large public research universities outreach and community engagement staff work in relative isolation from other engagement colleagues, in decentralized institutions where operations are primarily unit and discipline based.
- Administrative mechanisms do not exist for horizontal, cross-campus connections, resource sharing, or even communication that would benefit practitioners performing similar roles and functions on behalf of their home units.
- Informally connecting with other outreach and engagement is challenging. While some of these staff members do hold titles that indicate their outreach and community engagement responsibilities, many do not, and as such are not easily identified.

Unique, Emerging Identity: Inspired by NOSC



- October, 2007 National Outreach Scholarship Conference (NOSC) in Madison, Wisconsin, David Weerts and Lorilee Sandmann presented their research on boundary-spanning roles in higher education and outlined the predominant role that outreach and engagement staff play as the boundary-spanners at research universities (Weerts & Sandmann, 2007).
- Weerts and Sandman engaged the audience in generating a long list of skills & roles like “catalyst, surrogate, translator, agitator of the system,” terms not commonly found in university job classifications and yet so descriptive of the day-to-day work in building and sustaining university-community partnerships.

We applied the theory of boundary spanning, originally used by Weerts and Sandmann to characterize the *facilitation* of community-university partnerships, to define the *identity* of an emerging professional community: university outreach and community engagement staff who facilitate projects, programs, services, research, and relationships with community partners, with a set of shared knowledge, skills and values and a professional identity distinct from that of tenure-track faculty members.

Goals of the UW-Madison COP:



- facilitate communication and collaboration,
- share information and resources,
- improve the quality of outreach and engagement staff's work,
- support professional development,
- improve the ability of the campus to meet community needs,
- advocate for campus decisions and policies that support partnerships and outreach work.

Common Set of Challenges and Opportunities



- professional identity and isolation
- the power of innovation
- the burden of bureaucracy
- the challenge of measuring and describing progress and success
- the risks and benefits of collaboration
- functional leadership versus positional power.

COP Early Stages: Organizing tool, shared practices, understanding identity.

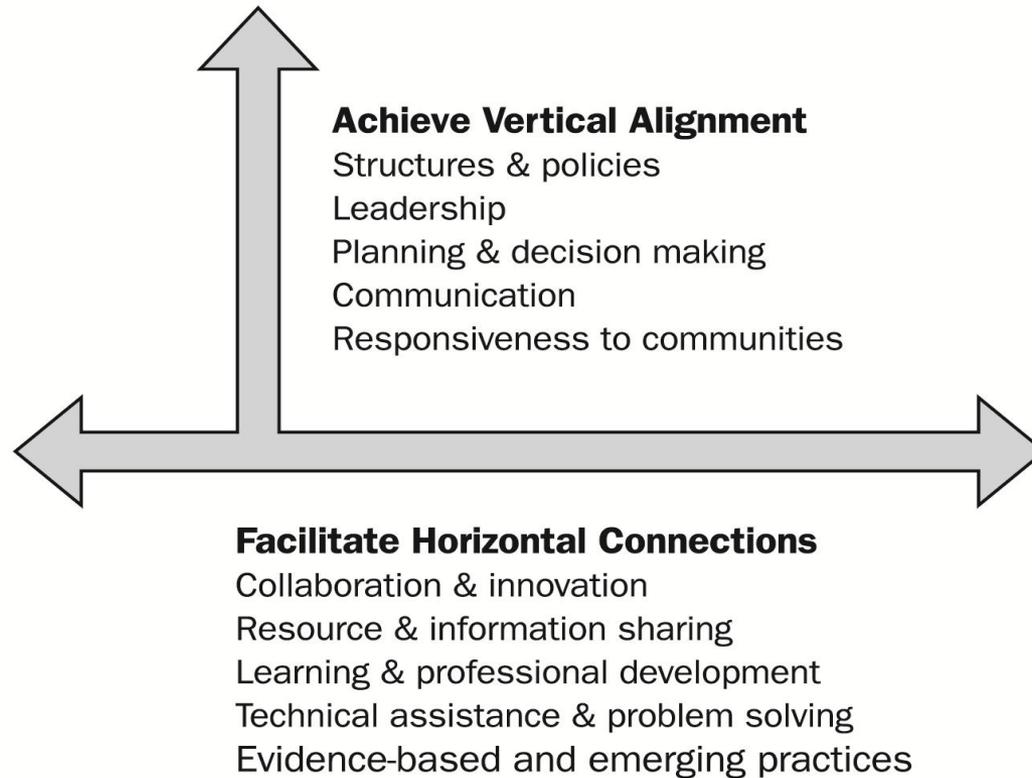
Table 1: Outreach and Engagement Staff Boundary Spanners: Functions, tasks, & roles

Functions	Sample Tasks	Sample Roles
Relate	Bring people together Understand interests Gather information	Networker/Connector Matchmaker Concierge Clearinghouse
Innovate	Reframe issues Develop new approaches Test new ideas	Entrepreneur Innovator Visionary
Cultivate	Build capacity Prepare environment Develop leadership Build infrastructure	Community organizer Promoter Catalyst Nurturer
Collaborate	Structure partnerships Create inclusive environments Maintain relationships Negotiate power	Translator/Interpreter Broker Gatekeeper Mediator Diplomat
Facilitate	Lead and design processes Advance initiatives	Problem solver Surrogate Shepherd Convener
Evaluate	Measure Document Describe Improve	Meaning maker Storyteller Program evaluator
Communicate	Understand Share Exchange	Publicist Reporter Media specialist
Educate	Learn Apply Disseminate	Student Teacher Trainer
Advocate	Change systems Develop resources Protect partnerships Ensure equity	Agitator Persuader Protector Fundraiser
Administrate	Demonstrate accountability Manage resources	Coordinator Supervisor Manager

Compiled in April 2009 from CPO Staff Network meeting notes, revised October 2009 by participants in CPO professional development workshop, revised October 2010 by participants in the national Outreach and Engagement Staff Workshop.

COP Later Stages: From Network to System of Influence

Figure 1.
Community Partnerships and Outreach (CPO) Staff Network
Purpose & Structure



Emerging Identity and Community at a National Level: The Spoke Network



- 2007 NOSC workshop in Madison
- 2009 After-hours meeting in Athens
- 2010 Pilot Outreach & Engagement Staff preconference (11)
- 2011 First official OESW preconference (30)
- 2012 OESW Year 2 (50)
- 2013 Annual meeting of the ESC at Texas Tech

The Outreach and Engagement Staff Workshop is designed for university staff and non-tenure-track faculty members who, in roles distinct from those of tenure-track faculty, facilitate and manage ongoing projects, programs, services, research and relationships with community partners.



Goals of the Spoke Network



- Establish an identity and voice in the national outreach community.
- Offer targeted professional development opportunities.
- Provide a national venue for sharing the work of outreach and engagement staff.
- Celebrate the distinct roles and accomplishments of outreach and engagement staff.
- Create a national community of practice for engagement professionals.



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