Boundary Spanner Role Conflict in Public Urban Universities

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BOUNDARY SPANNER ROLE CONFLICT IN PUBLIC URBAN UNIVERSITIES

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I have been honored by the company and support of many individuals as I have travelled this educational pathway. With appreciation, gratitude, and respect, I humbly dedicate this work to the scholars of COEHS Cohort XX, the graduate faculty of the Cleveland State University, Dr. Hansman and my dissertation committee, my family and friends and especially my wife Mary Jo, as well as the many women and men who work each day at university-community organizational boundaries to foster the scholarship of engagement and to improve the quality of life in our communities.

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JOSEPH GAUNTNER

ABSTRACT

Universities are increasingly seeking partnerships with external organizations for student learning and inter-organizational access to resources (Austin, 2010; Sandmann, 2006). The focus of such partnerships includes employee training, business development, affordable housing, community schools, community health centers, and other projects of reciprocal value to both the universities and community partners. Such work is frequently labeled university-community engagement (Carnegie Foundation, 2007).

University staff members who build and sustain partnerships between their institutions and the broader community are referred to as boundary spanners (AASCU, 2004). Working as agents of the institution, a boundary spanner must be capable of working both sides of the university-community organizational boundary to bring together people and resources and to move toward outcomes sought by both parties. Institutions frequently employ formally sanctioned, full-time university staff to serve as boundary spanners. It is common, though not exclusive, that such staff is administrative or allied staff versus tenure track faculty or academic unit administrators.

Even in those institutions fully committed to the principles of community engagement, it seems inevitable that boundary spanners attempting to design mutually beneficial relationships between separate entities will experience role conflict as they seek to align diverse community and institutional agendas. The challenges of creating
such partnerships are even greater for urban universities that operate in complex environments.

A constructivist grounded theory study was carried out to explore role conflict experienced by non-academic university staff members who work across organizational boundaries in urban universities to address the needs of both their host institutions and their communities.

Key findings of the study included that (1) the experience of role conflict is an integral part of the boundary spanner role, (2) individual boundary spanners’ responses may be identified and characterized either as formative responses directed toward continuing to seek alignment of interests between the university and the community or as adaptive responses, which indicate that the role conflict is unlikely to be resolved by reaching agreement, and (3) a theoretical framework for boundary spanner role conflict was identified, inclusive of factors which appear to increase role conflict and other factors which support formative responses to role conflict.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

As reflected in the work of Cantor, Englot, and Higgins (2013), Austin (2010), Buys and Bursnall (2007), Sandmann (2006), Silka (2004), and Baum (2000), growing numbers of colleges and universities are seeking value-added partnerships with external organizations to promote student learning and inter-organizational access to resources. For example, Sundberg (2002) describes a partnership between Carl Sandburg Community College and local manufacturers to establish the Center for Manufacturing Excellence, a separate independent corporation controlled by both the college and local manufacturers, to train workers. Altman (2006) cites further examples including “affordable housing development, community schools, and community health centers” (p. 12).

The Carnegie Foundation (2007) labels the process of forming and maintaining such partnerships as “community engagement” and defines it as “the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (para. 3). Fisher, Fabricant and Simmons (2004)
list four primary types of contemporary community engagement – service learning, local economic development, community-based research, and social work initiatives.

Individuals who work across organizational boundaries to connect institutions with their communities may be referred to as boundary spanners (AASCU, 2004). Weerts and Sandmann (2010) have delineated four distinct roles for boundary spanners within research universities – community-based problem solver, technical expert, internal engagement advocate, and engagement champion. Problem solvers may have a community advocacy orientation and bring technical skills along with partnership formation, interpersonal, and group development skills. Technical experts are boundary spanners with specific skills and/or knowledge perceived as important to a particular application or problem; at times technical experts may be perceived as less effective in developing mutual relationships. Internal engagement advocates are university staff, frequently faculty, with defined responsibilities to develop institutional capacity for engagement (e.g. rewards, financial resources, formal organizational structure). Engagement champions are typically those institutional representatives in senior leadership positions who may focus on broader strategic alliances and partnerships, political support, and resource acquisition. The University of Georgia, for example, has a Vice President for Public Service and Outreach who is responsible for leading and coordinating the institution’s engagement efforts (University of Georgia, 2012).

Institutions frequently employ formally sanctioned, full-time university staff to serve as boundary spanners (Holland, 2009). It is common, though not exclusive, that such staff members are administrative or allied staff versus tenure track faculty or academic unit administrators (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008, 2010). Titles of such
individuals are varied—Executive in Residence (Cleveland State University, 2011), Civic Engagement Coordinator (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2010), Director of Outreach & Business Centers (Cleveland State University, 2009), Associate Vice President for Strategic Initiatives and Engagement (University of Akron, 2010), Associate Vice President for Community Engagement (Xavier University, 2010), or Vice President of University Engagement (Cleveland State University, 2012). What these roles share is the purpose of fostering relationships valued by their employing institution.

For the purposes of this study, the label of “non-academic, administrative staff” will be used to describe those with boundary spanning responsibilities who are not tenure track faculty or academic administrators such as academic department heads, deans, provosts, or presidents. It is important to focus on such staff since they are frequently called upon to carry out boundary spanning roles and because little attention has been paid to such staff in the literature (Mcinnis, 1998; Szekeres, 2004).

Even though community engagement initiatives may frequently reflect noble principles, many such efforts stem from “real or perceived threats confronting the campus” (Reardon, 2006, p. 106). While University of Pennsylvania is regarded as a model institution for community engagement (Soska & Butterfield, 2004), an important motivating circumstance was the isolating impact of the deteriorating West Philadelphia neighborhood in which it was located. Ultimately, the job of boundary spanners is to advance the interests of the university—whether these are a safer community, community learning sites for students, development projects that may displace residents, or other objectives. Even in those institutions fully committed to the principles of community engagement, it seems inevitable that boundary spanners attempting to design mutually
beneficial relationships between separate entities with multiple stakeholders will experience role conflict as they seek to align diverse community and institutional agendas.

Boundary spanning staff members are caught in the middle of many forces—personal goals of service and advancement, competing (and frequently highly emotive) intra-institutional voices, and very diverse, external constituencies competing for presence within a complex and fractured socio-political environment. The personal experience of such staff may be further intensified by an organizational positioning which frequently offers little formal authority or power.

1.2 Statement and Significance of the Problem

Holland (2005) dismisses the idea that community engagement is a passing fad; she states, “Engagement is a global trend in higher education” (p. 236). Citing developing models of engagement in “South Africa, India, Southeast Asia, Australia, the Philippines, and Europe” (p. 246), she asserts that a “failure to integrate it [community engagement] more intentionally into our academic culture” (p. 236) may result in the loss of the international preeminence of the United States’ system of higher education. This position is supported by Langseth and McVeety (2007), who describe university-community engagement as a core leadership and advancement strategy.

The core of community engagement is the creation and management of partnerships between the university and other organizations and institutions, as carried out by institutional boundary spanners. Role stress and role conflict frequently result in adverse consequences for individuals and their host organizations (Miles, 1976; Singh, Goolsby & Rhoads, 1994; Stamper & Johlke, 2003; Gilboa, Shirom, Fried & Cooper,
To the extent that role conflict, as experienced by boundary spanners, poses a barrier to effective community engagement by institutions of higher education in the United States, the exploration of such phenomena is a critical concern.

It seems inevitable that university-community boundary spanners will experience role conflict. Institutions of higher education are not monolithic structures but diffuse organizations characterized by decentralized authority, complex administrative structures, conflicting goals, and an absence of focal measures of success such as profit (Birnbaum, 1988). Multiple aspects of self-interest are thus in play within the universities and hence influence the pursuit of university-community partnerships. The environments in which urban institutions of higher education operate are themselves increasingly “fragmented by race, social class, and economic function and spread over a huge territory, further divided into at least several counties and perhaps dozens of independent political subdivisions” (Brownell, 1995, p. 22). Altman (2006) points out that institutional relationships with communities are further complicated by existent intra-community relationships including “local government and community organizations (including religious entities), residents and organizations [and] universities and communities (town-gown affairs)” (p. 184). Such diverse sets of interests, along with their probable competing expectations of boundary spanners, would almost seem to guarantee that university staff seeking to create mutually beneficial university-community partnerships would experience significant role conflict.

Elliott’s (1994) work underscores the potential importance of examining this phenomenon of role conflict within urban universities. With over 75% of the United States population living in cities as of 1990 and the broader economic shift from “from an
industrial base to a knowledge base” (p. 6), urban universities will have a growing impact on the overall quality of life within these communities and the nation as a whole. Given such stakes, it is even more important that boundary spanner role conflict be understood within the urban context.

Role conflict can have adverse consequences for both boundary spanning staff and their host institutions. It is supportive of the core principles of community engagement that the emergence of such role conflict be increasingly understood. If such role conflict is not well understood and well managed, it may result in decisions that reflect a paternalistic view of the community or an inadequate regard for the needs of the institution. There is a dearth of research on this issue. This research seeks to increase overall understanding of role conflict within this context in order to further the overall effectiveness of university-community engagement practices.

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this research is to explore the experience of role conflict by non-academic university staff members who work across organizational boundaries in urban universities to address the needs of both their host institutions and their communities. This research will examine the following questions:

1. What is the nature of role conflict as experienced by non-academic administrative staff serving as university-community boundary spanners in urban universities?
2. How does the experience of role conflict impact the processes of partnership formation and community engagement?
3. What individual and institutional strategies have been identified by boundary spanners to assist with the management of role conflict?

1.4 Significance of the Study

As recently as the late 1990s, Mcinnis (1998) found that “there has been remarkably little systematic study of the roles and values of university administrative staff” (p. 161). In 2004, Szekeres described such staff as “invisible workers” (p. 7), invisible both within their institutions and within the literature. Not only is this true for university staff overall, it is also true for university staff members who serve as boundary spanners. Weerts and Sandmann (2010) examined university-community boundary spanner roles and indirectly acknowledged that current literature is deficient regarding the study of role conflict among boundary spanners in higher education. In the absence of other research, they heavily relied upon the 1992 work of Friedman and Podolny, who studied role conflict as experienced by labor union boundary spanners.

The concept of university-community engagement is not a passing fad (Holland, 2005) but a long-term development strategy for an increasing numbers of institutions (Langseth and McVeety (2007). The development of mutually beneficial partnerships is central to this concept of community engagement. Boundary spanners are individuals who are charged with the creation of such relationships, which have the stated intent of providing reciprocal benefits (Sandmann, 2007).

The loci of urban universities both add to their potential external impact and pose additional barriers to the development and management of such partnerships. Such institutions are loosely structured organizations with multiple stakeholders and multiple agendas. Urban institutions operate in very complex environments with multiple demands
and influences. The challenge of aligning divergent internal objectives with competing and disparate demands from the external environment would seem to be one of the drivers of role conflict as experienced by boundary spanners.

Individuals with boundary spanning roles are at greater risk for role conflict than are other organization staff. Role conflict results from the awareness of differing expectations as held by potential partnership participants. Leaders within metropolitan universities are at greater risk for role conflict versus those in non-urban settings.

Poorly managed role conflict has adverse consequences for both the focal staff person and his or her employing organization (Gilboa, Shirom, Fried & Cooper, 2008; Singh, Goolsby & Rhoads, 1994; Stamper & Johlke, 2003). Strategies for role conflict management which do not support the concept of reciprocal benefit to both organizations are insufficient for the purposes of university-community engagement.

1.5 Proposed Methodology

The planned contribution of this study is to explore the experience of role conflict from the point of view of non-academic university boundary spanners and to pursue an understanding of its process meaning from the point of view of those who have actually experienced it. It is intended that this work will provide guidance to assist such boundary spanners to become more aware of the phenomenon of role conflict and options for managing it. It is further intended that this work will add to current literature by identifying a relevant framework for the discussion and study of such role conflict.

A constructivist grounded theory study is proposed to examine the phenomenon of boundary spanner role conflict from the perspective of those who have experienced it.
Using a social constructivist theoretical perspective, the study will utilize purposeful sampling and the interview guide approach as described by Patton (1990).

Charmaz (2006) advocates a social constructivist approach to grounded theory research. Working from a symbolic interactionist frame of reference, Charmaz contends that meaning is social constructed: “Research participants’ implicit meanings, experiential views—and researchers’ finished grounded theories—are constructions of reality” (p. 10). Cresswell (2007) differentiates Charmaz’s approach from the traditional understanding of grounded theory by stating “Instead of embracing the study of a single process or core category as in the Strauss and Corbin (1998) approach, Charmaz advocates for a social constructivist perspective that includes emphasizing diverse local worlds, multiple realities, and the complexities of particular worlds, views, and actions” (p. 65).

The relevance of this approach to understanding the experience of role conflict as experienced by non-academic staff boundary spanners in urban universities is two-fold. First, it acknowledges the primacy of the experience of the boundary spanners as a source of knowledge and does not subjugate such experience to the interpretations of institutional or community leadership. Second, it is consistent with the constructivist nature of the community engagement process (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008).
1.6 Glossary of Terms

Definitions and clarifications are provided below for key terms used in this study. They are provided to frame context and meaning for the reader.

The term **non-academic administrative staff** is used to describe those university employees with boundary spanning responsibilities who are not tenure track faculty or academic administrators such as academic department heads, deans, provosts, or presidents. There is no common language in the literature to identify these staff members who work on the boundaries of the academy. Additionally and for the purposes of this study, non-academic administrative staff will only include such individuals in four-year colleges and universities whose primary responsibilities are the development and/or management of university-community partnerships.

**Boundary spanner** is defined to include university employees who directly develop and or manage university-community partnerships or connect such university staff to the process of partnership formation and who “are primarily responsible for interacting with constituents outside their organization … [to]... negotiate power and balance between the organization and external agents to achieve mutual objectives” (Weerts and Sandmann, 2010, p. 708). While boundary spanners are frequently tenure track faculty, administrators, or other administrative staff, this study will focus on non-academic administrative staff as described immediately above.

**Role conflict** for the purpose of this study is defined to include four scenarios – conflict between an individual’s values and the demands of a role, conflict stemming from insufficient resources and role expectations, conflict between multiple roles
assigned to the same individual, and role conflict stemming from competing external expectations (Rizzo, House, and Litzman, 1970).

**Community engagement** is defined as “the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (Carnegie Foundation, 2007, para. 3).

**Urban universities** are defined as institutions which have a mission that includes teaching, research, and public service; have a diverse student body with respect to age, socio-economic background, and ethnic and racial identity; respond to the needs of the community; are located in an urbanized area; promote the community involvement of students; and actively build partnerships to achieve their goals (Elliott, 1994; Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities, 2011).

**University-community partnerships** are defined, relying upon the work of Sockett (1998) and the above-referenced Carnegie definition, as inter-organizational relationships of reciprocal value involving exchanges of knowledge and resources within a context of shared decision making.

### 1.7 Summary

University-community partnerships are central to the process of community engagement. Boundary spanners are those individuals who are called upon to support university-community partnerships. Non-academic administrative staff are increasingly called upon to carry out these boundary spanning roles.
While organizational boundary spanners are at greater risk of role conflict than other organizational members, such risk is heightened in institutions of higher education, which are complex organizations with diffuse authority and multiple competing interests. When such institutions are located in urban environments, boundary spanning is frequently even more complex; the urban context is often fragmented, as is manifest by population demographics, community politics, and government structure. Given the significant potential impact of urban universities to impact their local communities, it is important that potential barriers to effective community engagement be understood and ameliorated.

Little research could be identified that directly addressed this phenomenon. The overt exploration of role conflict is important for providing direction to individual boundary spanners and their host institutions who are seeking to enter into meaningful partnerships, as reflected in the above referenced definition of community engagement. A constructivist grounded theory study is proposed. Cresswell (2007) differentiates the constructivist approach as advanced by Charmaz (2006) from the traditional understanding of grounded theory by stating “Instead of embracing the study of a single process or core category as in the Strauss and Corbin (1998) approach, Charmaz advocates for a social constructivist perspective that includes emphasizing diverse local worlds, multiple realities, and the complexities of particular worlds, views, and actions” (Creswell, 2007, p. 65).
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Whether one looks at the founding of Oxford and Cambridge, the U.S. land grant schools, or today’s community engaged universities, it is clear that institutions of higher education contribute significant value to and impact upon their environments. Institutions of higher education in the United States have historically both reflected society and helped to shape society.

During the colonial era, the function of higher education was to maintain and transmit “a relatively fixed social order” (Thelin, 2004, p. 25). During this period, less than 1% of the population, exclusively male, attended college. The land grant movement of the 1800s reflected the economic and educational needs of growing citizenry with many states making investments in higher education to promote learning, assist agriculture, and improve technology. The post-World War II influx of students created demand for increased capacity in higher education; this in turn prompted the development of new, urban situated institutions.

While higher education continued to be a reflection of privilege and an agent of social reproduction, some institutions (re)defined themselves as more inclusive agents of
educational value and community service. Suburban population sprawl helped redefine the word *urban* as code for communities with higher rates of minority presence, poverty, crime, unemployment, and other social conditions. Faced with this situation, many new and redeveloping colleges and universities began to embrace an urban mission—one in which positive impact on the immediate community became a core purpose and part of the learning process. The term *urban universities* is used to describe such institutions that embody a broad mission of scholarship and urban service (Elliott, 1994).

The scholarship of engagement developed as a guiding construct for university-community engagement. In this realm, community service and institutional scholarship are not separate components but integrated parts of a whole. Colleges and universities move toward community engagement through the development and nurturing of university-community partnerships providing reciprocal benefit to both parties. University staff members who help develop and maintain these partnerships are frequently called boundary spanners (AASCU, 2004). While university presidents, faculty, and others may do this work, non-academic staff members are being increasingly used to effect these partnerships.

Working across organizational boundaries and attempting to balance diverse institutional agendas and divergent and complex community needs, boundary spanners seeking to promote university-community partnerships providing mutual benefit may experience role conflict. In other settings, it has been shown that role conflict may result in increased personal anxiety and decreased effectiveness for the boundary spanner. Little is known about the phenomenon of role conflict as experienced by non-academic staff boundary spanners in higher education.
Clearly, such boundary spanning staff members are caught in the middle of many forces: personal goals of service and advancement; competing (and frequently highly emotive) intra-institutional voices; and very diverse, external constituencies competing for presence within a complex and fractured socio-political environment. The personal experience of such staff may be further intensified by an organizational positioning which frequently offers little formal authority and power.

The purpose of this research is to explore the experience of role conflict by non-academic university staff members who work across organizational boundaries in urban universities to address the needs of both their host institutions and their communities. This research will address the following questions:

1. What is the nature of role conflict as experienced by non-academic administrative staff serving as university-community boundary spanners in urban universities?
2. How does the experience of role conflict impact the processes of partnership formation and community engagement?
3. What individual and institutional strategies have been identified by boundary spanners to assist with the management of role conflict?

There is abundant literature describing diverse examples of community engagement by institutions of higher education. Similarly, the literature offers much descriptive work on boundary spanners. The literature, however, offers little description and direction regarding role conflict as experienced by those entrusted with boundary spanning roles in higher education in urban settings.
To build a foundation for the subsequently proposed research, this literature review will address the historical development of modern universities in the United States, the context and nature of urban-focused institutions of higher education, the concepts of community engagement in higher education and partnership formation, boundary spanning roles and practices, and role conflict. In doing so, the review will show that urban universities are complex institutions with great potential for positive impact within their immediate communities and that the urban settings which amplify the potential for positive impact also add complexity to decision making. Furthermore, this review will detail that the process of community engagement is at its core the process of shaping and managing reciprocal university-community partnerships, and that the experience of role conflict within such boundary spanning roles is both little understood and has significant potential adverse consequences for the boundary spanner and the host institution if not successfully managed.

2.2 Historical Development of Universities within the United States

Harvard University, founded in 1636, is frequently acknowledged as the oldest college in the United States. Pre-revolutionary institutions such as Harvard were “lean operations. Salaries for most instructors (called ‘tutors’) were marginal” (Thelin, 2004, p.17). Most students left school after a year or two, and the colleges had small enrollments. While science and mathematics were studied, these institutions were less about professional development and more about the arts than the sciences. Albeit some scholarship students were admitted, more often than not these were institutions serving
the privileged few – “the main purpose of colleges was to identify and ratify a colonial elite” (p. 25).

From 1800 to 1860, the number of degree granting colleges increased from 20 to 240 (Thelin, 2004). Regional dynamics influenced college development. In New England, subsistence level agriculture freed up young men from the labor force due to lack of jobs. Midwest values, perhaps less conservative in the day, led to the development of a cluster of institutions serving women. Ohio, Wisconsin, and Illinois each had three colleges enrolling women; Knox University in Indiana was one such institution.

“Diploma mills” (p. 56) were also common, especially for medical education. In the 1830s, John Cook Bennett used affiliations with chartered colleges, including Christian College in Indiana, to sell bogus degrees. Ironically, his stated emphasis on practice, versus formal instruction, was ultimately adopted as part of formal medical education, which began to emphasize practice along with formal instruction (Thelin).

The Morrill Land Grant Act was passed in 1862 by Congress (Grobman, 1988). States received land grants to help build colleges and universities in support of agriculture, engineering, and military training. The sixty-nine schools that resulted had a significant impact on the developing economy of the United States (Berube, 1978). These institutions helped to broaden both the purposes of higher education and the diversity of student enrollment; they were “sources of affordable, practical higher education” (Thelin, 2004, p. 74). As originally authorized, these schools focused on agriculture, engineering, and military training. The Morrill Act both expanded educational capacity and eventually improved access, but primarily benefited a white, male population.
In the early 1900s, the Wisconsin Idea (Cartensen, 1956) went beyond the mission of improving the technical skills of the population. The Wisconsin Idea called upon the higher education system in Wisconsin to broaden its impact upon the state and communities and to provide applied research and assistance with social problem solving and reform legislation.

Women’s enrollment in higher education grew almost eight-fold from 1870 to 1900. Even though their absolute numbers increased, women were frequently enrolled into separate schools from men or segregated by gender in separate classes in co-educational institutions (Nash, 2005). The enrollment of African-Americans remained extremely limited during this same period (Thelin, 2004). According to Goldin, Katz, and Kuziemko (2006), rates of college attendance for men and women were very similar from 1900 to 1930 with male enrollment increasing disproportionately through 1947 (except for the period of World War II) when male undergraduates outnumbered females more than 2 to 1. Women then began to catch up, matching male enrollment around 1980, and then exceeding male enrollment.

Between the World War I and World War II, overall college enrollment in the Unites States increased fivefold to 1.3 million, with 15% of the population between the ages of 18 and 20 being enrolled. Following World War II enrollment continued to increase, driven by the G.I. Bill, which paid for war veterans to go to college. Given that the United States armed forces primarily enrolled white males, this group benefited the most from the G.I.Bill. The one million African Americans who served in World War II had equal legal right to the tuition benefits but had less access to higher education, especially in the South due to discrimination (NBER, 2012). Overall enrollment soared to
2.7 million in 1949, and it further increased to 3.6 million in 1960, and doubled again to 7.9 million in 1970 (Thelin, 2004). Flexibility and higher wages within the United States labor market, which allowed students both absence from labor markets and part-time employment, effected the democratization of economic access to higher education (Claval, 1998) for many but not for all.

From 1973 to 1978, an average of 61% of white high school graduates went to college as compared to an average of 56% of African American high school graduates (Black & Sufi, 2002). Furthermore, Black and Sufi found that during “the 1970s and early 1980s, controlling for family background characteristics, blacks were more likely to attend college than equivalent whites” (p. 3). However, Black and Sufi’s analysis does not address what were still varying rates for high school graduation by race. By 1980, the variance in college enrollment rates by race, for high school graduates, was nearly non-existent but rebounded as the average enrollment for whites was 74% for the years 1990 through 1998 versus 59% for African Americans (Black & Sufi, 2002). By 2009, the rates were again very similar with 69.2% of white high school graduates and 68.7% of African American high school graduates enrolling in college (Rampell, 2010).

Two other trends significantly influenced the overall development of higher education in the United States during the last half of the 20th century: funding for scientific research and affiliations with private enterprise (Claval, 1998). The lures of resources and prestige caused many schools to pay less attention to their immediate communities in order to focus their attention on improving their finances and research rankings. Although there were dramatic increases in total government subsidies for higher education during this same period, the cost of higher education increased at a
higher rate than the overall cost of living as measured by the Consumer Price Index, causing these institutions to be increasingly reliant upon student tuition (Lingenfelter, 2008) and hungry for the resources available from research and private enterprise.

While federal resources in the form of GI benefits and student loans made higher education more financially available, many state governments actively worked to increase physical accessibility. Ohio’s Governor James Rhodes kept a 1960s promise to establish a college within “30 miles of every boy and girl in Ohio” (Ohio Board of Regents, 2008, p. 14). While Rhodes’ critics would suggest his interest was more in generating construction jobs and appeasing local political interests, his legacy was to create the foundation for a diverse urban and rural network of place-based educational institutions, entities that impacted and were impacted upon by their local communities.

Thus, many new urban universities in the United States emerged in the mid-twentieth century; their creation was triggered by increased financial access to higher education and the urbanization of the overall population (Elliott, 1994). These institutions of higher education developed within an urban environment increasingly “fragmented by race, social class, and economic function and spread over a huge territory, further divided into at least several counties and perhaps dozens of independent political subdivisions” (Brownell, 1995, p. 22).

Elliott’s (1994) observations on the emergence of urban colleges and universities highlights three important trends: (a) over 75% of the United States population was living in cities as of 1990, (b) the broader economy had begun to shift from “from an industrial base to a knowledge base” (p. 6), and (c) the growth of urban universities and colleges greatly expanded access to higher education—“First-generation college students from all
ethnic groups and lower-income backgrounds began graduating from urban colleges and universities in record numbers” (p. 6). As urban institutions were positioned to serve a growing percentage of the overall population, including those previously underserved, the number of well paying jobs not requiring higher education declined; and the workforce demand and economic return for college graduates increased.

While the potential for positive community impact was great, given the proximity of many universities to large urban populations, financial access and selective admissions policies continued to be a barrier for many potential students (Berube, 1978). This prompted changes at some urban schools, like the City University of New York, to adopt an open admissions policy. This led to higher minority enrollment but did not support academic success as “the open-admissions plan initially failed to offer strong remedial” (p. 36) programs.

Affirming the potential for positive impact by such institutions, Berube (1978) states that many urban universities are not fully responding to the “urban challenge” of assisting “central cities [that] are beset with ever mounting problems and looking to the learning community to help in providing answers” (p.3). Writing about this same time, the federal government (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1970) was more critical in reviewing the response of urban-situated colleges and universities to what it called the “urban crisis . . . . Unhappily, few, if any universities find themselves prepared to respond” (p. iii). Berube (1978) called for the establishment of “urban grant universities” (p. 125), citing parallels to the land grant universities of the 1800’s. Ernest Boyer (1996), writing some years later, found the situation seemingly unchanged: “The campus is being viewed as a place where students get credentialed and faculty get
tenured, while the overall work of the academy does not seem particularly relevant to the nation’s most pressing . . . problems” (p. 15).

This brief review highlights a societal ambivalence toward the evolving role of higher education in the United States. The longitudinal trend is clearly one of increased overall participation and enrollment in higher education. However, growth in access has not been uniform across population groups. Women and minority participation grew but at lesser rates. Is the role of institutions of higher education to benefit all or some? Should such institutions reflect and reinforce social and community stratifications or be agents of profound change and community development? These same questions are faced today by institutions working toward improved university-community engagement.

2.3 Context and Nature of Urban Universities

Development of Urban Universities.

Some universities with an urban-focused mission began in the late 1800s. Cleveland State University’s 1870 beginnings were as an educational offshoot of the local YMCA; Temple University began in Philadelphia in 1884 with a stated purpose of helping working people (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1970). It was not, however, until the economic democratization of higher education in the post-World War II era that new and expanding urban institutions served large numbers of urban residents. This increased demand was driven by the increased shift of the overall population to urban areas, the G.I. Bill that helped 3 million World War II veterans to attend school, and the post-war baby boom (Servino, 1996).
In 1981, Thomas Bonner, President of Wayne State University in Detroit, wrote about the nature of urban universities:

What exactly is an urban university? It is not merely a university located in a city; it is also of the city, with an obligation to serve the needs of the city’s diverse citizenry. It has a special concern with issues of urban life. It does research and provides intellectual leadership in efforts to deal with urban problems. It educates skilled professionals to meet the city’s needs. It is a major resource for private industry and organized labor. It uses the city as a laboratory, clinic, and workshop for students of social sciences, law, medicine, fine arts, and municipal government. It offers access to higher learning to people of all classes, races, and backgrounds, at all hours of the day and on weekends. Its population is broadly representative of the poor and the middle class, the minority and ethnic groups, the young and the old. (Bonner, 1981, p. 48)

Bonner’s essay distinguishes urban universities from those urban-situated entities that may offer service options or community programming. The fullness of engagement of Bonner’s urban university description points to how the community is part of the university sinew and neural network and not a peripheral add-on. If the community is merely a source of inputs (e.g. students, labor, money, supplies and materials) and a target of institutionally prescribed outputs (e.g. graduates, events, employees), then the institution has missed opportunities for new learning and scholarship and is a parsimonious contributor to the greater good.
Attempting to further define urban colleges and universities, Elliott (1994) emphasizes that “The commitment of those institutions to be engaged with people in the communities they serve…is at least one major and commonly accepted descriptor”; he acknowledges, however, “that not all universities situated in or near cities can be defined in the urban context” (p. 22). While acknowledging that urban universities may also be distinguished by location, community involvement, diversity in student population, and other factors, he states that the most important factor is an institutional self-image wherein the university is “of the city” and in a “symbiotic” (p. 23) relationship with the city. Elliott also acknowledges the term “metropolitan university” (p. 25) to describe urban universities with such relationships with their urban context.

Metropolitan universities developed out of the traditions and dialogue of urban universities. Hathaway, Mulhollan, and White (1995) describe metropolitan universities as those institutions which seek to engage with their communities for the betterment of those communities. However, they draw important distinctions in meaning:

The term urban…refers in the minds of many of our constituents only to the core or the central city. For too many the term “urban university” refers only to a set of shared characteristics. The metropolitan university must address the challenges presented by the inner city as one facet of its overall responsibility, but those challenges do not exist in isolation from those of the whole metropolitan area, nor can they be addressed successful in isolation. (p. 9)

The Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) is an organization of urban and metropolitan universities, which seeks to utilize education, research, and
service to improve the communities in which they are located (CUMU, 2011). The relevance of this membership organization is that its member universities not only seek to be engaged with their communities but are also seeking to strengthen the effectiveness of such efforts through networking, research, conferences and other practices which support both university-community engagement and traditional scholarship practices. Its members define themselves as follows:

A CUMU institution…

- Has a mission that includes teaching, research, and public service;
- Contains a diverse student body-in age, ethnic, and racial identity and socioeconomic background-reflecting demographics characteristic of the region;
- Responds to community and regional needs while striving for national excellence;
- Serves as an intellectual and creative resource for the metropolitan region to contribute to the economic development, social health, and cultural vitality through education, research, and professional outreach;
- Is located in a major metropolitan region;
- Believes in giving its students practical, real life experiences as part of their education;
- Actively builds partnerships to achieve its goals; and
- Provides an educated citizenry and workforce for the state

(Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities, 2011, para. 1)
Whether an individual institution sees its area of impact as the traditional urban center or across the urban region is perhaps not as important as the decision to be of service to the community. If an institution makes a commitment to community engagement, it is likely that the process of engagement itself will propel the university toward the specific locus of actionable projects and potential partners. As complex organizations with many voices, the choice to be engaged can be more easily made than selection of specific patterns of engagement.

*Universities as Complex Organizations*

Universities are inherently complex organizations (Szerkes, 2011). They are diffuse organizations characterized by decentralized authority, complex administrative structures, conflicting goals, and an absence of focal measures of success such as profit (Birnbaum, 1988). Faculty members are encouraged to pursue unique interests. Administrators and staff are pulled toward and between diverse and sometimes competing institutional objectives, community actors, and operational needs.

Universities are not characterized by rigid command and control hierarchies; structurally, such entities are held together with “loose coupling[s]” (Birnbaum, 2000, p. 14), which make them resistant to change and external influences. Such loose organizational couplings both reflect and reinforce the diffusion of power in such organizations (Hartley & Harkavy, 2010). Alfred (2005), writing about institutional governance in higher education in the 21st century, states “A new organization has emerged—one with multiple suborganizations (departments, administrative units, and work groups) pursuing specific operating objectives within the structure of a loosely
coupled parent organization” (p. 85). Most, if not all universities, have multiple administrative hierarchies (Twomby, 1990; Alfred, 2008) dealing with departmental issues, program structures, student issues, community needs and other aspects of daily operations. Thus there is not only a diffusion of organizational decision making and authority, it is also likely that there are overlapping responsibilities and competing decision makers.

Furthermore, academic freedom and the independent scholarship of faculty tend to breed more diversity of interest than uniformity. This provides another layer of complexity to the prioritization of institutional needs and the process of interacting with the broader environment.

Murphy (2004) points out that many public, urban universities serve student populations with a broad diversity of race, ethnicity, culture, language, and immigration status. The complexity of the institutional response necessary to serve an increasingly diverse student population is further extended as universities become de-centralized in place and instructional methodology with the movement toward off-campus instructional sites and on-line learning (Alfred, 2008; Birnbaum, 2004; Johnstone, 1994).

An orchestra may be a more apt organizational metaphor than a corporation for a university. Like orchestra conductors, university presidents can seemingly start things in motion and bring things to a halt, but their influence fluctuates between the prelude and the finale. It seems that the very nature of universities fosters a diversity of competing internal perspectives and objectives for institutional action. The skill of the conductor is more often evident in the subtle blending of notes and knowing when to emphasize (or
de-emphasize) a specific section. Similarly, university leaders may be viewed as most effective when separate units work in harmony with alternating rhythms.

Externally, the urban environments in which these institutions operate are themselves increasingly “fragmented by race, social class, and economic function and spread over a huge territory, further divided into at least several counties and perhaps dozens of independent political subdivisions” (Brownell, 1995, p. 22). Altman (2006) points out that institutional relationships with communities are further complicated by existent relationships within communities such as “local government and community organizations (including religious entities), residents and organizations [and] universities and communities (town-gown affairs)” (p. 184).

The very nature of institutions of higher education fosters a diversity of competing views and objectives for institutional action. Increasingly diverse student populations and the urban/regional context of metropolitan universities pose additional complexity. Those institutions seeking relationships with their communities must learn how to build relationships with community partners while aligning divergent internal forces, amidst frequently disparate and fragmented community voices. The development of such mutually beneficial partnerships is referred to as community engagement.

2.4 University-Community Engagement and Partnership Formation

University-community engagement is characterized by the formation and management of mutually beneficial partnerships. Partnership formation is a complex process, especially when addressing potential partners with divergent needs. Partnership formation and management are the work of organizational boundary spanners.
University-Community Engagement

Community engagement is defined by the Carnegie Foundation (2007) as “the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (para. 3). Sandman (2007) emphasizes the two-way, reciprocal dimension of such relationships as the critical element distinguishing engagement from typical community service or outreach activities. The key to differentiating community engagement from traditional community service and outreach is not the overt nature of the project—e.g., a community health project for example—but the nature of the processes that guide the project. It could be a fine service project for a medical school, working unilaterally, to start a free medical clinic for area residents. To involve community resources, residents, and organizations in active partnership(s) for the planning, operation, and/or evaluation of the clinic is more reflective of the principles and processes of community engagement. It is this notion of reciprocal partnership that distinguishes engagement from community service and one-way outreach and service programs that make campus resources available to the community.

Boyer is acknowledged by Sandmann (2006), McNall, Reed, Brown and Allen (2009), and others as a defining influence on the concept of community engagement within higher education. In Scholarship Reconsidered: The Priorities of the Professorate, Boyer (1990) affirms the history of service while issuing a challenge for engagement—“Can America’s colleges and universities, with all the richness of their resources, be of greater service to the nation and the world?” (p. 3). Boyer (1996) does not ask the
academy to abandon traditional scholarship for service but instead to widen the focus and concept of scholarship “to become more vigorously engaged in the issues of our day” (p. 17). This “scholarship of engagement means connecting the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems . . . [and] . . . creating a special climate in which the academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and more creatively with each other” (p. 19).

In The Wingspread Declaration on Renewing the Civic Responsibilities of Research Universities (Boyte & Hollander, 1998), university leaders challenge those who work in higher education to go beyond the more modest steps of expanding service learning and rewarding faculty for community-facing research in order “to tap and free the powers and all elements of our schools–our faculty, our staff, and administrators for public engagement” (Boyte & Hollander, 1998, p. 4). Building upon the Wingspread Declaration, The Presidents’ Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education (Erlich and Hollander, 2000) was issued by the Campus Compact to “articulate the commitment of all sectors of higher education…to their civic purposes” (p. 1). Specifically, they identified the need for community partnerships, which improved the quality of community life, and the quality of the education provided.

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities promotes the similarly defined but differently named concept of “public engagement”–inclusive of outreach, applied research, service learning and other reflections of education institutions serving as “stewards of place. . . . The publically engaged institution is fully committed to direct, two-way interaction with communities and other external constituencies through
the development, exchange, and application of knowledge, information, and expertise for
mutual benefit” (AASCU, 2002, p. 9).

As described above, Boyer, The Carnegie Foundation, The Wingspread
Declaration, and the AASCU all call for a partnering between university and community
resources for the betterment of both sectors. Beyond the rhetoric, they each seek to
convey that university community-engagement is not a public relations strategy but a
core manner of doing business. Holland (1997) reinforces this perspective. She identifies
eight dimensions of institutional life—mission, leadership, promotion and tenure,
organization structure and funding, student involvement and curriculum, faculty
involvement, community involvement, and external communications and fundraising—
which should reflect community engagement by institutions of higher education. While
her intent is to identify graduated levels of institutional commitment across the identified
dimensions, Holland’s underlying message is that engagement is not an add-on or an
optional activity but a core institutional process. This integration of community
engagement is exemplified at by Langseth and McVeety’s (2007) work reporting on
Portland State University. This institution has formally acknowledged engagement as its
“core leadership position” (p.117) for scholarship, learning, and partnerships. Reflective
of this commitment, the university’s motto is “Let Knowledge Serve the City” (p.120).
Such statements could easily be written off as puffery and smooth talk. However, if
seriously applied, they represent a commitment to service and a profound realization of
the inherent value of the scholarship of engagement (Sandmann, 2007) which integrates
the traditional scholarly work of teaching, research, and service with the concepts of
“mutually beneficial, reciprocal partnerships” (p. 549).
Barbara Holland (2005), professor at the University of Sidney, points to developing models of engagement in “South Africa, India, Southeast Asia, Australia, the Philippines, and Europe” (p. 246) to support her view that community engagement is an emerging global trend in higher education. Sharma (2012) indirectly supports this view in her report on the Association of South East Asian Nations higher education conference wherein university leaders complained that their outreach and community engagement efforts adversely impacted their academic rankings.

The Carnegie Foundation (2007) offers a comprehensive set of criteria to be met if an entity is to be listed under the accreditation heading of community engagement. Such criteria speak to institutional inputs (e.g. procedures, resources) to the process, again supporting the position that engagement is integral to institutional functioning.

Watson (2007) questions the emergence of community engagement as a recent phenomenon. He labels this movement “recently renewed interest” (p. 9) in the civic and social roles of universities and colleges while pointing back to the founding of Oxford and Cambridge Universities and their impact on the professions, as well as the founding of land grant universities in the United States and their impact on agriculture and mechanization as proof of far earlier engagement by the academy. Even Boyer (1996) acknowledges the long standing service and practical impact of America’s colleges and universities by stating, “that for more than 350 years, higher education and the larger purposes of American society have been inextricably interlocked” (p. 11). Whether or not the concept of engagement is new is perhaps a moot point. Whether one looks at the founding of Oxford and Cambridge, the U.S. land grant schools or today’s community
engaged universities, it is clear that institutions of higher education contribute significant value to and impact their environments.

Fisher, Fabricant and Simmons (2004) list four primary types of contemporary community engagement: service learning, local economic development, community-based research, and social work initiatives. Using the alternate label of university outreach, Altman distinguishes six different roles for community-engaged universities within their communities: “1) student voluntarism and service learning courses, 2) academic department based partnerships, 3) university-business partnerships, 4) general community relations, 5) comprehensive issues-based partnerships, and 6) real estate development” (p. 13). Additionally, both frameworks identify patterns of community engagement that offer benefits to both the communities and to the institutions of higher education. Both frameworks identify diverse portfolios of engagement activities.

In contrast to grand statements of mission and strategic direction, most community engagement partnerships are framed one at a time and are specific in nature. Yapa (2009) writes on the experience of Pennsylvania State University’s use of community collaborations to reduce the cost of food and housing for area residents and to create local jobs. Sundberg (2002) describes a partnership between Carl Sandburg Community College and local manufacturers to establish the Center for Manufacturing Excellence, a separate independent corporation controlled by both the college and local manufacturers, to train workers.

It is also important to note the diversity of institutional motives in supporting community engagement. While Boyer (1990), Erlich and Hollander (2000), and other writers call on university leaders to respond to community needs with a noble sense of
mission and purpose, Judd and Adams (2008) point out that university-community partnerships are “generally formed to respond to opportunities, threats, and mandates” (p. 117) as perceived by the institution of higher education. Reardon (2006) concurs by stating that many such efforts stem from “real or perceived threats confronting the campus” (p. 106). While the University of Pennsylvania is regarded as a model institution for community engagement (Soska & Butterfield, 2004), an important motivating circumstance was the isolating impact of the deteriorating West Philadelphia neighborhood in which the school was located.

Dempsey (2010) makes the case that university-community engagement reflects a blending of institutional and societal self-interests. She points out the frequency of universities being called upon to compensate for deficiencies by government and market forces in addressing social ills, the need for higher education to demonstrate its societal relevance amidst competing demand for government funding, and the way many institutions are embracing engagement as a revenue development strategy.

**Partnership Formation**

From the Carnegie Foundation (2007) definition of community engagement as “the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (para. 3), it is evident that the formation of institutional-community partnerships is a critical element of the engagement process. Thus it is important to look at the process of partnership formation. Forming effective and sustaining partnerships is a complex work. There is diversity in the intensity
of interaction, requisite sophistication of inter-organizational processes, significant demands for interpersonal leadership, and an emphasis on reciprocal trust and shared problem solving.

Partnerships vary in intensity of interaction. Sockett (1998) identifies four hierarchical levels of partnership formation:

- **Service** relationships, where an individual or unit volunteers support for a school-related function;
- **Exchange** relationships, where the parties exchange resources for their mutual benefit;
- **Cooperative** relationships, where the parties plan together and share responsibilities; and
- **Systemic and Transformative** relationships, where the parties share responsibility for planning, decision making, funding, operations, and evaluation of activities, and where each institution is transformed through the relationship. (p. 76)

McNall and Brown (2009) assert that there is significant agreement on the organizational characteristics of effective partnerships—“cooperative goal setting and planning [. . .] shared power, resources, and decision making [. . .] group cohesion [. . .] and partnership management” (p. 319). However, there is little understanding of the relationship between these characteristics and partnership outcomes. Their study of university-community partnerships and perceived benefits indicates that effective partnership management is associated with greater research on the focal community need.
or issue and that improved service outcomes for clients are associated with the co-
creation of knowledge among the partners.

Sockett (1998) cites the importance of reciprocal trust in partnership formation, identifing four rules for forming partnerships. These include joint clarification of the level of partnership sought, active decision making as to intention to grow through the four levels, promoting awareness of what it means for organizations to share ownership and control, and a shared process of review and evaluation of the partnership. According to Silka (2004), key differentiating factors in community engagement versus other types of interface are the concepts of partnerships and reciprocity. Perception of the above listed roles and activities by community members will likely vary, dependent upon whether the activities are done to them or done with them. Sandmann (2007) supports this position. In a longitudinal review of engagement literature, she emphasizes the two-way, reciprocal dimension of engagement as the defining element of campus-community partnerships. This notion of reciprocal partnership distinguishes engagement from community service and one-way outreach programs.

Fitzgerald, Allen, and Roberts (2010) go beyond the principle of two-way, reciprocal partnership benefits and assert the importance of “each partner [being] aware of the other’s needs from the outset and...each partner agreeing to respect the needs throughout the duration of the partnership” (p. 15). Holland and Gelmon (1998) support a far more functional view of the importance of mutual benefit in stating “sustainability is directly associated with ongoing sense of reciprocity” (p. 107). Bringle and Hatcher (2002), Sandy and Holland (2006), and Silka (1999) point out that the university-community partnerships are, at their core, personal relationships between campus and
community representatives. To be successful, such partnerships must emphasize shared problem solving and reciprocal trust. The institutional facilitation and management of such relationships is frequently the work of individuals formally recognized within their organization as boundary spanners (AASCU, 2004; Thompson, 1967; Wachner and Arthurs, 2007).

2.5 University Boundary Spanning Roles and Barriers to Community Engagement

This section seeks to define the work of boundary spanners within universities, to identify the different roles and characteristics of boundary spanners, and to describe barriers experienced by boundary spanners within higher education. This is complex work carried out within complex environments.

*University Boundary Spanning Roles and Barriers to Engagement*

Those who work across organizational boundaries to address the needs of both their host institutions and their communities are called “boundary spanners” (Weerts and Sandmann, 2008, p. 93). They “are actors who are primarily responsible for interacting with constituents outside their organization. These spanners negotiate power and balance between the organization and external agents to achieve mutual objectives” (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010, p. 708). Boundary spanners are also defined as follows:

- individuals who cross the boundaries between discrete organizations, connecting the different members of the partnership and holding it together….
- Boundary spanners are those faculty members, teachers, principals and, yes, university presidents who are able to bridge…
- the missions of the different partnership institutions, organizations, and agencies….
- They provide information, experience
and contact across the partnership, facilitating trust, communication, and action.

(AASCU, 2004, p.30)

Organizational boundary spanning is a diffuse function, not constrained within a single unit or individual role (Friedman & Podolny, 1992; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). Weerts and Sandmann (2010) have delineated “four distinct but flexible roles in their work on engagement: community-based problem solver, technical expert, internal engagement advocate, and engagement champion” (p. 712). Problem solvers may have a community advocacy orientation and bring technical skills along with partnership formation, interpersonal, and group development skills; these individuals are frequently non-academic administrative staff characterized as “possessing social closeness to the community” (p. 712). “Social closeness” can be alternately described as strong personal identification with external community attitudes and perspectives. Technical experts are boundary spanners with specific skills and/or knowledge perceived as important to a particular application or problem; sometimes technical experts are perceived as less effective in developing mutual relationships. Internal engagement advocates are university staff, frequently faculty, with defined responsibilities to develop institutional capacity for engagement (e.g. rewards, financial resources, formal organizational structure). Engagement champions are typically those institutional representatives in senior leadership positions who may focus on broader strategic alliances and partnerships, political support, and resource acquisition. All four roles have varied components of “technical” and “socio-emotional” (p. 720) tasks.

Tushman (1977) describes the importance of boundary spanning roles in the process of innovation. He states “One critical aspect of the innovation process is the
ability of the innovating unit to gather information from and transmit information to several external domains” (p.587).

Overton and Burkhardt (1999) point to the importance of leadership with respect to the establishment of effective university community partnerships and identify four elements of such leadership—vision, boundary spanning, engagement, and commitment. They go on to identify five contributing characteristics that relate to the boundary-spanning capacity of institutional leaders—distrusting hierarchies, interpreting academic disciplines and divisions to the community, appreciation for community culture and history, bridging academic language, promoting mutual understanding, and avoiding limitations of institutional policy and procedure.

Alexander, Comfort, Weiner, and Bogue (2001) examined leadership issues in community health partnerships. They “assert that leadership in a partnership is differentiated from that in a traditional, hierarchical organization in that participation is voluntary and egalitarian and often entails cooperation by organizations with different cultures and agendas.” (p. 159). Alexander et al.’s direction to boundary spanners is that they cannot rely upon traditional modes of leadership. Pasque (2010) cites the importance of boundary spanners having good communication skills, but states that such staff must operate with sensitivity to power relationships and a commitment to altering the underlying processes of social reproduction in order to promote greater societal equity.

What can be derived from the above descriptions of boundary spanner characteristics is that such positions are not entry-level organizational roles. They require mature professionals with sophisticated skills and political awareness.
Holland (2009) points out that many institutions have created formal staff positions to perform and help coordinate these boundary spanning functions. It is common, though not exclusive, that such staff is administrative or allied staff versus tenure track faculty or academic unit administrators (Szerkes, 2011; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008, 2010). Titles of such individuals are varied, such as Executive in Residence (Cleveland State University, 2011), Civic Engagement Coordinator (University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2010), Director of Outreach & Business Centers (Cleveland State University, 2009), Associate Vice President for Strategic Initiatives and Engagement (University of Akron, 2009), and Associate Vice President for Community Engagement (Xavier University, 2010). From the titles above, one might infer a mixture of positions at middle and upper levels of their respective organizations. Based on the personal knowledge of this researcher, these positions incorporate varying degrees of authority and autonomy within their respective institutions. What these roles share is the purpose of fostering relationships valued by their employers.

It is important to note that the increased presence and enlarging roles of administrative staff in universities is a focus of debate. Ginsberg (2011) cites the recent growth in university administrative and support staff. He affirms an earlier common practice wherein “moonlighting academics typically occupied administrative slots on a part time or temporary basis and planned in due course to return to full-time teaching and research” (p. 9) by further stating “Whatever their individual faults and gifts, faculty administrators seldom have to be reminded that the purpose of the university was the promotion of education and research, and their own short-term managerial endeavors tended to not distract them from their long term commitments” (p. 9). Ginsberg notes that
university administrators formerly had to rely upon faculty cooperation to do many of the things that are now done by university staff. Szerkes (2011) states that “running these large complex organizations requires a mixed set of specific skills” (p.683) and this has led to the hiring of professionals. The polarities of this debate are both true: The creation of knowledge is the core work of universities, and the organizational infrastructure of the university should be well run. The challenge of the debate is to avoid both “marginalizing faculty” (Ginsberg, 2011, p. 10) and having faculty see professional staff solely as “traffic wardens” (Szerkes, 2011, p.689) or other agents of control. The current study does not assume that boundary spanning work done by non-academic administrative staff is superior (or inferior) to such work done by tenure track faculty, merely that it is different. The facts that such staff roles exist as part of the university-community boundary spanning process and that they are seemingly increasing in number both support the need for the study of such roles.

Szekeres (2004) points out that there is no uniform terminology for referring to university administrative staff. For the purposes of this current study, the label of “non-academic, administrative staff” will be used to describe those with boundary spanning responsibilities who are not tenure track faculty or academic administrators such as academic department heads, deans, provosts, or presidents.

The day to day experience of such administrative staff can be stressful in and of itself, even absent boundary spanning responsibilities. Mcinnis (1998) reports that administrative staff members frequently feel unappreciated by faculty. Dobson (2000) describes a general tendency by faculty to describe non-academic staff in a negative way. Szerkeres (2004) goes further in stating that “in most cases administrative staff in
universities are largely invisible” (p. 7). Whether such attitudes are fully generalizable or not, they point out that such staff are sometimes viewed as different, and perhaps separate from the work of the scholarly purposes of the institution. This sense of difference also suggests that some administrative staff may have a sense of being less powerful than other staff.

**Barriers to Community Engagement**

A key element of the Carnegie Foundation (2007) definition of community engagement is that the resulting partnerships should be “mutually beneficial” (para. 3) to both the institution and the community partner. Sandmann (2007) conducted a longitudinal review of engagement literature and identified the two-way, reciprocal dimension of engagement as the defining element of campus-community partnerships. Boundary spanners who seek to form and maintain mutually beneficial university-community partnerships face many barriers. There are multiple sources of potential barriers to partnership formation. Barriers to partnership formation are also de facto barriers to community engagement. As detailed below, potential barriers to partnership formation may be found within the institutions that employ the boundary spanners, within the communities with which institutions attempt to partner, and within boundary spanners themselves.

Hartley and Harkavy (2010) identify five aspects of universities that are impediments to engaged scholarship. These include elements of organizational structure, culture, and tradition. The diffuse nature of authority within university makes it challenging to focus resources or align organizational direction. “Predominant academic
norms” (p. 122) are less likely to support community-focused academic work.
Institutional priorities may focus on pursuing research funding and the related commercialization of knowledge. Professional reward systems for academic staff may not recognize engaged scholarship. Lastly, the attitudes of senior faculty may directly and indirectly discourage new members of the academy from pursuing this work.

While it would be a gross misperception to attribute the non-responsiveness of universities to their communities solely to the attitudes of tenure track faculty members, the literature offers a history of such perspectives. As one example, the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (1970) studied urban institutions of higher education and their response to their communities’ challenges and cited faculty power and the tenure system as a potential barrier to such service: “The traditions and structure of universities guarantee a certain irresponsibility of faculty power because responsibility and accountability are divorced.” (p. 41). It seems clear that the word “irresponsibility” herein reflects an assumption of a need for greater control or at least alignment. Clearly, individual faculty interests may serve to cultivate or bypass opportunities for community engagement. It is a matter of perspective as to whether academic freedom poses barriers to or supports community engagement; clearly it impacts both.

To position tenure track faculty interests as pro or con to engagement indirectly raises the question of whose interests should drive the community engagement agenda. Should the scholarship of engagement be driven exclusively by faculty? If one views such faculty as the primary asset and value proposition of the university, then this makes a great deal of sense. Community pressures and institutional administrative preferences compel a blending of interests. Faculty independence is not a barrier to engagement; the
potential barrier herein is the inability of an institution to arrive at a shared set of priorities reflecting the diverse interests of the institution and its community. Such shared values need to be evident in both the soft messaging of campus rhetoric and the bottom line of faculty compensation and other resources for supporting community engagement.

Omeara (2002) found that many faculty members, in looking at the work of their peers such as in promotion or merit review, doubt the scholarly value of service scholarship. Diamond (2002) is more blunt in describing historic institutional bias for traditional research in stating “faculty members who placed emphasis on teaching or service, or whose research was viewed as more applied than basic, often did so at great personal risk, jeopardizing tenure or sacrificing any hope of gaining full professorship” (p. 73). Simply put, such work frequently goes uncompensated, unappreciated, and ignored.

Bringle, Hatcher, Jones, and Plater (2006) state “when there is convergence of the individual and institutional agendas, faculty members are well-positioned to engage in work that is intrinsically meaningful and the institution is capable of honoring that work with its most significant rewards: salary, promotion, and recognition.” (p. 67). However, Omeara (2002) points out the critical role that organizational values play, stating “even when official policy language includes the evaluation and reward of multiple forms of scholarship, conscious and unconscious values and beliefs held by faculty facilitating the reward system can prevent newer forms of scholarly work from being accepted and rewarded” (p. 76). Even if the responses of individual faculty members do not pose a barrier, the diffusion of faculty interests adds to the complexity of the institution and the potential for conflicting goals. When primary institutional reward and recognition
systems, such as tenure and compensation, fail to reward engagement and time spent on community partnerships, this is a primary structural barrier to partnership formation.

Competing motivations within institutions to engage with communities can also pose barriers to reciprocal partnerships. While community engagement initiatives may frequently reflect idealistic principles, many such efforts stem from “real or perceived threats confronting the campus” (Reardon, 2006, p. 106). While the University of Pennsylvania is regarded as a model institution for community engagement (Soska & Butterfield, 2004), an important motivating circumstance was the isolating impact of the deteriorating West Philadelphia neighborhood in which it was located. Ultimately, the job of boundary spanners is to advance the interests of the university—whether this is a safer community, community learning sites for students, development projects which may displace residents, or other objectives. Caputo (2004) writes that universities are placing increased emphasis on physical security. However legitimate the need, a university’s move to increase security can pose physical and perceptual barriers to community partners. Baum (2000), in a somewhat cynical reflection of the complexities of gaining university agreement to work within the urban environment, states “Those who would form a partnership between the university and a community must persuade community members that they represent the university and must get others within the university, to authorize them to act, acquiesce in their acting, or at least ignore them” (p. 237).

Barriers to effective partnership also exist within perceptions and attitudes of potential community partners. Fermin and Hill (2004) report on the perspective of community participants within university partnerships and point to potential agenda conflicts between the individual, professional and institutional agenda of university
participants and the community side objectives of obtaining and leveraging resources, access to networks, and increasing perceived legitimacy. The authors point to a lack of trust among community partners stemming from “the persistent experience of having their reality reinterpreted, devalued, ignored, or otherwise disrespected” (Fermin & Hill, p. 248). Mulroy (2004) recognizes this dynamic in stating that the “core issue is the extent to which university participants can forge collaborative behaviors” (p.47).

Sandy and Holland (2006) also researched the views of community partners and identified barriers to effective institutional participation, including lack of commitment to true partnership, difficult or unclear access points to the institution, and the concept of time in higher education in which student and faculty obligations are frequently measured in hours, bounded in quarters or semesters, and limited to the academic calendar. Weerts and Sandmann (2010) report harsher community attitudes wherein faculty are sometimes referred to as “poverty pimps” (p. 715); this label was used to describe members of the academy who study and thus may benefit indirectly from adverse social conditions but are not engaged in bettering such conditions. While undoubtedly there are aspects of university operation and culture that inhibit or constrain effective partnership formation, it is perhaps community perceptions and interpretations of same that pose equivalent or greater barriers. For example, a community leader may interpret and label a university representative as uncaring and nonresponsive if the leader asks for help with a summer youth project but is told there is no university budget for summertime assistance. While institutional budget limits pose real constraints, community observers may only see university employees who get a long summer vacation
Further barriers to partnership may be found within the experience of the boundary spanner him or herself. Not only may the individual boundary spanner share the competing motivations described above for faculty and the university institution, but also personal motivations and style may pose additional barriers. According to Leifer and Delbecq (1978), boundary spanners pay attention to five aspects of their experience:

(a) what they are told to pay attention to (superior’s needs, wants); (b) their own wants, needs personalities; (c) some attention cues based on past experience: (d) how and in what context that information to be used; and (e) cues based on whether or not the information is redundant. (p. 47)

Werts and Sandmann (2010) state “tension between technical task roles and social closeness of university boundary spanners can lead some spanners to protect institutional interests while other advocate community interests” (p. 709). Werts and Sandmann suggest that such tensions may be a cause for great personal stress experienced by boundary spanners. It would seem likely that some individual boundary spanners will make choices with the motive of reducing such stress. In some cases, the choices of boundary spanners may reflect explicit, conscious decisions; and in some cases, motivations may not even be evident to the boundary spanner him or herself.

Staff boundary spanners work as agents of complex educational institutions with diverse motivations and diffused power. The actual work of partner formation is very challenging given the complexity of universities, the complexity of urban environments, perceptions of potential community partners, and the choices and motivation of boundary spanners. Even in those institutions fully committed to the principles of community engagement, it seems inevitable that boundary spanners attempting to design mutually
beneficial relationships between separate entities with multiple stakeholders will experience role conflict as they promote alignment between diverse community and institutional agendas and their own experience.

2.6 Boundary Spanner Role Conflict

The initial intent of this section is to clarify the concept of role conflict, as it will be used to begin the proposed research. Additionally, this section will describe various aspects of role conflict as experienced by various actors within higher education. As will be shown, there is very little literature describing role conflict as experienced by boundary spanners within higher education.

Looking at role conflict in historical perspective, Stryker and Macke (1978) point out that the concept of role conflict is grounded within the two approaches to role theory: “structural-functional and interactionist” (p. 70). Structural-functional “role conflict is caused by the simultaneous occupancy of conflicting structural positions. The role expectations or norms associated with these positions are assumed invariant across situations” (p. 70). For example, the role expectation of a parent to attend a school event could conflict with the role expectations of a worker to come to work, or a university staff boundary spanner who may have choose between going to evening community meetings as a representative of the university or taking evening classes to finish an advanced degree. Stryker and Macke further point out that a specific status, such as supervisor, may actually encompass a number of roles such as disciplinarian, confidante of subordinate, or colleague to other supervisors; such separate roles could be another source of conflict.
“Interactionist role theory…emphasizes the individual’s experience of conflicting expectations, not simply the existence of the structure. The focus shifts from the impact of the structure on person via position and role to the influence of one person on another via role-making and negotiation” (Stryker & Macke, 1978, p. 71). Within interactionist role theory, role expectations are negotiated and socially constructed. Role conflict results when common meaning is not established by the individual and others in the same social space.

Stryker and Macke (1978) further state:

Role conflict takes five basic forms: Structurally competing demands of various parts in a role set; conflicting reactions of the same individuals to the same behaviors; differences or lack or clarity in others’ expectations; and conflict between role expectations and self-concept. (p. 72)

This typology appears to affirm both the structural-functional and interactionist scaffolding of role definition and role conflict.

Stryker and Burke (2000) write about the concept of identity, in which each individual has a specific experience of self in relationship to each group to which they belong:

In identity theory usage, social roles are expectations attached to positions occupied in networks of relationships; identities are internalized role expectations. The theory asserts that role choices are a function of identities so conceptualized, and that identities within self are organized in a salience hierarchy reflecting the importance of hierarchy as an organizational principle in society. (Stryker & Burke, p. 286)
While the concept of salience as a directive process might be interpreted by the reader to understand role choice as a cerebral, non-emotive process; Stryker and Burke do acknowledge the impact of emotions and related stress as individuals seek to reconcile conflicting identities. Stryker (2007) positions identity theory within the construct of symbolic interactionism: “society shapes self, and self shapes social behavior. The proposition not only admits to, but insists upon, the possible reciprocity of its components: social behavior can impact self, and society and self can impact society” (p.1089).

The progression of Stryker’s work above—proceeding from separate, almost mechanical views of role behavior and related possible conflict to more continuously interactive processes between the individual and the societal context—reflects and perhaps parallels the development process of partnerships wherein discrete partners enter into a process of negotiation of new meaning while each partner influences the other and the work. This is consistent with the views of Weerts and Sandmann (2008) who point out that the work of university-community engagement is best understood within a constructivist paradigm of knowledge creation. They state that “constructivism suggests that the knowledge process is local, complex and dynamic” (p. 78) and “boundary spanners act as conveners, problem solvers, and change agents who negotiate the wants and needs of parties involved in the process of creating and disseminating knowledge” (p. 79).

Hecht (2001) defines role conflict in terms of competing roles; she writes of family obligations versus work obligations. In doing so, she leads this discussion to an important distinction in the definition of role conflict to be used in this study. Hecht’s
description of “competing demands” (p. 112) helps to differentiate the idea of competing roles or inter-role conflicts (Love, Tatman, & Chapman, 2010) from role conflict.

It is the intent of this study to explore the concept of role conflict as experienced by boundary spanners solely within their role as a university staff member and not amidst the full myriad of personal, family, social, and professional roles. This research will rely upon the work of Rizzo, House, and Litzman (1970) to provide a starting point for the study of role conflict herein. They defined role conflict to include four scenarios—conflict between an individual’s values and the demands of a role, conflict stemming from insufficient resources and role expectations, conflict between multiple roles assigned to the same individual, and role conflict stemming from competing external expectations. This typology appears to represent a blending of the above structural-functional and interactionist theories.

To work strictly from a structural-functional or interactionist perspective would limit the research process of understanding the experience of role conflict. The acknowledgement of both such influences is consistent with the concept of symbolic interactionism, wherein “society shapes self, and self shapes society behavior. This proposition not only admits to, but insists upon, the possible reciprocity of its components: social behavior can impact self, and society and self can impact society” (Stryker, 2007, p.1089). Personal agency both is subject to societal context and directly impacts such context through action and construction of meaning.

While at first glance the above referenced work of Rizzo, House and Litzman (1970) seems dated, contemporary references in the literature appear to support its foundational nature and current relevance. It is recognized in two separate meta-analyses
of role stress (which includes the concept of role conflict) as carried out by Fried, Shirom, Gilboa and Cooper (2008) and Ortqvist and Wincent (2006). Fried, Shirom, Gilboa, and Cooper found that 80% of the studies they reviewed relied upon the 1970 work of Rizzo, House, and Litzman. Similarly, Ortqvist and Wincent relied upon the same work to help frame their meta-analysis of 300 journal articles on role stress, which includes the concepts of role ambiguity, role conflict and role, overload.

Keller and Holland (1975) found widely varying degrees of role stress among boundary spanners. When inter-organizational goals were in alignment, there was less role conflict; and when goals differed, there was greater role conflict. Miles (1976) found a direct relationship between role conflict and boundary spanning activities among research and development professionals—“Persons engaged in these activities must maintain a delicate system of linkages across different systems or subsystems and this linking function is viewed as a major source of strain and conflict in complex organizations” (p. 173). Given the complex natures of institutions of higher education and urban communities, mis-alignment of inter-organizational goals is likely the more common situation facing university-community boundary spanners as they begin their work.

Friedman and Podolny (1992) state that “the standard way to resolve conflict is either to ignore the role expectations of one side or the other or to create rituals that allow negotiators to convince each side that the negotiators are playing the roles required of them” (p. 29). Reflecting historic concurrence, Getzels and Guba (1954) describe the adverse impact of such situations in which “An actor who is in conflict must necessarily ignore some of the expectations of one or more or the roles, and to the extent that he
does, he is held to be ineffective” (p. 166). Such choices to ignore the needs of one side or the other would appear to be at odds with the core values of university-community engagement and might elicit the experience of role conflict for a boundary spanner committed to such values.

Perrone, Zaheer, and McEvily (2003) write that “due to their unique location in the organization, boundary spanners are simultaneously exposed to competing expectations from their own and from the partner organization” (p. 423). The authors differentiate between the concepts of “role taking . . . [and] role making” (p. 424). In role taking, the individual accepts and complies with the expectations of others; and in role making, “incumbents actively influence the definition of their role in a way that is mutually satisfactory” (p.424) to others and to the individual. This distinction between mechanical acceptance of a role and the creation and negotiation of a role provides confirmation of both the potential for role conflict and the constructivist nature of role behavior decision making. However, this role making process sets the stage for greater role conflict by boundary spanners who must achieve mutually satisfying role definitions with discrete groups.

Rasch, Hutchison and Tellefson (1986) identify role conflict and boundary spanning as major sources of stress for administrators in research universities; these stressors may result in job dissatisfaction, anxiety, and physical problems. Amey (1990) states that role conflict is a major source of dissonance for new administrators in higher education and that it is sometimes overwhelming. “Mid-level administrators seem to be the quintessential sufferers of role conflict” (p. 80). They are caught between “the often competing agendas and perceptions of vertical and horizontal constituents” (p. 80). If left
unresolved, the resulting dissonance “can lead to lower job satisfaction and self-confidence, higher job tension and psychological strain, and greater feelings of futility and anxiety” (p. 81). Hellawell and Hancock (2001) write about how academic middle managers increasingly experience personal vulnerability as they seek alignment among their vertical and horizontal constituents within institutional cultures increasingly characterized by the exercise of power and less by the process of collegiality. The above findings not only underscore the challenging natures of such work but also articulate the real potential for related role conflict and personal stress.

In looking at mid-level leaders in higher education, Rosser (2004) points out that “by virtue of their midlevel placement within the organizational structure, midlevel leaders are often placed between institutional decision-making and policy implementation” (p. 331). Rosser researched work life issues of midlevel leaders in higher education and found “the more positive midlevel leaders perceive their relationships with faculty members, students, senior administrators, and the public, the more likely they are satisfied with their work experiences and the less likely they are to leave” (p. 331). Lazaridou, Athanasoula-Reppa, and Fris (2008) point out that academic middle managers regularly “experience significant role ambiguity, conflict, stress, and other negative effects–and that their well-being has been compromised” (p. 87). While it is logical that this alignment of positive inter-staff relationships with constituent groups internal to the university would lead to greater work satisfaction, such focus on alignment with internal constituents may make effective connection with external partners more difficult.
Studying role conflict as experienced by academic deans, Wolverton, Wolverton, and Gmelch (1999) found that deans at comprehensive institutions of higher education experienced greater role conflict than those at baccalaureate institutions; this was attributed to a heightened complexity of institutional mission. Their study also reported that deans in urban settings were more likely to report feeling greater role conflict. Given greater complexity of such internal and external environments, it is logical that staff boundary spanners in such settings are also likely to report feeling greater role conflict. Sotirakou (2004) researched role conflict as experienced by department heads in higher education and found that department heads are increasingly being called upon to function as “academic entrepreneur[s]” (p. 349) taking on multiple roles as planners, managers, fundraisers, community liaisons, and partnership developers in addition to their academic work.

Studying role conflict as experienced by faculty in immersion service learning courses, Warner and Esposito (2009) found that faculty working with students in immersion service projects experienced role conflict as instructors who had to both grade student efforts and work as co-participants in the service project. At first look, such studies might appear to reflect inter-role conflicts (Love, Tatman, & Chapman, 2010); upon reflection, perhaps they point out that it is not as easy to parse the separate roles as experienced within a single job. In examining the role of faculty who are engaged with their communities, Stephenson (2011) writes the following:

The role entails deep ethical tensions between the potential for paternalism or manipulation and dignifying empowerment that that are best mediated by active and ongoing attempts by university representatives to ensure that those who are
involved are consistently engaged and viewed as critical participants and
decision-makers who bring vital knowledge and experience to social choice-
making processes. (p. 106)

It seems likely that these same ethical tensions would also be experienced by university
staff boundary spanners.

Fermin and Hill (2004) affirm that boundary spanners promoting university community partnerships frequently have to deal with potential agenda conflicts between the individual, professional and institutional agenda of university participants and the community-side objectives of obtaining and leveraging resources, access to networks, and increasing perceived legitimacy. To the extent that both sets of participants are not focused on the concept of reciprocal or mutual benefits to each party, boundary spanners seeking to create and manage such partnerships may experience competing and perhaps conflicting role expectations.

The reality, however, is that such partnerships are not simply two-sided. Both the university and the community speak with many voices. Chung and Schneider (2002) write on role conflict as experienced by customer service representatives who are attempting to “serve two masters” (p. 70), their employer and their employer’s customers. It is likely that the potential for role conflict is even greater in partnership development where many different voices may be at the table or otherwise affected.

In studying boundary spanning roles at research universities, Werts and Sandmann (2010) report on the challenge of neutrality as experienced by boundary spanners who focus on community problem solving and try to promote partnership responses while avoiding alienating anyone. This is similar to Leifer and Huber’s (1977)
view of “the boundary spanner as a mediator between environmental influences and organization structures” (p. 246). Werts and Sandmann (2010) also suggest that the “success of these partnerships reflected the strength of community-based problem solvers’ interpersonal skills and technical expertise” (p. 19). This observation seems to reinforce the interactionist view of role construction. Werts and Sandmann (2010) further state “tension between technical task roles and social closeness of university boundary spanners can lead some spanners to protect institutional interests while other advocate community interests” (p. 709). Such approaches to role conflict appear to be inconsistent with the aforementioned partnership traits of trust and reciprocal benefit.

In review, Rizzo, House, and Litzman’s (1970) definition of role conflict includes four scenarios—conflict between an individual’s values and the demands of a role, conflict stemming from insufficient resources and role expectations, conflict between multiple roles assigned to the same individual, and role conflict stemming from competing external expectations or demands. These scenarios provide a starting point for this current research project’s examination of role conflict.

Perrone, Zaheer, and McEvily (2003) found that organizational boundary spanners are exposed to competing expectations and hence to the possibility of increased role conflict. Friedman and Podolny (1992) indicate that the typical way of resolving role conflict is to ignore one set of demands or the other; yet, this is not a viable path for staff trying to create partnerships of reciprocal value.

Within university administration roles, Rasche, Hutchinson, and Tellefson (1986) identify boundary spanning and role conflict as major sources of stress. Structural alignment as a mid-level administrator within the university, wherein such roles
frequently include boundary spanning duties, is also a source of stress, anxiety, role conflict, and psychological strain (Amey, 1990; Hellawell & Hancock, 2001; Lazaridou, Athanasoula-Reppa, & Fris, 2008; and Rosser, 2004). Academic deans in urban settings reported experiencing increased role conflict versus those in other settings (Wolverton, Wolverton, & Gmelch, 1999). Sotirakou (2004) found that department heads are increasingly experiencing role conflict as they are called upon to function as both internal leaders and entrepreneurs attracting external resources.

Role conflict and ethical tensions are also experienced by faculty members. Warner and Esposito (2009) found that faculty members working in community settings with students were at increased risk of role conflict. Faculty attempting community engagement face ethical tensions related to perceived choices of paternalism and empowerment when dealing with community representatives (Stephenson, 2011). This may be especially prevalent when faculty are called in as identified experts and face choices of making decisions for community groups as opposed to with community groups.

While organizations can lessen the potential for staff to experience role conflict by assuring alignment of goals (Keller & Holland, 1975) and providing clear organizational support (Stamper & Johlke, 2003), this can be difficult to do in universities which are characterized by diffuse authority (Birnbaum, 2000). Fermin and Hill (2004) point out that boundary spanners may have to deal with agenda conflicts both within the university and within the community. Non-academic staff members’ political skills can also help to reduce conflict (Meurs, Gallagher, & Perrewé, 2010), but reducing conflict is not necessarily the same as effecting agreement. Weerts and Sandmann (2010)
attribute heightened success in developing community partnerships to the interpersonal and technical skills of the boundary spanner.

In a manner consistent with the definition provided by Rizzo, House, and Litzman (1970), role conflict is prevalent in university settings. It can be further exacerbated by conflicting internal and external agendas, employee positioning within the organizational structure, and specific management duties including boundary spanning. There are no recognized methods of effectively dealing with role conflict when the boundary spanner’s objective is to develop partnerships characterized by mutual benefit.

2.7 Summary

The concept of university-community engagement is not a passing fad (Holland, 2005), but for an increasing numbers of institutions, it is a long-term development strategy (Langseth and McVeety, 2007). The development of mutually beneficial partnerships is central to this concept of community engagement. Boundary spanners are individuals who are charged with the creation of such relationships, which have the stated intent of providing reciprocal benefits (Sandmann, 2007).

The loci of urban universities both add to their potential external impact and pose additional barriers to the development and management of such partnerships. Such institutions are loosely structured organizations with multiple stakeholders and multiple agendas. Urban institutions operate in complex environments with multiple demands and influences. The challenge of aligning divergent internal objectives with competing and disparate demands from the external environment would seem to be one of the drivers of role conflict as experienced by boundary spanners.
Individuals with boundary spanning roles are at greater risk for role conflict than are other organizational staff. Role conflict results from the awareness of differing expectations as held by potential partnership participants. Leaders within urban universities are at greater risk for role conflict than those in non-urban settings.

Poorly managed role conflict has adverse consequences for both the focal staff person and his or her employing organization (Gilboa, Shirom, Fried & Cooper, 2008; Singh, Goolsby & Rhoads, 1994; Stamper & Johlke, 2003). Strategies for role conflict management, which do not support the concept of reciprocal benefit to both organizations, are insufficient for the purposes of university-community engagement.

The identified literature offered little description of role conflict as experienced by boundary spanners in urban universities, as well as little effective advice to manage such conflict. In fact, little attention has been paid overall to the “study of the roles and values of university administrative staff” (Mcinnis, 1998, p. 161). It is important to the ongoing development of community engagement that such role conflict be better understood as to how it is experienced by boundary spanners, its drivers and antecedents, how it affects the processes of partnership formation and community engagement, and effective strategies for managing role conflict. A constructivist grounded theory study is proposed to examine the phenomenon of boundary spanner role conflict from the perspective of those who have experienced it.

Charmaz (2006) advocates for a constructivist approach to grounded theory research. She disclaims the idea that theory is discovered; such discoveries are really interpretations. She states that as researchers “We construct our grounded theory through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and
research practices” (p. 10). In parallel fashion, “Research participants’ implicit meanings, experiential view—and researchers’ finished grounded theories—are [also] constructions of reality” (p. 10). Creswell (2007) states that Charmaz’s constructivist approach “includes emphasizing local, diverse worlds, multiple realities, and the complexities of particular worlds, views, and actions” (p. 65).

The use of qualitative methods, and Charmaz’s constructivist approach in particular, appears to be consistent with the nature of the community engagement process. Weerts and Sandmann (2008) assert that the work of university-community engagement is best understood within a constructivist paradigm of knowledge creation. They state that “constructivism suggests that knowledge process is local, complex and dynamic” (p. 78) and “boundary spanners act as conveners, problem solvers, and change agents who negotiate the wants and needs of parties involved in the process of creating and disseminating knowledge” (p. 79).

The intended contribution of this study is to explore the experience of role conflict from the point of view of non-academic university boundary spanners and to pursue an understanding of its process meaning from the point of view of those who have actually experienced it. It is intended that this work will provide guidance to assist such boundary spanners to become more aware of the phenomenon of role conflict and options for managing it. It is further anticipated that this work will add to the current literature on university-community boundary spanners with new learning on the experience of role conflict.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

University staff members who build and sustain partnerships between their higher education institutions and the broader community are frequently referred to as boundary spanners (AASCU, 2004); this work is often described as community engagement (Holland, 2009). It is common, though not exclusive, that such boundary spanners are administrative or allied staff versus tenure track faculty or academic unit administrators at their institutions (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010).

Fermin and Hill (2004) affirm that boundary spanners promoting university community partnerships frequently have to deal with agenda conflicts between the individual, professional, and institutional agendas of university participants and the community-side objectives of obtaining and leveraging resources, access to networks, and increasing perceived legitimacy. Faced with conflicting interests as described above, university boundary spanners may experience role conflict as they attempt to develop partnerships providing reciprocal benefit. The potential for such role conflict is greater
within urban universities, which operate in more complex and diverse environments than do non-urban universities.

The experience of role conflict has potential adverse consequences for both the focal staff person and his or her employing organization (Ortqvist & Wincent, 2006; Singh, Goolsby & Rhoads, 1994; Teh, Yong, Arumugam & Ooi, 2009). Boundary spanning staff members within organizations are at risk of experiencing greater personal stress and anxiety. In addition, the experience of role conflict among boundary spanners may pose a barrier to more effective university-community engagement when strategies for role conflict management do not support the concept of reciprocal benefit to both the university and community organizations.

The purpose of this research was to explore the experience of role conflict by non-academic university staff members who work across organizational boundaries in urban universities to address the needs of both their host institutions and their communities. This qualitative research study addressed the following questions:

1. What is the nature of role conflict as experienced by non-academic administrative staff serving as university-community boundary spanners in urban universities?

2. How does the experience of role conflict impact the processes of partnership formation and community engagement?

3. What individual and institutional strategies have been identified by boundary spanners to assist with the management of role conflict?

The study was situated within a constructivist theoretical framework. The work of university-community engagement is best understood within a constructivist paradigm of
knowledge creation (Weerts and Sandmann, 2008): “Constructivism suggests that knowledge process is local, complex and dynamic” (p. 78) and “boundary spanners act as conveners, problem solvers, and change agents who negotiate the wants and needs of parties involved in the process of creating and disseminating knowledge” (p. 79). Furthermore, Merriam & Associates (2002) point out the direct linkage of qualitative research methodology to the social construction of meaning by stating that “meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction in the world” (p. 3).

This chapter describes the study design, sample selection, data collection, plans for data analysis, validity and reliability, and researcher’s bias and assumptions. The study utilized purposeful sampling and the interview guide approach as described by Patton (1990).

3.2 Study Design and Rationale

A qualitative, constructivist grounded study design was utilized. The experience of role conflict among boundary spanners within higher education has received little attention within the literature and is not well understood. Marshall and Rossman (1989) support the use of a qualitative approach for “research that delves in depth into complexities and processes . . . . research for which relevant variables have yet to be established . . . [and] . . . research on informal and unstructured linkages and processes in organizations” (p. 46). Boundary spanning activities and related role conflict appear to be complex inter- and intra-personal processes operating within organizational contexts characterized by diverse formal and informal connections and processes. Given these factors, a qualitative approach is an appropriate strategy. The use of a qualitative approach to explore the experience of role conflict is also supported by Denzin & Lincoln
(2000) who posit that qualitative researchers can better understand a participant’s unique perspective than can quantitative researchers.

The choice of qualitative methods offers many options; this researcher employed a constructivist, grounded theory study. The core objective of traditional grounded theory study is to discover or describe an operative theory (Creswell, 2007). The lack of applied theory and research on role conflict experienced by boundary spanners in urban universities supports this general methodological approach. Similarly, Merriam (2009) points out that grounded theory focuses on the development of “substantive theory [which] has as its referent, specific everyday-world situations. . . . A substantive theory has a specificity and hence usefulness to practice often lacking in theories that cover more global concerns” (p. 30). While Merriam’s statement is consistent with a traditional approach to grounded theory, Bryant and Charmaz (2007) describe how the re-positioning of grounded theory within a constructivist frame allows one to “understand such issues as those shaping the research process, the roles, social locations, perspectives of the researcher, [and] the production of data” (p. 50). Furthermore, it “builds on the fluid, interactive, and emergent research process of its originators but seeks to recognize partial knowledge, multiple perspectives, diverse positions, uncertainties, and variation in both empirical experience and its theoretical rendering” (p. 51).

Working from a symbolic interactionist frame of reference, Charmaz (2006) advocates a constructivist approach to grounded theory research. Charmaz contends that meaning is socially constructed: “Research participants’ implicit meanings, experiential views—and researchers’ finished grounded theories—are constructions of reality” (p. 10). Cresswell (2007) differentiates Charmaz’s approach from the traditional understanding of
grounded theory by stating “Instead of embracing the study of a single process or core
category as in the Strauss and Corbin (1998) approach, Charmaz advocates for a social
constructivist perspective that includes emphasizing diverse local worlds, multiple
realities, and the complexities of particular worlds, views, and actions” (p. 65).

The use of qualitative methods, and Charmaz’s constructivist approach in
particular, is consistent with the processes of role definition and community engagement.
According to Stryker (2007), identity formation and role definition occur within an
iterative cycle wherein social processes impact the individual and the individual impacts
society’s social processes. As previously described, the work of university-community
engagement is best understood within a constructivist paradigm of knowledge creation
(Weerts and Sandmann, 2008). Furthermore, Merriam & Associates (2002) point out the
direct linkage of qualitative research methodology to the social construction of meaning
by stating, “meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction in the world” (p.
3).

A further differentiating factor of a constructivist approach to grounded theory
versus its traditional positivist origins is that it recognizes the impact of the researcher on
the research process. Per Charmaz (2000), the researcher is literally shaping the contours
of the emerging learning by how he or she thinks, writes, structures questions, and
interprets responses.

In summary, the use of a constructivist grounded theory approach was determined
appropriate for the following three reasons. (1) There is little evidence in the literature of
applied theory to describe or explain the experience of role conflict as experienced by
university boundary spanners. (2) A constructivist approach to understanding the
experience of boundary spanners aligns with interactive nature of role definition (Stryker, 2007) and the nature of boundary spanning work wherein “boundary spanners act as conveners, problem solvers, and change agents who negotiate the wants and needs of parties involved in the process of creating and disseminating knowledge” (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008, p. 79). Charmaz, (2000) states that “A constructivist grounded theory assumes that people create and maintain meaningful worlds through dialectical processes of conferring meaning on their realities and acting within them” (p. 521). (3) The constructivist grounded theory approach does not ignore the impact of the researcher on the research process but instead affirms the knowledge-mediating role of the researcher by encouraging the establishment of relationships with study participants, reflection, and interpretation (Charmaz, 2006).

3.3 Sample Selection

A constructivist grounded theory study requires the gathering of rich data (Charmaz, 2006) which includes detailed descriptions of the participant’s views and actions, the participant’s external context, the participant’s reflection on events, and information reflecting the importance of each participant’s story. While the interview method to collect data is more fully described below in a subsequent section of this chapter, it is important to note that gathering of rich data necessitates the active involvement and reflection on the part of study participants.

The strategies of theoretical sampling and purposive sampling (Charmaz, 2006) were used to identify potential participants. Theoretical sampling speaks to both the purpose of the sample and the eventual sample size. Simply put, with theoretical
sampling, the researcher continues to conduct additional interviews until no further categories emerge from the data. Eleven interviews were completed; the researcher continued to conduct additional interviews until no new themes or categories emerged.

The use of purposeful sampling allowed for “selecting information rich cases for study in depth” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). The snowball form of purposive sampling (Merriam, 2009) was used for this study. Initial participants were asked to help to identify other participants who met the selection criteria as shown below. Snowball or chain sampling “identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know people who know people who know people who know people who know what cases are information-rich, that is good examples for study, good interview subjects” (Patton, 1990, p. 182).

There were two levels of sample selection (Merriam, 2002): the organizational context of the participant and the actual participants. Selection of potential study participants employed two sets of criteria: criteria that defined urban universities as differentiated from other institutions and criteria that identified non-academic staff boundary spanners. Criteria for urban universities included four year institutions of higher education which in mission statement, philosophy or manifest programs conveyed an urban purpose and were located within the boundaries of urbanized areas as defined and listed by the U.S. Census Bureau; such areas are defined as “densely settled territory that contains 50,000 or more people” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Copies of institutional mission statements, philosophy, or program descriptions conveying an urban purpose were also collected by the researcher to document the urban purpose of the institution. The selection process resulted in only publically supported institutions being selected, even though representatives of private school were also contacted and declined.
The researcher recruited non-academic administrative staff with boundary spanning duties, developing and/or managing community partnerships, as primary job responsibilities. Potential study participants were recruited by email and in-person at the 2012 National Outreach Scholarship Conference Pre-conference Session for outreach and engagement staff. This pre-conference session was specifically targeted to non-tenure track faculty and administrative staff with responsibilities to develop and manage community partnerships. Initially convened in 2010, these preconference training sessions have attracted university staff members who come together for evolving conversations focused on formation of a professional identity for staff boundary spanners within higher education. Based on the direct participation of this researcher in these preconference activities, it is the researcher’s belief that such individuals provided “information-rich cases” (Patton, 1990, p. 169) and thereby advanced the purposes of this study. The researcher was invited to make a presentation of the proposed study at the pre-conference session to invite potential participants. Study participants identified the physical location of their college or university and affirmed the institution’s commitment to an urban purpose as reflected in their university’s mission statement, philosophy or manifest programming. The researcher verified that the physical location of the institution was within an urban area as previously defined (U.S. Census, 2011). The researcher also reviewed the website of each participant’s institution to verify the four-year nature of the institution and to confirm institutional recognition of the boundary spanner’s role and the institution’s urban mission.

While convenience sampling is a recognized type of purposive sampling (Merriam, 2009), it can be perceived as trading increased efficiency in time and money
for thoroughness and validity (Creswell, 2007). Recognizing that such interviews only served as a starting point for chain and theoretical sampling, the overall sampling process of continuing to identify, invite, and interview additional participants until no new themes or categories emerged, is judged to have offset any initial deficiencies.

3.4 Data Collection

The primary method of data collection utilized was the intensive interview, as recommended by Charmaz (2006). Individual intensive interviews were conducted with non-academic staff university boundary spanners. Intensive interviewing seeks an “in-depth exploration of a particular topic or experience, and . . . fosters eliciting each participant’s interpretation of his or her experience” (p. 24). Charmaz recommends the construction and use of open-ended questions followed by focused follow up and discussion of participants’ responses. Charmaz’s recommendation is consistent with the Interview Guide (Patton, 1990) approach, which does not presume the direction or boundaries of the boundary spanner’s experience but offers a framework or starting point for the conversation while allowing the interviewer latitude in deciding when to explore further a particular issue. Working from a constructivist perspective, it is also important to attempt to elicit “the participant’s definitions of terms, situations, and events and try to tap his or her assumptions, implicit meanings, and tacit rules” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 32). The interview guide is shown as Appendix A.

Interview respondents were invited to be active and involved participants in the process of exploring the experience of role conflict (Moustakas, 1994). This idea of interviewees being thus involved is more than political correctness. Their active and
motivated participation in the process was necessary, as they were asked to share their “thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as well as situations, events, places, and people connected with their experience” (p. 177) of role conflict. Such invitation was explicitly reflected in both the interview guide and in the opportunity to review, modify, and comment upon the typed transcript with the researcher’s initial coding.

Interviews were completed in person and by telephone. A brief memo was written after each interview. In addition to attempting to capture immediate impressions from the interview, each memo sought to identify new and recurring themes and issues to support the use of the constant comparative method and theoretical sampling.

The interviews were audio recorded and independently transcribed. The researcher reviewed each transcript while listening to the original recorded interview and made minor corrections as were appropriate.

3.5 Data Analysis

The constant comparative method was utilized beginning with the completion of the first interview. Grounded theory requires the use of a constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006). The constant comparative method is the “process of taking information from data collection and comparing it to emerging categories” (Cresswell, 2007, p. 64). This method requires the on-going active involvement of the researcher to reflect upon each interview and to attempt initial coding and memo writing with respect to the categories of data and relationships between data. Not only is the constant comparative method an important step in data analysis, it is also a requirement for theoretical
sampling. As described above, sampling continued until it was determined that the categories were saturated with data and no new categories emerged.

Charmaz (2006) recommends the use of memo writing to researchers. According to Charmaz, the process of memo writing results in active process of reflection that can occasion new insight and awareness. The researcher wrote a memo after each interview summarizing reactions to the interview. Additional memos were written as part of the ongoing interpretative process. Merriam (2009) highlights the importance of the writing process as an analytic “form of thinking” (p. 243). The reflective element of memo writing is an important component of the constant comparative process.

Based on the work of Charmaz (2006) and Bazeley (2007) and utilizing NVivo coding software, a three phase process of coding was carried out. The three phases consisted of initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding. Per Cresswell (2007) the process of using a computer to code the data is substantially similar to using manual methods wherein text segments are labeled and sorted. Per Merriam (2009), such programs can be of significant assistance with managing, organizing, and representing data. Clarke’s (2005) Social Worlds/Arenas mapping was also utilized to help interrogate the data.

In initial coding, interview transcripts were coded in sections with gerund and noun phrases. According to Clarke (2005) the use of gerunds helps to identify specific actions, processes, and topics. Within the NVivo software, the first level of coding is identified as “storing coding in nodes” (Bazeley, 2007, p. 83); such “free nodes” (p.108) are utilized to label a concept or topic. Strauss and Corbin (1998) contend that “The first step in theory building is conceptualizing. A concept is a labeled phenomenon. It is an
abstract representation of an event, object or an action/interaction that a researcher identifies as being significant in the data” (p. 103).

“Focused coding means using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data. Focused coding requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). Focused coding allows for the categorization of the initial gerund based coding as reflected in individual NVivo nodes. Bazeley (2007) describes the parallel NVivo procedure as grouping free nodes into “building trees” (p. 104) in which individual nodes are grouped in hierarchical relationships reflecting “conceptual relationships” (p. 105).

Theoretical coding was used to posit possible relationships between the categories identified via focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). NVivo refers to this this process as “making connections across trees” (Bazeley, 2007, p. 110); NVivo’s graphics tool was used to display potential relationships between tree nodes. Merriam (2009) supports the use of graphic representation of such qualitative data as both a form of analysis and a representation of findings.

Three iterations of the coding process were completed. The first iteration consisted of the coding of transcript material in gerund-based free codes. Coding was initiated after the first interview was transcribed and reviewed by the participant. Individual gerund-based codes were developed one by one and added as necessary to identify specific actions, processes, and topics (Clarke, 2005). Each transcript was re-read by the researcher following review by the participant and prior to coding. Thus, the initial iteration of coding was developmental with new codes being added with each interview, more so with the early interviews than later interviews.
Following this first phase of coding, all the transcripts were re-read with their initial coding. The individual NVivo nodes were revisited with some codes collapsed and new codes produced. Individual nodes began to be placed in hierarchical tree structures. A written definition and brief memo were completed for each node. A second iteration of initial coding, with related structuring of hierarchical relationships between nodes, was completed for all transcripts. Upon review and further reflection, a third iteration of node definition, hierarchical structuring and recoding of all transcripts was completed. Appendix B. shows the third and final iteration of nodes within their hierarchical relationships.

Clarke’s (2005) social worlds and arenas analysis was also utilized to interrogate the data. Such method of analysis builds upon the earlier work of Strauss (1978); such analysis provides a mapping of the worlds and arenas within which the actors of a situation negotiate meaning. “Such maps offer mesolevel interpretations of the situations, engaging collective action and its social organizational and institutional and discursive dimensions” (Clarke, 2003, p. 559). Mesolevel systems include both community and institutional spheres of influence that help to shape norms, standards, rules, and policies (Gregson et al., 2001). According to Clarke (2007, p. 113), “An arena…is composed of multiple worlds organized ecologically around issues of mutual concern and commitment to action.” Social worlds are “shared discursive spaces” (p. 113) which “generate shared perspectives that then form the basis for collective action” (p. 115). Social worlds and arenas analysis has been used effectively in the study of emerging disciplines.

This mapping technique was completed twice to assist in interrogating the data. The maps displayed the social worlds and actors whose actions, processes, and topics
Clarke, 2005) were reflected within the gerund-based free codes. The graphic representation of the map coupled with memo writing about each social world assisted with the iterative interpretation of data and the redefinition of individual nodes and related tree structures. A social worlds and arenas analysis was completed after both the second and third iteration of NVivo based coding of the data.

The literature review points out that university administrative staff may not be seen as important actors within the university. Dobson (2000) describes a general tendency by faculty members to describe non-academic staff in a negative way. Szekeres (2004, p. 7) goes further in stating that “in most cases administrative staff in universities are largely invisible.” In addition, community partners report the “experience of having their reality reinterpreted, devalued, ignored, or otherwise disrespected” (Fermin & Hill, 2004, p. 248). Such research suggests that perceptions of power and authority may be important elements of the role conflict experience.

Charmaz (2006) warns that such early preconceived ideas or perceptions must earn their own way into the work. However, she also recommends “Theoretical playfulness [which] allows us to try out our idea and to see where they may lead” (p. 71). Claiming Charmaz’s license to theoretical playfulness, this researcher experimented with interpretation through a critical lens for each of the interviews. Critical theory recognizes both the social construction of experience as well as implicit and explicit power relationships that influence such construction (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). Each post-interview memo completed by the researcher also included a specific reference to issues of power and authority.
3.6 Ethical Concerns

It is believed that participants in this study faced minimal risk, no more than is consistent with daily life. The names of individual participants and their institutions have been kept confidential in the preparation of the research findings.

Participants were asked to provide their informed consent to participate. The informed consent process advised participants of their rights not to participate and to withdraw from the study at any time. The consent form was also used to obtain the participants’ permission to be audiotaped. Additionally, each participant was provided with a typed transcript of the interview with the researcher’s initial coding and was afforded the opportunity to make changes to the transcript and to make comments on the researcher’s initial coding.

3.7 Validity and Reliability

Three specific strategies as identified by Merriam (2009) were utilized to promote validity and reliability; these were member checks, adequate engagement in data collection, and researcher’s position or reflexivity. Participants were asked to review the initial coding of their interview and provide comments on the alignment of their experience and the gerund/noun coding. The use of theoretical sampling required adequate and continuing data collection “until no new properties [within the data] emerge[d]” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 96). The constant comparative method as described above required an ongoing process of reflecting on the work. This was achieved through memo writing, periodic journaling, and iterative redefining of codes and recoding and of the data as described above.
3.8 Researcher Bias and Epoche Statement

An explicit assumption of the constructivist approach to grounded theory is that the researcher is part of the world and data that is studied and that the researcher interprets and construct grounded theory within the lens of “past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10). While acknowledging the presence and impact of the researcher in the process of constructing learning, it is also important that such presence interferes as little as possible with the expression and meaning-making of the co-researcher. To be able to understand the participants’ experiences of role conflict, it is essential for the researcher to “remove, or at least become aware of prejudices, viewpoints, or assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation” (p. 199).

Moustakas (1994) refers to this process as “Epoche” (p. 84). The intent of engaging in this process is to allow the researcher to bracket off, or temporarily put aside, the researcher’s own assumptions, perceptions, and biases as to the phenomenon (Merriam, 2002). Through reflection and generation of this researcher’s epoche statement below, the researcher hopes to be able to participate more ably in the research process “with an unbiased, receptive presence” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 180). The following epoche statement was written as this research project began with the purpose of enabling this researcher to separate his feelings from those of the participants.

I come to this work both a sense of burden and curiosity. As a developing and sometimes reluctant scholar, I feel burdened by the need to get through this process—to finish this body of work and hopefully to finish my degree. With great frequency, my
competing needs and choices lead me to leave the work unattended on the desk—articles not yet read and paragraphs unwritten; and yet when I talk to university staff members who do this work, their interest sparks my energy and curiosity for and about this research.

Throughout my professional career in human services, I have frequently sought out partnerships: trading ideas with other counselors, working with other managers to share resources and talents, and co-creating strategic alliances with leaders of other organizations. Where trust and mutual respect were present, more was achievable. Quid pro quo trades were tougher and more burdensome and created uncertainties both within myself and my organization. Are we getting our fair share? Am I being open to the needs of the other? How do I make this a win/win for both sides? Do I always care if it is a win/win?

It feels artificial not to think of such exchanges as part of a broader constellation of power relationships. If I do what I need to do and maybe not much beyond that, is that good management? Maybe yes. Good stewardship? Don’t know. If I was too trusting, did my boss think I gave too much away? Was I viewed as weak or ineffective when I could not get what my side wanted? Was I viewed as untrustworthy or arrogant when, I didn’t push for what our community partners needed?

Repeatedly, I see themes of power and marginalization within the work of boundary spanners. Individual staff boundary spanners whom I have met vary widely in terms of their formal organizational power. Some are top administrators in second careers and some fit the profile of early career middle managers with many masters. Institutional and community (or is it institutional vs. community?) partnerships frequently also reflect
inequalities of power and position. This can be especially true in those seemingly rare times when individual participants, not of the academy, sit at planning tables with university representatives. These perceptions of power and marginalization are also prevalent with the community and region. Some voices are simply louder and heeded more than others.

I believe that many staff boundary spanners in higher education share values of reciprocity that their institutions and leadership do not. I believe that as non-faculty staff they are often stuck betwixt and between—not only between the institution and the community but also between conflicting agendas within their institution. I believe that some of these boundary spanners do not experience role conflict and act solely as advocates for their employer.

Having talked to university staff boundary spanners about this research project though, they frequently reacted with excitement, as if somebody finally heard them or heard of their plight. In concluding this statement, I do not seek to separate or hold myself from the construction of learning, merely to attend to this work with greater awareness of my own views and perspectives.

3.9 Significance of the Study

The intended significance of study is to explore the experience of role conflict from the point of view of non-academic university boundary spanners and to pursue an understanding of its process meaning from the point of view of those who have actually experienced it. It is intended that this work will provide guidance to assist such boundary spanners to become more aware of the experience of role conflict and its impact on their
work forming and maintaining partnerships. It is further intended that this work will add to current literature by identifying a relevant framework for the discussion and study of such role conflict. Per Charmaz (2000, p. 524) “A constructivist grounded theory seeks to define conditional statements that interpret how subjects [participants] construct their realities.” Through a better understanding of the realities of role conflict as experienced by boundary spanners, it is intended that this phenomenon be opened to further scholarship research and that those engaged in such work be provided with a framework or scaffolding through which to reflect upon their work. It is believed that such reflection will lead to increasingly effective university community engagement practices.
CHAPTER IV
STAFF BOUNDARY SPANNER ROLE AND
SOCIAL CONTEXT

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore the experience of role conflict by non-academic university staff members who work across organizational boundaries in urban universities to address the needs of both their host institutions and their communities. Eleven boundary spanners were interviewed and generously shared their experiences, their hopes, and their consistently passionate sense of mission. This chapter introduces the research participants, provides a description of key facets of the university-community boundary spanner role, and describes the social ecology within which the boundary spanner role is carried out utilizing Clarke’s (2005) Social Worlds / Arenas mapping technique.

These boundary spanners came to their university staff roles with a diversity of background experiences, for example: human services, K to 12 education, choreography, nonprofit management, and military command. Two participants had very diverse
backgrounds, having worked across government, non-profit, and for-profit sectors. While their purposes varied—promoting service learning, community outreach, general partnership framers/product managers, educators, researcher, administrator, minority health partnership manager—they shared formal job responsibilities that involved developing and/or managing university-community partnerships.

Most participants were able to identify numerous explicit examples of role conflict consistent with the four scenarios defined by Rizzo, House, and Litzman (1970): conflict between an individual’s values and the demands of a role, conflict stemming from insufficient resources and role expectations, conflict between multiple roles assigned to the same individual, and role conflict stemming from competing external expectations. For example, one participant (whose pseudonym is identified as Betty in Table I) was ordered by her university superior to carry out a book drive that the community partner did not want or need. Other examples of role conflict included numerous instances of insufficient resources, the need to go over a dean's head when a school of nursing tried to back out of an agreement for community assistance, the need to placate an unreasonable community partner, the uncomfortable place of being caught in the middle of an institution versus community resident building project debate with race and class elements, and the experience of needing to push back on a faculty member who was not following through on agreed upon timelines. While all boundary spanners who were interviewed identified one or more examples of role conflict as defined above, university staff newer in their boundary roles were less likely to report these situations as representing role conflicts.
Table I provides a brief description of the organizational role and organizational context for each participant. The listed names are pseudonyms. All participants worked for public urban universities.

**Table I. Description of Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Focus of role</th>
<th>Organizational context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Student service learning partnerships and coordination a campus peer support network for staff boundary spanners</td>
<td>Student services at Midwestern research university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>New role to coordinate a campus-wide program of community engagement</td>
<td>University administration at a Southern university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candice</td>
<td>Development of partnerships in response to faculty and community initiated requests for service learning and technical assistance</td>
<td>Group of staff boundary spanners at regional urban campus of a Midwestern research university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>Student service learning projects</td>
<td>University administration at a Midwestern university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ed</td>
<td>Regional campus director</td>
<td>Regional urban campus of a Midwestern university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>Community outreach and education partnerships</td>
<td>Specialty science research center at Midwestern research university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guen</td>
<td>Development of profit generating partnerships</td>
<td>Group of staff boundary spanners within the business school at a Midwestern university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henrietta</td>
<td>Management of community health partnerships</td>
<td>Hospital at a Midwestern research university</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Given that spoken words of the participants are the principal sources of data reported in this research, it is also important to begin to introduce the voices of the participants as they describe their values, hopes, and concerns. Table II provides this introduction.

*Table II. Voices of Participants*

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**Anna** – “The university has such tremendous resources that there should be a whole cadre of people working to figure out how to maximize those resources for community use. . . . And so I still feel that pretty strongly and I feel like that is a fight that’s still worth fighting, so that keeps me fighting in this role.”

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**Betty** – “I am on soft money right now, I don’t know if that’s a condition at other campuses, but here, that’s often the way to sort of transition a new position in to see if that is something that the university feels is sustainable.”

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**Candice** – “It’s always been about solving the world’s problems . . . literally attempt[ing] to be authentically me and real and reach out to people because I think that really they want to be heard, they want to be listened to, but they want to be cared about, so for me, I haven’t said this word until now, on a deep personal level, it’s a spiritual calling to do this work.”

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**Donna** – “So, half the time when my phone rings, it is the community partner saying I have a problem, can you solve it? And half the time it’s professors saying I heard you’re doing really cool stuff, I want to be a part of it.”
Ed – “Always a desire of being a part of the community . . . and giving people an opportunity to advance where they are today. So, it’s really expanding educational knowledge. It’s kind of always been a passion for me.”

Fred – “Maybe it comes back to if you ask the people at the bottom to have some input in the design, you’d get a much different response . . . for health programs and education programs and that.”

Guen – “Love the word boundary spanner and I think . . . conflict’s inherent . . . but to me it’s seeing those opportunities within that conflict where there is really . . . that’s where you start to really go beyond those boundaries.”

Henrietta – “So, looking at how we would setup hospitals . . . in the middle of the desert, it just doesn’t make sense that this whole issue of access to healthcare can’t be addressed through partnerships and working within the community.”

Ida – “So, when I talk about being the objective, neutral. . . . it’s making sure that we really understand what the community partner’s needs are, and that while we have our needs as well, we’re really working together to make sure that we’re meeting their needs.”

Janice – “So, it’s that constant tension of being able to kind of code switch; if I need to sit down with the table full of professors who’ve been cranking out really good research for decades, I could do that, and I’m very comfortable in that atmosphere, but if I also need to sit down with five people who that morning were changing diapers and cleaning up vomit from working in an afterschool center, I could do that too.”

Kevin – “My daily life, my family, being in the city, it’s just ongoing . . . everything is . . . for my world and for my art, and my work, and what I do, it’s all very interconnected.”

These introductory statements make it clear that university staff, who carry out boundary spanning roles work within varied organizational structures, operate in support of diverse institutional objectives, and frequently seek to infuse the work with their own personal and professional values.
4.2 The University-Community Boundary Spanner Role

All of the boundary spanners included in the sample worked for an institution reflecting an urban mission as documented on their websites. Elliott (1994) describes an urban university mission as “The commitment of those institutions to be engaged with people in the communities they serve” (p. 22); it is a purpose of community service as opposed to mere co-location. An important element of each boundary spanner’s role is to reflect this mission.

A university’s legal standing, mission, values, structure, goals, and strategies provide context and comprise its strategic framework (Gauntner et al., 1992). If all the elements of the framework are in alignment and congruent, they might appear as a series of concentric circles indicating focus and direction. If incomplete or contradictory, a university’s strategic framework for university-community engagement might provide a fractured or even contradictory direction for partnership formation, thus increasing the potential for role conflict. Both types of situations were evident in the experience of the participants.

The formal job duties of participants varied widely with respect to their intended partnership domains and the degree to which their boundary spanning roles were explicitly defined. Domains of intended partnership impact included K to 12 education, research, the arts, the private sector, community service, local government, and human services.

Some roles seemed to be explicitly defined and have very clear expectations and success measures. Guen’s role is to “to generate revenue that then can support potentially applied research, the development of new academic programs, often very
interdisciplinary, and then actually develop a portfolio of services that serve the business community.” Additionally, Guen was looking for partners who were willing to provide value at all levels and that could be providing opportunities for students for internships, it could be having a practitioner that would be willing to come into the classroom and share their experiences and expertise. So, there has to be a commitment to really want to be involved and be part of a relationship and not just receive something.

As Guen’s comment indicates, while individual boundary spanner role requirements may preclude some potential partnerships, they also provide clarity of focus that some university-community engagement efforts seemed to lack.

Candice’s role is less limited in its definition and expectations. She is part of a university administrative staff group focused on partnership formation and maintenance. Her university has made a commitment to a small number of nonprofits to attempt to assist with whatever they need. In addition, they accept ‘one-off” requests for research, service learning, and technical assistance from both faculty and the community. The apparent lack of bounded-ness to the program requires Candice to be both flexible and non-limiting in her role related duties. It seems to provide both more diverse partnerships opportunities and role latitude but also more ways to fail. According to Candice,

I would like to think that boundary spanners are like that. We’re more entrepreneurial, we’re more risk-taking, we are more confident that we can land on our feet if something doesn’t work. We’re not afraid to make those mistakes I think. You have to be tolerant of risk.
Even though there was variety in their domains of intended impact and the degree
to which roles were specifically defined, participants identified many common facets of
their roles as boundary spanners. These are described immediately below.

*Inherent Nature of Role Conflict within the Boundary Spanning Role*

All participants were able to identify examples of role conflict consistent with the
four scenarios defined by Rizzo, House, and Litzman (1970): conflict between an
individual’s values and the demands of a role, conflict stemming from insufficient
resources and role expectations, conflict between multiple roles assigned to the same
individual, and role conflict stemming from competing external expectations. Participants
who were newer to their roles, however, were less likely to identify role conflict as part
of their experience, or even as a concern.

Examples of conflict between a boundary spanner’s values and role demands
include Henrietta’s “moral compass” which caused her to side against her university’s
position on a controversial building project with perceived differences corresponding to
economic background and race. As an African-American, she felt conflicted about her
employer’s plans to put up a new building, which would require the demolition of low-
income housing project that primarily housed African Americans. In a similar position,
Anna pointed out the conflict she experiences with her institution’s frugal approach to
sharing its resources:

> And I guess that I would argue that we do have some financial resources to bring
to bear on community issues. And so I still feel that pretty strongly and I feel like
that is a fight that’s still worth fighting, so that keeps me fighting in this role.
Almost every participant had examples of role conflict stemming from insufficient resources of one type or another. Fred points out that demand for help exceeds his capacity to respond, “we couldn’t partner with every [city] school on something, and that’s always in the back of my mind; so you always struggle with how do you decide where to invest that time if it’s not funded.” Candice’s institution has a small staff to assist faculty with partnership activities but feels sometimes that her staff resources may get bogged down with low value, logistical tasks that faculty or graduate assistants could do themselves. Henrietta expressed frustration that her institution makes resources available in the short term but does not work toward longer term relationships with community partners:

So, from a university standpoint, I think that’s where my frustration is a lot of times, is that, wow, this is a great idea, let’s do it and they don’t establish the relationships, and then when the money runs out, the program is gone.

In this context it appears that funding supplants the relationship-building process and when the funding runs out so does the relationship. For some boundary spanners like Betty, their own paid time spent organizing projects is their only resource; they do not have program dollars or other staff to call upon. Resource conflicts can also be concrete as identified by Kevin who pointed to a lack of parking as a barrier to more effective community engagement with arts groups. Clearly limitations on resources presented significant sources of role conflict; but as will be discussed later, the availability of greater resources did not preclude the experience of role conflict.

There were also examples of role conflict related to boundary spanners who had multiple formal roles. Ed does not have a PhD but manages a branch campus of his
university and is also responsible for university-community partnership formation. As a boundary spanner, he had to go to upper administration to get follow through on a community commitment made by the nursing program. As a campus manager, he also had to rely upon the good will and faculty involvement from the nursing program to optimize enrollment and class offerings. Janice also has multiple formal roles. She is the director of the university-community research institute, the acknowledged K to 12 content expert, and occasionally serves as the lead researcher on projects. One of her early projects involved an evaluation of community agency services that was also funded by community sources:

My first month in this position, I sat around a table with some of my colleagues at [the] Institute and I just said, unless this dramatically changes, I will not put my name on it; I will not put [our] name on it; there are huge issues with this; huge . . . from a research perspective.

In addition to being the leader of the institute charged with helping to address community needs, Janice’s additional role as an expert researcher resulted in role conflict stemming from her claiming of multiple roles.

Participants offered several examples of role conflict stemming from competing external (to the boundary spanner) demands. Ida reported problems getting faculty to follow through on an agreed upon timeframe that overlapped with the end of the semester. Donna frequently had the experience of creating service learning projects, wherein “the expectations of the faculty member and/or the students don’t necessarily match those of the community partner.” Ida had to address the conflict that emerged when faculty who wanted to do academic work felt compromised by the marketing needs
of the for-profit entity funding the research carried out on behalf of a community housing program by faculty.

The reported experiences of the participants as reflected above affirm the appropriateness of the Rizzo, House, and Litzman (1970) framework of role conflict. While not all participants felt the term “role conflict” to be appropriate to their experiences of competing external and internal expectations, all participants reported situations consistent with one or more of the four types of role conflict as stated by Rizzo, House, and Litzman.

Contrary to the perspective that role conflict is somehow an imposing obstacle to the boundary spanner role, Guen’s view was that “the conflict’s inherent” in the roles of boundary spanners.

I’m still kind of struggling with the conflict word, because I think if you’re a boundary spanner, you’re automatic. . . . it’s inherent, there’s going to be conflict, so . . . and maybe it’s just more of semantics and switching it around. . . . I think the role is learning how to facilitate that conflict and how to move through it and not have it be something that. . . . almost seeing that conflict as an opportunity and because that means there’s probably change.

Within this context, the role of university boundary spanners is to seek the continuous alignment of university and community interests and expectations.

While many of the examples of role conflict coincided with the early stages of partnership formation, there were in fact instances of role conflict identified throughout all phases of the partnership process: initial planning, ongoing operations, evaluation, and
even termination. Betty chose to continue to assist a group of refugees on her own time when her university decided it was time to end their service partnership:

There aren’t actually a lot of people at the university that even know I’m involved in this partnership. I sort of feel like I’m doing it a bit on the down-low because the university really has moved on and I’m . . . in a way sort of institutionally, has already abandoned this partnership.

**Boundary Spanner Behaviors**

There were many different ways that boundary spanners described their core work activities. Words like “broker” and phrases such as “connecting the dots” came up frequently. These types of boundary spanning role behaviors reflect the capacity to see an alignment of interests among different parties. Janice acknowledged this in saying “I’ve always have been very good at linking things that don’t seem to be linked.”

Even when apparent match ups between institutional and community interests may have seemed obvious once understood, the process of understanding needs can be time intensive. Anna described this phase of the work in the following manner:

Engaging in conversation about what both parties have to offer, what their interests are, what kind of outcomes they’d like to see, what kind of impact the project should have . . . that, in a good partnership, that gets negotiated and talked about very early on and continuously throughout the project.

Participants repeatedly identified three behaviors as instrumental to the objectives of seeking and maintaining alignment of interests and expectations. These behaviors were listening, translating, and mediating. Ida offered an example of her intentional use of
listening while working with faculty who were concerned about the perceived intrusion of a private sector funder—“They felt that it compromised their academic integrity . . . at the first meeting, I just listened and let them vent their concerns.” Listening seemed to be the most important of the boundary spanning behaviors identified, perhaps because of the functional necessity of understanding the parties’ needs, but perhaps also because knowing that one is understood may be a precondition for the development of trust.

There were repeated references to translation or translating the needs or perspectives of community partners to those within the university and vice versa. Betty saw this as an ongoing part of her role:

Working with the gaps between campus and community. I find often, most people exist pretty thoroughly in either one or the other of these communities, so helping them each to understand the other becomes a real important part of what I do.

Donna’s experience was similar: “They conveyed information in whatever way they conveyed it and all it will take is one meeting or one phone call from me to say, okay that’s not really what the student meant. And it will all be fine.” Translation behaviors can be related to language use, interpreting the perceived intent of the parties, and even feelings of respect or lack of the same.

Boundary spanning behaviors were labeled as mediation when the conscious intent of the boundary spanner was to get one or more of the parties to alter a position. Fred described the following process of bringing together project collaborators:

I was able to push, push, push to get them keep reading and keep talking. We got something; got it on paper; then scaling back and have everybody then walk away
feeling comfortable that we know we didn’t want to do that, but the product is still so good.

Candice’s approach was a little more blunt:

So . . . I want to gently say to this rather highly respected faculty senate member idealist, it’s really neat that you want to help those down-trodden folk, learn how to cathartically share their emotions and feelings in writing, but really what they want from you is how to get to the GED. And I’m not sure telling them how to write poetry is going to get them there.

These two examples show how boundary spanner behaviors can impact the potential alignment of diverse interests of university and community parties; the second example though also indirectly raises the concept of personal agency or identity of the boundary spanner as a potential third party whose interests may need to be addressed as part of the process of university-community partnership formation.

In describing boundary spanner roles and responses to role conflict, this research is attempting to capture the reported experience of the boundary spanning participants. There was no attempt to gauge the relative competency of the participants as boundary spanners. The effectiveness and competence of boundary spanners, along with their perceptions of their work, might be an area for further research.

**Boundary Spanner Self-Identity**

There were apparent differences among study participants regarding their personal agency or sense of self-identity as boundary spanners. Ida describes herself as “neutral,” meaning that she is focused on meeting the needs of community partners and
faculty members. Others saw themselves as advocates for certain parties or positions. Janice’s beliefs about the role of good data is a guiding influence in her view of potential partnerships—“So, it’s just . . . that’s the thing that pulled me to this job was how I could marry my really deeply instilled belief that simple data can shift big pieces of our policy problems.” Anna believes strongly that the university could have a greater impact on the surrounding community by sharing more of its resources—“I still feel, as I did, that the university has such tremendous resources that there should be a whole cadre of people working to figure out how to maximize those resources for community use . . . and I feel like that is a fight that’s still worth fighting, so that keeps me fighting in this role.” This sense of self-identity seems to be an important element of the boundary spanner role in that it is space where the personal values of the boundary spanners co-exist with their internalized understanding of their roles. This collective sense of how they view their role may align or misalign with their institutionally sanctioned job description and the interest of university and community partners and engender opportunities for role conflict.

Boundary spanner self-identity appears to be further influenced by the individual boundary spanner’s professional background, their educational status of having or not having earned a PhD, and how recently the boundary spanner assumed her or his duties. All the participants identified prior professional experience outside of higher education. In many instances, participants had prior experience in multiple roles across government, the private sector, and the non-profit sector. Guen thought her broad background of government service, corporate work, and non-profit leadership increased her ability to understand and identify with the needs of diverse parties—“dealing with very distinct
stakeholders, in higher ed[ucation] and within the community as well, and you’re bridging the ability to communicate across those different groups.”

The issue of boundary spanner educational status, as to having or not having a PhD, was surprisingly complex, with respect to both how the boundary spanners were viewed by others and how they viewed themselves. Of the 11 participant boundary spanners, three had earned PhDs and eight had not. Some without the PhD degree thought they were not valued by some faculty and administrators because they did not have the degree. Another boundary spanner seemed to find her work easier as a non-PhD, because she did not have that expert credential, she felt she was less likely to be seen as a threat by faculty since she did not have or claim (by credential) the same academic expertise.

It seems that educational status per se of the boundary spanner is not necessarily an important element of boundary identity. What does appear to be important are the boundary spanners’ views of their own educational status and how such status impacts their view of their role, and secondly, how their educational status may impact how they are perceived by others.

Janice has a PhD and seemingly wanted to both claim expert academic status alongside faculty—“Like I did receive these letters after my name . . . of course I know I would need to control for” –but was seemingly disavowing the same—“I just want to make sure I’m presenting myself authentically, because I don’t want to be an ivory tower. . . . I don’t want to have to publish . . . great theoretical constructs, but on the ground level, it just doesn’t work that way.” Candice’s experience of getting a PhD later in her career has impacted her view of less experienced faculty:
I admit, I have a big huge chip on my shoulder, I got my PhD late, so that’s . . . later than typical, I was in my mid 40s when I got it, so there’s a chip . . . I’ve been out in practice and you all are teaching about stuff you’ve never done.

Fred’s experience of not having a PhD has left him in a “gray space” wherein he feels room to define his role absent some of the traditional expectations associated with having a PhD in academia—

I bridge the boundaries . . . I do stuff that’s in service to all the staffs, so I’m not quite office staff, not quite research because I don’t have a PhD, so I live in this gray space that I kind of like. I like the way it is.

The presence of a PhD does seem to influence the boundary spanners’ role expectations and how their boundary spanner role and identity are experienced by others.

Two of the participants had been in their boundary spanning roles for less than one year. Neither felt they had experienced any role conflict, even though both had identified experiences consistent with the role conflict framework of Rizzo, House, and Litzman (1970). This may indicate that awareness of role conflict is an aspect of boundary spanner identity that only emerges with experience.

This description of the boundary spanner roles highlights that the experience of role conflict is an inherent element of the work carried out by university staff. The description of these complex roles, the experience of external expectations, and the formation of boundary spanner identity are all consistent with the construct of symbolic interactionism wherein “society shapes self, and self shapes society behavior. The proposition not only admits to, but insists upon, the possible reciprocity of its components: social behavior can impact self, and society and self can impact society”
(Stryker, 2007, p. 1089). Such roles are negotiated and renegotiated within an ever shifting, complex ecology. The following section attempts to describe the complex environment in which these roles are enacted.

4.3 Social Worlds / Arenas Mapping

The analytic technique of Social Worlds / Arenas Mapping as developed by Clarke (2005) builds upon the earlier work of Strauss (1978). It is a process of mapping the worlds and arenas within which the actors of a situation negotiate meaning. “Such maps offer mesolevel interpretations of the situations, engaging collective action and its social organizational and institutional and discursive dimensions” (Clarke, 2003, p. 559). Mesolevel systems include both community and institutional spheres of influence, which help to shape norms, standards, rules, and policies (Gregson et al., 2001).

The production and description of this material is intended to provide a representation of the context in which university-community boundary spanners work. According to Clarke (2007), social worlds are “shared discursive spaces” (p. 113) which “generate shared perspectives that then form the basis for collective action” (p. 115). “An arena . . . is composed of multiple worlds organized ecologically around issues of mutual concern and commitment to action” (p.113). Additionally, the perspectives of study participants in relationship to their roles as boundary spanners with respect to the different worlds they interact with are described.

As Figure 1 shows, many of the identified worlds overlap with the resulting impact that individuals may have varied, sometimes competing roles within multiple worlds. The relative size of the circles representing each of the worlds reflects their relative frequency in the discourse of the study participants.
Figure 1. Social Worlds / Arenas mapping of worlds within the arena of university-community partnerships.

Tenure Track Faculty World – Faculty as Artists

The work of tenure track faculty is to teach, to create knowledge through research, and to foster the academy via various committee assignments and other projects. If accessible, and especially if supported, the work of tenure track faculty includes the scholarship of engagement, which is or can be the same scholarly work that is otherwise pursued but with a consciously sought aspect of shared (with a community partner) decision making.
and benefit. Generally, the core commitments of this world are to teach, to research, and to publish. These commitments are not mere duties or assignments. For most tenure track faculty, they reflect personalized and highly valued investments of time, energy and hard work. Ida offered a simile that assisted her in better understanding the relationship of faculty to their work; it is their “art”:

I think there are a lot of things that I’ve learned about working with faculty, about PhD faculty, that have helped me reframe my discussions . . . I kind of equate it to they are artists and this is their artwork and you can’t really judge a piece of art. I mean, people take it very personally when you judge their art, and I never really understood that piece of it from a faculty’s perspective.

When faced with competing demands from academic and community domains, sometimes boundary spanners can interpret language, align schedules, and mediate other differences. In doing so, it is important for a boundary spanner to develop a respectful appreciation for both sides of the dialog. In some cases the community may not need what the faculty member has to offer. The faculty person may not find community alignment or acceptance of their needs. Much of what faculty members may want to develop or bring to the community reflects long-term personal commitments and highly individualized understandings. One challenge for the boundary spanner is to proceed respectfully and appreciatively when assisting a faculty member to find a good match between their scholarship and community needs.

Within this arena of university-community engagement, tenure track faculty members have very diverse interests and motivations with respect to potential community partnerships. An important influencing factor is how supportive the university structure is
or is not. For example, support may be manifest when such work may be used as evidence for tenure, the university provides release hours from teaching to allow for community work, or supplemental funding is available. In some situations, engaged scholarship can be an alternate flavor of regular ongoing scholarship, though the community partnership aspect can create additional time demands. In some instances, members of this world may view administrative calls for engagement as inconsistent, perhaps even hypocritical in that the call to action may be the full extent of the university’s tangible support. In many tax-supported and taxpayer-assisted institutions, such calls upon faculty for expanded engagement may also reflect a desire to support a rationale of community value for the institution, even while the number of tenure track faculty members is reduced for budget reasons via preference for part-time or adjunct staff.

Generally speaking, one might think of the student world as a direct complement to the faculty world. As described below, students are frequently impacted by university-community partnerships, but seldom appear to be active developers of such partnerships.

**Student World**

Students may or may not be involved in community partnerships. Service learning and volunteer civic engagement are two of the primary ways that students may contribute to community partnerships. While the student’s role is primarily to learn and get credentialed, extra-university community involvement can be also be of assistance to students in career exploration and starting to create resume fodder. Although some student community engagement may be student generated, it seems more common for
students’ engagement to be framed by academic or administrative staff. Donna sees her work creating community partnerships focused on student service learning as supporting key priorities of her employing institution:

Most important to the employer is creating students that are employable, probably. There’s also a lot of research that says students who are involved have a better chance of graduating and our retention rate is not as high as it should be, so I really believe that getting more students involved in service learning can increase our retention rates; so I think that’s important to my employer.

*University Boundary Spanner World–A Diverse World*

In a practical sense, every individual affiliated with a university is a de facto boundary spanner. Rare would be the employee or other stakeholder who does not interact with someone outside the institution. This is true for the purchasing agent in the facilities department, the softball coach, the faculty member presenting at a conference, and the student who rides the bus to campus.

Those relatively few staff members who are charged by some institutions with formal job duties to develop and/or manage community partnerships work within a broad range of structured roles and may overlap with tenure track faculty and senior university officials. Some staff boundary spanners seemingly exist within a loosely defined administrative charge to go forth and do well. Others have much more specific directions such as setting up service learning partnerships, increasing health access of minority populations, or creating ongoing revenue generating partnerships with businesses.
Hart and Northmore (2011) point out the increasing importance of university-community engagement and the lack of “effective audit and evaluation tools” (p.34) available to assess whether or not universities are doing this work effectively. They state that “the development of audit and evaluation tools . . . is still at a formative stage (p.35). Holland (2009) agrees with this and acknowledges that engagement activities are readily evaluated using “traditional measures” (p.86) such publications, patents, and rankings. The lack of clear evaluation tools is consistent with the experience of those participants whose roles appeared unbounded. Candice stated,

So, we’re still . . . every conversation we’re having is, who are we, what are you doing? That question the other night of, ‘what the hell do you do?’ is something we hear every day. So, it’s . . . you’re starting at scratch, and you’re explaining your role, and you’re saying this is what’s going on.

The unbounded nature of such roles may result in the more frequent occurrence of role conflict.

Boundary spanning initiatives launched amidst a generalized university call for greater engagement, but with few other criteria, seem to place boundary spanners in positions of greater vulnerability and uncertainty. More than one participant spoke about a situation wherein they had been criticized by a faculty member or a community partner for how they responded to a specific task or project. At Candice’s university, there is an expectation that she will field and attempt to assist with whatever requests come to her office from faculty and community partners—“We don’t want to be in the position to say no to faculty, because . . . they’re the kind of people that we really, really want to court, and we really want to bring them on board” (Candice). She described a dissatisfied
faculty member who wanted to teach writing to inner city residents as a pathway to
“write cathartically about . . . [their] impoverishment”:

She went to a faculty senate meeting at which my boss’ boss, the provost, was
sitting, and said, those people are jerks and . . . they didn’t give us what we
wanted . . . just completely plowed me under in front of faculty members . . .
faculty government and my provost.

The lack of other specific success criteria beyond faculty member or community partner
satisfaction appears to lead to less bounded roles for staff boundary spanners and more
opportunities to fail.

This experience of boundary spanner vulnerability was evidenced in other ways.
Multiple participants reported that their position was in the budget as soft money,
potentially one-time university or external grant commitments. Betty offered further
insight from her volunteer role with a staff boundary spanner listserv—"the names and
emails are always changing." Betty conjectured that frequent staff turnover among staff
boundary spanners was related to a reliance on soft money.

Some boundary spanners described a growing sense of caution or restraint in
dealing with potential community partners. Anna stated:

And so I really back off putting myself out there, because I felt like I was starting
to become a professional risk to be . . . to make promises . . . granted, I learned
pretty early on not to make promises, but I think just by showing up, you’re
making some kind of . . . you’re indicating in some way that the university might
have something to offer.
There is a fear of over-promising, whether this is done explicitly or even implicitly. Anna’s concern was that she could not operate with integrity if she asked a community group for a full statement of their needs when she had no expectation of being able to meet them. More than one boundary spanner described a circumstance wherein the university had made a commitment and was not fulfilling this commitment. In this context, various boundary spanner responses included confronting internal leadership, trying as best they could to put a positive face on the situation, and continuing the work with personal resources. For some, these were ethical questions; for others, these were simply practical issues of future credibility.

Sometimes boundary spanners have internal budgets and support staff to help support partnerships, sometimes they have to get outside funding, and sometimes they have to beg resources from all involved. While resources can help solve practical issues, they did appear to be less effective than clarity or specificity of partnership purpose in avoiding boundary spanner role conflict or role stress. Senior university administrators, as described below, influence both allocated resources and the overall objectives of the engagement initiative.

_Senior University Administrators’ World_

A statement of intended university-community engagement can be a long term governance and resource strategy, it can be a promotional marketing statement, or it can be a throw-away leadership preference like ‘yah, let’s do more of that’. To be viable and show tangible results, the principles of community engagement must be imbedded within the overall functioning of the institution. The behavior of top university leadership, as
evidenced by ongoing allocation of resources and support for faculty involvement with community work, is indicative of the real potential for integration within the university fabric. At many institutions, presidents, provosts and deans change in shorter term cycles than do tenure track faculty. Holland (2009) points out the potential for learned cynicism about community engagement in presenting the questions “‘Will it last?’ or ‘Will it die out when we have a new leader or when the grant ends?’” (p.86). Community engagement could be viewed as merely the next new thing if it appears as part of series of frequently changing organizational priorities or lack clear leadership support among senior university administrators.

Most senior university administrators are also boundary spanners: raising money, receiving requests for community help, structuring the institution's image of community participation and more. Community partnerships and involvement are sometimes the currency they trade for their other objectives. Universities have relatively weak command and control functions, as authority is more diffuse. Even those university administrators, who may want their institutions to reflect greater engagement, may not be able to accomplish this quickly. Participants with stronger vertical/supervisory relationships with university administrators appeared more likely to be able to continue to work through role conflict and to effect an alignment of interests between different parties. Senior university administrators may themselves have multiple roles within their universities and may be present within multiple worlds as described herein, including the university colleges/academic division world.
None of the participants in this study were senior university administrators. Almost every participant had a story to tell about how senior university administrative staff helped, hindered, or ignored their work.

*University Colleges/ Academic Division World*

Formal organizational structures would have little meaning if one would attempt to define them as distinct from the administrators, faculty, and support staff they contain. They do, however, form a separate basis for organizing one's views and formal interaction within the overall institution and potentially the broader community. Alfred (2005), writing about institutional governance in higher education in the 21st century, points out that “A new organization has emerged–one with multiple sub organizations . . . [each] . . . pursuing specific operating objectives” (p. 85). The separateness of colleges and other academic divisions is much more likely to be a source or orienting basis for competition for resources, student enrollment, relationships, campus buildings and other markers of academic structures.

More than one boundary spanner interviewed spoke of the additional challenges of promoting university-community partnerships that included more than one academic unit. Ida described her experience as “It’s like herding cats.” Fred described his university structure as a “bunch of fiefdoms.” Individuals within such structures may themselves represent multiple organizational identities within a program specialization, teaching structure, administrative structure, or other formal on-campus professional or support staff roles.
University Support Staff World

In order to engage in partnership activities with community partners, university boundary spanners may need friends (or at the very least, good communication and support) in security, facilities, food service, the registrar’s office, IT, and other support units. Even committed on-campus partners in support roles see their work complicated by staff and students; adding community partners to the mix further complicates things. Nonetheless, such campus resources can themselves be a focus of partnership. Part of Kevin’s role is to leverage free campus facilities as a point of attraction to develop university-community arts partnerships. Anna sees the use of campus facilities as one more potential resource to the community—

I still feel, as I did, that the university has such tremendous resources that there should be a whole cadre of people working to figure out how to maximize those resources for community use. While we might deny that we have financial resources, we certainly have human resources, and we have physical resources in the form of technology hardware and classrooms that are available and resources that our physical plant can offer.

Community and Civic Organization World

As described herein, the world of community and civic groups is intended to include non-profit groups and government-run functions like education and human services. The perception frequently exists that universities have lots of resources that are sitting unutilized or underutilized. Fred reported,
I think when people approach the university, there’s . . . (1) [they] see us having a lot of money; (2) it’s seen as having a lot of people that sit in their offices and could just have free time to come out and do stuff for free.

Recruiting student interns is frequently seen as the answer to staffing woes experienced by community organizations.

Some community and civic organizations are better positioned than others for partnerships. Colleges of education need on-going relationships with school systems for student practicums and teaching experiences. The same is true for social work and nursing programs, which need to be able to place students in programs to gain experience for initial licensure. However, many agencies and community groups think of accessing free university help for one-time and short term projects. They may not think through their own potential staff time costs necessary to gather data, provide for a productive discussion of the problem to be solved, or to relate to faculty or students. Donna had an experience in which a large government entity wanted help with a financial project but then balked at collecting and sharing the necessary financial data halfway through the course project. As Donna’s example illustrates, sometimes community partners are unprepared or even unwilling to commit sufficient resources for the partnership to be mutually beneficial to themselves and the university partner.

In addition to being potential university community partnership members, community and civic groups have multiple roles in relationship to universities; they may also be funders, critics, and/or employers of credentialed university students. Their voices may be in alignment or conflict with area businesses and other groups.
Businesses and Industry Group World

In similar fashion, private concerns also have multiple potential identities as related to universities. They may be direct employers of students as well as members of industry sectors and professional associations. They may be direct purchasers of services or philanthropic funders of university activities. This world is Guen’s primary focus. It is her role is to develop long-term, profit making, multi-dimensional partnerships with businesses and industry groups. She attempts to build partnerships which benefit the business school, faculty members, students and entities within the business and industry group world.

Governmental Unit World

While many units of government are direct providers of services like education and human services, other units of government such as legislatures, general government departments, and regulatory agencies have significant impacts on universities. They carry out multiple roles as employers of credentialed students, funders, and regulatory agents. Fred reported that large parts of his work are mandated by some government grant requirements for outreach or related need to amplify the effect of the funded work. Hence the granting agency becomes a de facto partner, perhaps generating requirements seen as having limited value by the university or the community partner. For example, Fred explained,

A lot of the grants I work with have this outreach component; NASA has got a lot of funding for that. NASA has invested tens or hundreds of millions of dollars in STEM education in the US, and we have nothing to show for it.
Often times, he finds that the outreach portion of such project have minimal community impact.

*External Funder World*

While community groups, businesses, and units of government carry out funding roles, so do other external funders such as foundations and wealthy individuals. Either through direct funding of a project or simply encouraging university interest in a given project while funding a separate project, external funders are significant influencers on what gets done by a university. It was Donna’s experience that:

Funders in our community love what we do so much in terms of the service learning and potentially solving community problems, they tell nonprofits to call me. When they can’t fund a project for a nonprofit, they just say, we’ll call [Donna] to see if she can get some students over there, or if she can send a class over there and she can solve your problem.

Such requests may result in further role conflict for Donna, especially if the community agency needs, as supported by external funders, are not in alignment with the university’s student and faculty member purposes.

*Taxpayers and Elected Officials Worlds*

While these are actually separate worlds, the high degree of overlap and intertwining relationships (taxpayers and leaders, voters and candidates, constituents and responders) support a consolidated description of these worlds. Both groups are predisposed to believe that tax-funded (tax-assisted) parts of government are wasteful and
inefficient. Moreover, they, like the community groups they belong to, see universities as having seemingly unlimited of resources; this creates an expectation that universities can and should actively assist their communities. Taxpayers and elected officials do not make themselves known as monolithic voices. Their voices reflect the diversity of their communities and interests. Externally, the urban environments in which these institutions operate are “fragmented by race, social class, and economic function and spread over a huge territory, further divided into at least several counties and perhaps dozens of independent political subdivisions” (Brownell, 1995, p. 22). Altman (2006) points out that institutional relationships with communities are further complicated by existent relationships within communities such as “local government and community organizations (including religious entities), residents and organizations” (p. 184). On any given issue, these voices may project multiple, often competing, perspectives. Thus a particular university-community partnership may be evaluated as a good thing or a boondoggle. As an example of this, Henrietta found herself in the middle of a community battle when her university decided to build a new facility in an off campus neighborhood with the support of city officials but to the dismay of area residents.

**Arena of University-Community Partnerships**

The arena of university-community partnerships includes all the worlds identified above. Many different forces drive the existence of this arena. For some it is an issue of basic morality: universities should make a difference within the communities in which they exist. For some universities it is enlightened self-interest: the university has decided to improve the geographic space surrounding its facilities so that students and faculty feel
safe and welcome. For some, the push to partnerships is a projection of scholarly interest; for others, it may be a response to a vocal community that feels ignored.

The diversity of motivations at play within the arena poses significant challenges for an institution or university boundary spanner whose interest it may be to help define, develop, support, and manage a portfolio of university community partnerships. The overlapping worlds shown in Figure 1 graphically point out how some individual actors may exist in multiple worlds simultaneously. Tenure track faculty do not exist entirely apart from university colleges and divisions, university administrators are frequently also boundary spanners, businesses may also be funders, etc. Most, if not all universities, have multiple administrative hierarchies (Twomby, 1990; Alfred, 2008). The overlapping nature of these worlds and their administrative hierarchies, with potentially different objectives, within the university-community partnership arena intensifies the opportunities for the experience of role conflict by university staff serving as formal boundary spanning agents.

Clarke (2005) points out the utility of identifying “implicated actors and actants” (p. 48) in the mapping process. “Implicated actors” are those groups who are “physically present but are generally silenced/ignored/invisibled by those in power in the social world or arena” (p. 48). “Implicated actants” are “non-human actors in situations of concern” (p. 47); such actants may be a discursive construction, event, material good or process.

Missing from this discussion is the presence of non-tenure track/adjunct faculty. They would appear to be implicated actors; they are physically present but were seemingly invisible within this research process. This apparent powerlessness of individual members of this world stands in contrast to the emerging importance of this
world overall, as adjuncts comprise the majority of faculty members and are increasingly responsible for teaching the majority of courses within universities (Jaschik, 2008; June, 2012). Assuming that adjuncts will continue to carry out a significant percentage of teaching duties, it seems prudent to consider if university-community engagement can reach its full potential without engaging what is likely the largest group of university employees. Since many such faculty members are part-time and frequently hold other jobs, they may already be functioning as de facto boundary spanners. Conversely, the limited nature of these employment relationships seems to narrow the potential for expanded community engagement.

Issues related to funding were consistently present in the discourse of university-community boundary spanners. Funding issues appear to be powerful actants in the arena of university-community partnerships. For Guen, the creation of profit for the university is the reason her job exists. Fred has to raise his salary from grants, which directly influences what partnerships can be pursued—“So I’ll have to consciously think about we could do X or we could do Y; X isn’t fundable but really beneficial; Y is fundable and I keep my job.” Candice’s job is funded on soft money, and this seems to make her very aware of feedback the campus provost receives from faculty about her work. As an “implicated actant” (Clarke, 2005, p. 47), funding and tangible resources are highly influential factors in the process of university-community engagement.

4.4 Summary

This chapter introduces the voices of the research participants, describes key facets of the university-community boundary spanner role and provides a description of
the complex social ecology within which the boundary spanner role exists utilizing Clarke’s (2005) Social Worlds/Arenas mapping technique. The description confirms that boundary spanner role are complex, they are characterized by role conflict, and they are carried out amidst diverse and sometimes overlapping worlds within the university-community engagement arena. Chapter V identifies key themes emerging within this arena and responds directly to the research questions.
CHAPTER V
FINDINGS

This chapter identifies five themes emerging from the described experience of boundary spanners and offers a response to each of the research questions. In selecting the identified emerging themes, this writer acknowledges Charmaz’s labeling of constructionist research analysis as “intuitive and impressionistic” Charmaz (2006, p. 147).

5.1 Emerging Themes

This researcher has identified five themes emerging from the described experience of the 11 boundary spanners who agreed to participate in this study. These emerging themes include the challenge of mutuality, boundary spanner vulnerability, the influence of resources, formative responses to role conflict, and adaptive responses to role conflict. The themes are presented as stepping stones, guiding the reader to the subsequent responses to the research questions.
5.1.1 The Challenge of Mutuality

All of the study participants spoke about the importance of partnerships being mutually beneficial to community partners and their employing institutions. The creation and management of mutually beneficial partnerships of reciprocal value is the core expectation and challenge within the university-community boundary spanning role. Speaking on the importance of mutuality of benefit, Donna states, “It’s very important to me, it’s the mission of the university; it’s the point of my job.” This is a powerful statement reflecting an alignment of her personal values, institutional mission, and specific employment expectations.

However, the challenge of mutuality is evident within the daily work of seeking alignment on interests of university and community agents. Ida explained:

My main job or what I see as my main job is to ensure the quality of those partnerships so that we make sure that when a community partner is coming in, we clearly understand what it is that they want, and when we agree to a partnership, we’re agreeing to quality of outcome, and that’s really what I consider my job. And vice versa too, I want the faculty to have a quality experience as well.

When boundary spanners contend with diverse and potentially contradictory interests of the potential partners, they sometimes default to the primary influence of their employment relationship. In describing how she sometimes responded to situations wherein there is not an alignment of interests, Donna states “I reminded myself where my paycheck comes from.” Betty acknowledged a similar primacy of orientation in stating, “I love my community partners, but I still have to look at this as a university employee,
too.” Even in institutions outwardly committedly to the mutual and reciprocal value of partnerships, boundary spanners must still contend with the powerful influence of the source of their paycheck.

A further aspect of the challenge of mutuality is the question of how one assesses whether a partnership is mutually beneficial. There was little consensus on this point. Kevin contends it is a question of resource inputs and that it should not be expected that community partners always contribute some of the money. Donna, who develops service learning partnerships, stated that all her work was mutually beneficial, “Just about any kind of project that gets our students involved, depending on the kind of class we’re looking at, is beneficial to the students. Anything is better than them sitting in a classroom.” Ida describes herself as trying to be “neutral” in helping parties to come together, to do a deal, and to each get something they want. Ana strives for a seemingly deeper integration of interests wherein, as she describes

> Shared vision and goals and values and outcomes are really important, or at least a commitment to supporting the others, so that. . . . I think that goes along with a trusting relationship is that some, either explicit or implicit agreement to support the others’ interests is critically important.

Her description of mutuality goes beyond a simple agreement to work together but encompasses a more inclusive shared ownership of the needs of both parties. Betty’s statement is perhaps the most conclusive about this aspect of the challenge of mutuality, as she points out there is not much “scholarship” on this question.

University staff boundary spanners frequently face this challenge of mutuality, while attempting to manage their own experiences of personal and professional
vulnerability amidst complicated university and community power relationships. These experiences—having one’s position funded on soft money, being subject to interpersonal attack, and coping with the adverse impact of multiple roles—are described in the following section.

5.1.2 Boundary Spanner Vulnerability and Power Relationships

Both Betty and Candice reported that they were paid out of so-called “soft money” wherein funding for salary and program needs was not guaranteed from year to year while the university evaluated the utility of the partnership work. Fred’s position is expected to be self-supporting: “If I don’t get revenue coming in through grants, I lose the position, so I’m given three years to make sure that all works out.” As Betty points out below, the fundamental financial uncertainty of such positions might make it difficult to sometimes push aggressively for a mutually beneficial alignment of university and community interests. Betty is pointedly clear about this experience:

Addressing that misalignment in the most expedient way might, in turn, might not be in alignment with my personal interest, which is keeping my job. So, the challenge is how to define and implement the thing that is the right to do, but is also the thing that will be the right thing to do in the longer term. . . . Keeping my eye on the prize sometimes means having to give up a short gain in order to keep the long term one. You know, if I lose my job, I’m not going . . . there will be nobody here right now to do some of the things that I do.

Hence the experience of boundary spanner vulnerability stemming from being supported by soft money is heightened by the internal university power structure wherein boundary
spanner effectiveness may be viewed only in terms of immediate perceived value to the university or to a specific university official. There are other influencers in this valuation process as well.

Candice shared two situations that resulted in her experience of feeling vulnerable. A faculty member dissatisfied with Candice’s assistance “just completely plowed me under in front of faculty members. . . . faculty government and my provost” when she was not able to assist a faculty member in developing creative writing workshops for low income persons. She also described the experience of “getting thrown under the bus” by a non-profit ceo who was out of touch with what his subordinates had requested and then complained to the university chancellor that Candice was not providing assistance when it was his own staff who were slowing the project down. “But, I . . . [was] not only thrown under the bus, but run over five or six times. . . . I’m not in a permanent role yet…so I don’t have the protections and the sense of security that others might.” Even though they worked in university structures in which mutuality of partner benefit is formally supported, Candace and Betty experienced significant vulnerability and openness to direct interpersonal attack with potential job sanctions.

Vulnerability was also evident in the experience of boundary spanners who had multiple roles. As a regional campus director, Ed acknowledged that he had to be mindful when advocating for community needs with academic leaders, whose cooperation he also needed for the classroom operations of his campus. Conflict stemming from Janice’s dual role of heading up a university-community research partnership and serving as a lead researcher sometimes put her in conflict with tenured faculty regarding pending research projects:
They might want to label me as someone who isn’t sound methodologically or doesn’t quite know what she’s doing. . . . occasionally I’ve got asked questions and I’m like, well . . . I want to say, that’s kind of a stupid question; of course I know that I would need to control for ABCD, like I did receive these letters behind my name.

It seems likely that boundary spanners who are focused on their own vulnerability may be less likely to push back within the university-community network of power relationships to attempt to achieve greater mutuality of benefit from a specific partnership project. To the extent that resource scarcity is also an issue, such resource competition may intensify boundary spanners’ feeling of vulnerability.

5.1.3 The Influence of Resources

Not surprisingly, resources (money, staff time, space and more) figure prominently in many aspects of the boundary spanning process. Often community partners see the universities as well-resourced institutions amidst needy urban environments. Henrietta’s experience is that when she is contacted by a potential community partner, they all want “money.” Her response is to attempt to redirect the conversation to potentially more sustainable forms of programmatic assistance. Money and resources are also on the minds of boundary spanners and the institutions that employ them.

As described in the prior section, many boundary spanners’ employment is dependent on soft money, and they are continually aware of how their day to day work may connect with their continuing employment. As Candice explains, “We start off with
six months, that was extended for another year, now I’m good until next June. Is the university going to be able to make that commitment?” Some boundary spanners are exclusively grant funded and this impacts their work. It was Fred’s experience that “we could do X or we could do Y; X isn’t fundable but really beneficial; Y is fundable and I keep my job.” The question of ongoing funding for boundary spanner positions may cause some boundary spanners to proceed cautiously when trying to align university and community interests. For other boundary spanners it clearly drives which needs get addressed.

Setting aside the question of how the boundary spanner’s time is funded, there are a number of other resource variables. For some boundary spanners their time (and help they could beg from others) was their only tangible resource. Others worked in settings where there were other professional boundary spanning staff, support staff, medical support services, physical space, and grants programs for community partners and faculty. While the availability of additional resources seemed to help with some alignment issues, it did not seem to be a decisive factor in the experience of boundary spanner role conflict. It appears likely that community and on-campus funding needs would always surpass available resources. Even so, Anna points out how the difficulty in accessing supportive resources has impacted her work and her role expectations:

The other thing is that it’s so hard to meet community needs, given that the university hasn’t made a very explicit commitment. . . . I have found over the years that it’s very common to be working with the community partner, to identify what their needs are, and then not be able to meet them or fulfill them in any way.
. . . and so, the position I was in, working with students and working with community partners was more and more untenable.

For some boundary spanners, formal institutional policy, about the necessity of outside resources, helped to clarify role expectations for boundary spanners and lessen the experience of role conflict. As Fred stated above, he can only do those projects that are “fundable;” he believes his potential community partners generally understand this and that this helps to shape their expectations. Guen leads a modest professional staff whose role is to generate profits and long term sustainable partnerships. She explains, “We work as profit centers, so obviously everything that we’re running, we’re looking at not just covering our costs but generating income so that we can continue to grow, look at new products or new programs or new initiatives.” Ida packages community projects (with community funding) for faculty to execute.

Clearly the presence or absence of additional resources impacts the process of partnership formation and the potential experience of role conflict by university boundary spanners. What seems to be of greater importance to the experience of role conflict is the degree to which expectations about resources are defined and shared. If all stakeholders understand and accept that the work has to be self-sustaining, that helps to shape and align the expectations of potential partners. For some boundary spanners, expectations tied to resources can be more explicitly defined than merely self-sustaining. Henrietta evaluates “the return on investment” with respect to “reducing NICU [neo-natal intensive care unit] days and emergency room” use when evaluating her resource and partnership opportunities.
Resourcing the work has multiple dimensions. The community sees the university as having vast amounts of available human and physical resources that are underutilized. Yet, universities are increasingly looking to partnership strategies to help with their own resource deficits. The sole resource of some boundary spanners was their own time. Other institutions had more resources available, including internal grants, community grants, staffing support for engagement, and facilities. Resource issues figure prominently in other aspects of the boundary spanning process. Some boundary spanners’ salaries are dependent upon soft or one-time money, which may make them more cautious. Having extra money available for engagement activities does seem to help to smooth out some rough edges in the partnership process; however, university and community needs will always surpass available funding. Furthermore, the need for some partnerships to be self-supporting or profit-making is also a significant influence on the partnership process and potential sources of role conflict. While the overall impact of resource issues on boundary spanner responses to role conflict is only partially understood, it is clear that for many of the participant boundary spanners resource issues are of ongoing and immediate concern.

5.1.4 Formative Responses to Role Conflict

The experience of role conflict, while promoting mutually beneficial partnerships, is inherent to the work of the university-community boundary spanner. It is not a separate state or experience but an integral aspect of the boundary spanner role. While the experience of role conflict may be marked by external events and circumstances, it is an internal, ongoing process that coincides with boundary spanning behaviors.
When asked how they responded to the experience of role conflict (i.e., experiencing competing external expectations and/or external expectations which conflicted with their values or self-expectations), participants reported behaviors which this researcher has labeled and categorized as responding formatively and responding adaptively. Behaviors labeled as responding formatively are behaviors seemingly directed towards seeking agreement and alignment of the parties' positions. Behaviors labeled as responding adaptively are behaviors that seem to indicate that the role conflict is not readily resolved by reaching agreement and hence the boundary spanner needs to adapt or adjust his/her behaviors, expectations or attitudes.

Behaviors categorized as responding formatively include listening, translating, mediating, and expanding problem solving space or creativity. Additionally, participants identified responses characterized as reflecting internal choices to depersonalize conflict and to display patience and trust. Listening was identified as an important response to understand both the facts of a situation and its interpreted meaning. In discussing her work with faculty, Guen stated

I think the first thing I did was just listen and really let them talk about why they had problems with the requests that were being made on them. They felt that it compromised their academic integrity, which means it compromises their own personal view of their work.

While the act of listening may seem passive and one-sided, if active listening by the boundary spanner results in the speaker feeling she or he is understood, then such experience is reciprocal and not one-sided.
University representatives and community partners frequently exist in different worlds, cultures, and amidst widely varying markers of time. It is Betty’s experience that I’m often find myself sort of a translator, a boundary spanner . . . working with the gaps between campus and community. I find often, most people exist pretty thoroughly in either one or the other of these communities, so helping them each to understand the other becomes a real important part of what I do.

Translation behavior is directed at helping parties to understand the point of alignment of interests that exist in a conversation or situation when the words used or meanings conveyed by one party may not be readily understood by the other party.

As labeled by this researcher, mediating behaviors include those directed toward reconciling differences between parties to bring an agreement; they may include promoting dialogue, compromise, and focusing on the work to be accomplished as an outcome of the partnership. Fred offered an example of this boundary spanning behavior: “People get a little polarized when you start arguing funding and stuff; but working . . . we got that far, we got some innovative people there, I was able to push, push, push to get them keep reading and keep talking.” The central boundary spanning objective of this behavior is to keep the parties at the table and engaged in the process.

A few participants reported the experience of expanding problem solving space or creativity as a response to role conflict. Guen seems to affirm the experience of conflict within her role as an important part of the overall process—

I mean, I love the word boundary spanner and I think there’s . . . conflict’s inherent, but it’s what you do with that which is kind of fascinating to me. . . . to me it’s seeing those opportunities within that conflict where there is really. . . .
that's where you start to really go beyond those boundaries. That’s where you break the boundaries; because if you’re in the conflict, you’re remaining in that boundary–you’re not going beyond it, usually.

Perhaps it is counter-intuitive, but those boundary spanners who identified expanded creativity as a response to role conflict also seemed to have strong supervisory, vertical relationships and some clearly defined role limitations such as the need to be financially self-supporting or profit-making. It may be that strong supervisory support provides a sense of license to pursue alternative solutions, while clear expectations such as the need to make a profit provide clear role boundaries for staff framing partnerships.

Boundary spanners also reported the ability to depersonalize conflict and to display patience and trust. Janice spoke about her capacity to have challenging conversations without over-reacting to what others said to her or about her—“So I don’t shy away from difficult conversations. . . . they don’t stress me out, I don’t lose sleep at night, and very volatile situations are actually, I don’t react to them”. Ida also spoke about the importance of not personalizing the stress resulting from role conflict and maintaining an awareness of choices in responding to a particular situation:

So, it’s been . . . there are times that it’s been frustrating, but there are times that I definitely have to take that step back and rethink and reassess on how I’m doing something. I guess I’ve learned how to de-personalize a lot of reaction.

Similarly, Candice stated, “I can’t overestimate the value of going forward with positive assumptions about the intentions of others. She affirms the necessity of this trusting approach even though it may pose risks at times saying:
that you have to really wear that out there on your sleeve and recognize that people are going to take advantage of that, somebody’s going to shoot you for that, and you’re going to take a bullet . . . but I think it’s taking trust to this really interpersonal level where I really do care that you get what you need to get.

To a certain extent the behaviors described above are conscious choices, but they also seem to be choices that are more likely to be available to boundary spanners with well-developed personal awareness and maturity. This is consistent with Weerts and Sandman (2010) who suggested that partnership success “reflected the strength of . . . [the boundary spanner’s] interpersonal skills and technical expertise” (p. 19).

5.1.5 Adaptive Responses to Role Conflict

Behaviors labeled as responding adaptively are those behaviors which seems to indicate that the role conflict is unlikely to be resolved by reaching agreement and hence the boundary spanner adapts or adjusts his/her behavior, expectations, or attitudes. In responding adaptively there appears to be instances of boundary spanner acting in and acting out. Acting in behaviors include internalizing conflict, feeling vulnerable, and becoming more cautious. Acting out responses include picking one side, advocating, identity shifting, seeking support, and renegotiating the boundary spanning role.

Acting in responses to role conflict

Internalization of the conflict was reflected in the experience of distress and failure and a heightened sense of responsibility. Ana discusses this saying “I really internalize some of these conflicts and not . . . and don’t attribute them to the environment that I’m working in. I really feel that I very often attribute them to myself in
my incapacity and skill.” Betty’s sense of personal responsibility was so strong that she
continued to support a group of refugees on her own time, without her employer’s
knowledge, after the university moved on—“Oh, it’s very distressing and I have come to
know these people and I know that we can’t help every single person, and of course you
become preferential to the people that you know and protective too.”

A variety of situations were connected with boundary spanners’ reporting that
they felt vulnerable when responding to role conflict. Fred felt that each job decision was
important to his ability to raise money for his position. Candice was extremely aware of
her vulnerability, both as a person and in retaining her position, after being “thrown under
the bus” by a community partner who had not previously registered disagreement with
her work and being “just completely plowed me under in front of faculty members . . .
faculty government and my provost” by a faculty member whom she thought she was
successfully assisting. In addition to her feelings, she also felt this made her more
vulnerable professionally, because her position is funded on soft money on a trial basis.
Betty’s experience of vulnerability stemmed from the clear direction of her boss to
implement a project, which the community partner had said they neither wanted nor
needed. Betty acknowledged how her feelings of vulnerability sometimes led her to
become more cautious in her work.

This experience of becoming more cautious in response to role conflict was a
common one. Anna found herself in the position of not being able to make good on the
implicit promise extended when she worked with potential community partners to
understand their needs–
It’s very common to be working with the community partner, to identify what their needs are, and then not be able to meet them or fulfill them in any way. And so I really back off putting myself out there, because I felt like I was starting to become a professional risk to be . . . to make promises . . . granted, I learned pretty early on not to make promises, but I think just by showing up, you’re making some kind of . . . you’re indicating in some way that the university might have something to offer.

Candice’s experience of being “thrown under the bus” caused her to react

Whoa Will Robinson, there’s danger out there . . . there are some really mean hostile people on my own campus that even when I’m doing what I think is really open, collaborative, here, we’re here to help kind of work, can be misread, misunderstood.

Ed’s experience of caution was a reason he felt he needed to re-think priorities:

You can’t just be going out and trying to conquer the world and solve all of the problems. There needs to be some sort of planning and looking at how those partnerships are going to benefit each other; and how you can help the community or the citizens.

The central response reflected within the experience of becoming more cautious is a self-imposed limitation on the boundary spanners’ range of behaviors to effect the alignment of interests and/or the limiting of the range of possible solutions. While the need to set priorities is real, becoming more cautious does not always advance the work of university-community engagement, and may in fact pose a barrier to the potential benefits of such work. All three of the acting-in patterns of responding adaptively–
internalizing conflict, feeling vulnerable, and becoming more cautious—reflect situations in which the boundary spanner is no longer in dialogue with others but is left to his or her own internal voices.

*Acting out responses to role conflict*

Acting out forms of responding adaptively include picking one side, advocating, identity shifting, seeking support, and renegotiating the boundary spanning role. The response of picking one side is characterized by little effort to find a mutually agreeable solution and appears to be driven by boundary spanner’s experience with authority and supervision within the workplace. For Donna, the primacy of her employment relationship was a clear orienting principle when she was faced with role conflict in the form of competing external expectations: “I reminded myself where my paycheck comes from. . . . I’ve got to work for a living.” Henrietta felt caught in the middle of a community controversy wherein her employer wanted to build a new hospital in a low income, African-American neighborhood. As an African American with strong ties to members of the community, she was caught between two sets of loyalties and role expectations. She publicly supported her employer, although she disagreed with the project. Ida had a similar experience when she lost the trust of a faculty member when she removed what she perceived as excessive source citation in project presentation to community leaders; she chose to side with the community perception that such documentation was unnecessary. All three of these actions were taken by boundary spanners who expressly believed in the proposition that projects must be mutually agreeable and mutually beneficial. These situations reflect the real world situations in which boundary spanners work and make choices. The picking of one side within the
conflict, and hence the negation of the principles of mutual agreement and benefit, has negative implications for project sustainability and is in conflict with the principles of university-community engagement.

The adaptive response of boundary spanners advocating is differentiated from the just discussed response of them picking one side. Advocating is intended to reflect those instances when the boundary spanner takes a clear position to advocate for one of the parties to the conflict after having tried to find mutually agreeable solutions. Sometimes this decision to act as an advocate stems from the value system of the boundary spanner and sometimes from the boundary spanner’s identification with one of the parties, usually the non-university partner. Ed advocated with upper level university officials in support of the community to overturn a perceived lack of response by the nursing school to provide public health services: “We have students to serve; we have organizations that need us and we have to serve them. So, I have to take that higher.” The need to share the university’s resources with community groups is one of Anna’s core beliefs:

I think bringing the community perspective on campus is really powerful, so to have an advocate for community needs, community organizations, our current community partners present in meetings and on committees and processes is very . . . is a value to the institution. I think that’s a service that I can offer.

While the actions of Ed and Anna were seemingly noble in their intent, the one-sidedness of the solutions may be insufficient to the requirements of sustainability and the principles of university-community engagement.

Identity shifting is the label proposed for those behaviors wherein the boundary spanner alters outward aspects of her or his identity as reflected in dress, speech, or
presentation of self so to better align with either a community partner or institutional constituency. Donna described how her formal dress identified her with the university and made it difficult to connect with community residents:

‘Oh, here’s the university walking into our meeting’. And so I’d actually go home from work. . . . I’d take off my suit, and I’d put on a pair of blue jeans, tennis shoes, and a sweatshirt, and then I’d go to the neighborhood meeting. And then I would be more accepted. I’d walk into those meetings in my suit; they absolutely didn’t want to talk to me.

Janice placed similar importance on down-playing her dress and self-presentation:

No one calls me doctor. . . . I’m very, highlighting the fact that I was an agency level person for many years. . . . So I’m very conscious about how I present myself. I’m conscious about the way I dress. . . . Whenever possible, I try to down-play my role.

Janice describes this process as attempting to “cause this cognitive dissonance about your identity and they [community partners] stop, and then are able to kind of break out any preconceived notions.” She felt she was more likely to be accepted by community partners if she minimized her outward identification as an academic professional.

According to Barker (2001), dress is a method of non-verbal communication through which one may present alternative identities within a social context. Such identity shifting may serve to minimize barriers between the boundary spanner and partners posing what may be an alternate identity as a non-university member of the community. The behaviors reported by Donna and Janice above, wherein they chose to
use their wardrobe choices to weaken their perceived linkage to their universities, may also cause the boundary spanner to feel less likely to be rejected by partners.

Seeking support from others on campus staff and faculty was another adaptive response to role conflict by boundary spanners. This was evidenced by boundary spanners who sought to convene other boundary spanners to discuss mutual concerns, to develop project specific alliances with faculty, and to share boundary spanner responsibilities. Kevin hopes to be the spark that ignites others to action: “I hope to achieve that this . . . so we become a united force, so that it’s not just me initiating and bringing this group in and that group in.” The essential social nature of this response to role conflict allows for an external processing of the experiences of role conflict with the possible avoidance of the acting-in responses as described above. Anna’s experience seems to support this interpretation: “And so, my response has been to turn inward and do more in-reach and organizing internally so that we could get our act together and build our capacity internally to meet some of these needs.”

The renegotiation of the boundary spanner role was another adaptive response to role conflict. Anna moved away from structuring service-learning partnerships to supporting staff networks of other boundary spanners, at least partially in response to the limited response of her employing institution in sharing resources with community partners. For Ed, the response of renegotiating his role was one of limiting it to fewer priorities, recognizing that he could not “conquer the world and solve all of the problems.” Betty described working to shift her university’s focus from short term one-off partnerships to longer term, more sustainable partnerships.
For Anna, the reframing of her role was a strategic choice to shift her focus away from what was not working to what she thought could add value for her community partners:

The university could not come through on what it was the community member was . . . or community partner was asking for. And so, the position I was in, working with students and working with community partners was more and more untenable.

While such redefinition or renegotiation of the boundary spanning role does not prevent new occurrences of role conflict, it may reframe current conflicts and constraints, while potentially repositioning potential partners.

The five themes described above—the challenge of mutuality, boundary spanner vulnerability and power relationships, the influence of resources, formative responses to role conflict, and adaptive responses to role conflict—describe key processes, which frame and influence boundary spanners’ experience of role conflict and how they respond to these experiences. These themes are pertinent to responding to the research questions. These responses follow in the next section.

5.2 Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to explore the experience of role conflict by non-academic university staff members who work across organizational boundaries in urban universities to address the needs of both their host institutions and their communities. This section of the findings addresses the identified research questions:
1. What is the nature of role conflict as experienced by non-academic administrative staff serving as university-community boundary spanners in urban universities?

2. How does the experience of role conflict impact the processes of partnership formation and community engagement?

3. What individual and institutional strategies have been identified by boundary spanners to assist with the management of role conflict?

The responses to each question are shown below. Additionally, such responses will also be used to identify the initial scaffolding elements for an emerging theory of boundary spanner role conflict as presented in Chapter VI Discussion.

*Question 1: What is the nature of role conflict as experienced by non-academic administrative staff serving as university-community boundary spanners in urban universities?*

Role conflict appears to be an inherent element of boundary spanning roles as carried out by non-academic administrative staff participants in urban universities. While some participants questioned the use of the term *role conflict*, all participants provided examples of role conflict consistent with the framework defined by Rizzo, House, and Litzman (1970): conflict between an individual’s values and the demands of a role, conflict stemming from insufficient resources and role expectations, conflict between multiple roles assigned to the same individual, and role conflict stemming from competing external expectations.

Guen identified the inherent conflict as an opportunity: “I mean, I love the word boundary spanner and I think there’s . . . conflict’s inherent, but it’s what you do with that which is kind of fascinating to me.” In other circumstances, the experience of role
conflict seemed more problematic. Betty described her university’s decision to end a refugee service project very “distressing” and struggled with “feeling like we’re abandoning them;” she then continued the project on her own time absent the university’s knowledge.

Boundary spanners who were in their roles less than a year offered examples of role conflicts consistent with the four dimensions identified by Rizzo, House, and Litzman (1970); however, they were less likely to see them as problematic and instead seemed to experience them as just another limitation or requirement of their job. While one might debate the use of the term role conflict, this study provided many examples of the phenomenon of role conflict as experienced by administrative staff serving as university-community boundary spanners in urban universities. Another possible interpretation is that such staff members, especially those newly in their roles, are insufficiently aware of the phenomenon of role conflict and its implications for their work.

Each of the universities employing the participants evidenced a formal commitment to an urban serving purpose as reflected in statements of mission and or program philosophy. Some institutions have received the Carnegie Foundation classification recognizing a commitment to community engagement. The foundation’s definition of university-community engagement, “the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (Carnegie Foundation, 2007, para.3), underscores the challenge of mutuality for the boundary spanner,
While all universities represented in the sample had formal statements of support for this work, boundary spanners had widely varying realities when it came to campus leadership and resources as evidence of tangible support. Betty’s situation is that while her institution’s strategic plan includes a section on “outreach and engagement that specifically mentions my job. . . . All of my efforts need to align with the strategic priorities of the university.” Candice described how her university is “expanding the resources, they are putting underneath the Provost’s Office to support engagement work; to be in alignment with the Chancellor’s metropolitan vision.” Ed’s institution seemed to have a very strong formal mission focus on university-community engagement –“It is in the strategic plan; they strive very strongly for outreach and engagement. We are Carnegie designated.” Anna’s school does “not have upper leadership that’s coordinating any kind of outreach or engagement work in general. We haven’t made any statements about what issues we’re going to take on” and “we don’t have any program dollars.” Fred’s experience was “while that’s [urban mission and community engagement] a university initiative, I would say there’s a big disconnect on campus between what the university initiative is”. While the alignment of an institution’s strategic framework reflects greater congruence of its mission, values, structure, and goals and strategies (Gauntner et al., 1992), and such congruence can reduce the potential for role conflict (Keller & Holland, 1975), it is unclear if such alignment is of meaningful assistance when role conflict is experienced.

The organizational structures within which participants worked varied widely. Janice and Fred worked at specialty research centers. Ana was situated in student services, and Henrietta worked out of the university hospital. Guen was in the business
school. Others were structured within various administrative units. Some worked as solo staff while others like Guen and Candice worked with teams charged to develop partnerships. There was no evidence to support that organizational structure impacted the experience of role conflict as reported by study participants.

Participants varied widely in the degree of trust and support they perceived from their supervisors. Henrietta reported that she has the support of her superiors to make decisions on which partnerships to pursue—“Usually it’s me that makes the decision. My boss and my boss’s administrator usually trust me to make that decision.” Guen reported that her dean was openly supportive of her work, and she gave an example of how she used that influence to improve alignment between faculty members and community. In this instance, the faculty member was asked to decline a project due to the perception that it was not a good fit. The supportive position of her dean was active and immediate: “What do you need for me to get your . . . to do what you’re doing moved forward?” Betty was aware that she wanted a supervisory relationship characterized by greater trust and support –

  Trusting me is really important; the problem is, you can’t hurry trust. . . . the best help my boss can provide is to allow me both to define and to occupy the space I need, even if he doesn’t thoroughly understand it. . . . to be available when I have a question or a concern.

As Guen evidenced above, strong supervisory support can be of assistance to the boundary spanner in resolving conflict situations. It also seems that strong supervisory support may serve to lessen feelings of boundary spanner vulnerability and help boundary spanners continue to respond formatively to role conflict. When attempting to plan a new
partnership with potentially conflicting objectives (and parties), Fred felt actively supported—“The good thing is that our director and other people that are way senior to me, world-renowned, were willing to say, we’ll help you through it.” This is consistent with the position of Stamper and Johlke (2003) who found that explicit organizational support lessened role conflict experienced by staff.

The experience of role conflict seemed to vary widely given the degree of role bounded-ness or specific job related expectations of the boundary spanner. Individual boundary spanners who had known requirements such as being self-supporting seemed to experience less role conflict and seemed less personally troubled by it when they did.

Guen’s role is to create and manage ongoing, profit-making partnerships with businesses:

When we work with a corporate partner, it’s not about them just being a corporate sponsor or providing this . . . we really look to them to provide value at all levels and that could be providing opportunities for students for internships, it could be having a practitioner that would be willing to come into the classroom and share their experiences and expertise. So, there has to be a commitment to really want to be involved and be part of a relationship and not just receive something.

Candice is part of university team of professionals focusing on engagement through a couple of primary partnerships while attempting also to assist all faculty members and potential community partners who may ask for help. The relative unbounded-ness of her role seems to create more opportunities for role conflict and make it more challenging to resolve conflicts. Some boundary spanners seemed to have a formal or informal license to say ‘no’ to requests for assistance. This ability to decline a project reflected another method of delimiting the boundary spanner role.
For boundary spanners who had clearly defined roles, it was also important to communicate the dimensions of that role to on-campus and community partners as a way to minimize role conflict. Ida provides project management support, helping to frame and monitor paid and unpaid faculty engagements with outside entities:

We help convene . . . we first try to meet and greet; we assist them in developing the work scope; we assist in developing the proposal; we handle a lot of logistics meetings. . . . [and to faculty] I am not here to engage in your PhD work or evaluate it. My role here is to let you do your research and I free up all the other things to allow you to do that.

Clarity from the boundary spanner in communicating her or his role certainly does not preclude, but may lessen, the intensity of role conflict.

The majority of the examples of role conflict identified by study participants were situated at the points of exploration or initiation of a partnership. But there were other conflicts that arose during the ongoing operations of the partnership. Donna needed to intervene with a community partner who was not following through on agreed upon steps necessary for a service learning project. Ed had to aggressively address a situation in which his nursing program was seemingly abandoning an agreed upon community commitment to provide basic public health services. There were also examples of competing university and partner expectations in respect to project termination.

The experience of role conflict seems to be very personal and highly emotive experiences at times for many boundary spanners. Anna shared that “taking responsibility . . . having to take responsibility for some of those failures makes you feel like a failure.” Henrietta shared her distress in having to support her employing institution in a
disagreement with her own African-American community. Candice regards her boundary spanning work and dealing with her role conflict as a “spiritual calling.” Even in settings wherein the boundary spanner serves as part of an engagement team, there seems to be the potential for solitary experience. Some boundary spanners described having been able to build personal support systems on campus, but developing methods of support for coping with role conflict seemed to be a continuing struggle for others.

**Question 2: How does the experience of role conflict impact the processes of partnership formation and community engagement?**

The impact of role conflict on the processes of partnership formation and community engagement is mediated through the boundary spanner’s overall experience of role conflict. Aspects of this experience include their identity as boundary spanners, environmental factors driving boundary spanner role clarity and ambiguity, their formal job duties and specific assignments, and boundary spanner responses to role conflict.

**Boundary spanner identity**

This researcher has identified a concept of boundary spanner identity, as emerging from the use of theoretical coding which was used to posit possible relationships between the categories identified via focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). The subordinate elements, identified with focused coding, are professional background, self-identified role framing, claiming of personal power, PhD status, and amount of experience as a boundary spanner.

The professional backgrounds of participants variedly widely: the military, the arts, non-profit administration, government, for profit, education, engineering, human
services, and more. With one exception, all the participants had previously worked in multiple positions outside of higher education. For the one participant whose background was exclusively in higher education, all her prior university roles had an external focus (e.g. student recruitment).

While each boundary spanner described how previously acquired content knowledge was influential to her or his role, such as K to 8 teaching or data interpretation, most participants also had concrete examples of how their prior professional background had given direction to their current roles in more subtle ways. Anna connected her social work training to her current focus on “systems thinking” and “root cause[s] of community problems.” Henrietta currently oversees university-community health care partnerships. Her knowledge of what is possible pushes her work: “So, looking at how we would setup hospitals . . . in the middle of the desert, it just doesn’t make sense that this whole issue of access to healthcare can’t be addressed through partnerships and working within the community.” Ida is an engineer by training and was initially surprised by the extent to which personal agendas influenced approaches to the work. Having now adopted an approach she characterizes as a little more “patient” and “sensitive,” she is able to focus more clearly on the objectives and component processes of partnerships. Kevin convenes university-community arts partnerships; his experiences as a hip-hop artist, instructor, and collaborator across the media of dance, poetry, acting, music, and graffiti seemed to have strongly influenced his current role wherein he frames partnerships between the university and constellations of artists around different themes and issues.
The concept of role framing was used to capture the boundary spanners’ personal interpretations of formally assigned position duties. For Candice, knowing that her position was funded on soft money and subject to annual review resulted in a conscious decision to align all her activities with “the strategic priorities of then university.” Candice identified her role as on requiring initiative and risk: “We’re more entrepreneurial, we’re more risk-taking, we are more confident that we can land on our feet if something doesn’t work. We’re not afraid to make those mistakes.” For Ida, being a university-community boundary spanner means being “neutral,” wherein she is equally concerned about both quality of the work provided to the community partner and the experience of the faculty partner.

Claiming personal power, as an element of boundary spanner identity was meant to describe a boundary spanner’s assertion of the appropriateness of a personal position, presence, or role choice stemming from personal vales or other personal characteristic. For Kevin, it was his lived experience that propelled his needs to bring partners together: “My daily life, my family, being in the city, it’s just ongoing . . . everything is . . . for my world and for my art, and my work, and what I do, it’s all very interconnected.” For Janice, it’s her personal connection to the value of data that drives her partnership work—“I love data, I know that sounds so weird . . . the thing that pulled me to this job was how I could marry my really deeply instilled belief that simple data can shift big pieces of our policy problems.” For Henrietta, her work and its importance is a reflection of her “moral compass, doing what’s right, understanding that I’ve been so blessed, that I need to give back; I think that’s probably what drives me.” This concept of claiming personal power might otherwise be referred to as a combination of personal and professional values but
that label seemed too passive given the importance that participants attached to these descriptions. Perhaps counter intuitive, the behavior of claiming of personal power was evidenced by boundary spanner participants who also shared experiences of boundary spanner vulnerability.

The PhD status of participants varied. Three had earned their PhDs, and the balance did not. The non-PhD status of the majority of participants seemed to both create and circumvent power and credibility issues. Ida’s experience was that “there are faculty that . . . don’t value my work as highly because I’m not a PhD” This apparent bias seemed to be obviated when boundary spanners were able to articulate their roles as facilitators of the process of partnership versus being evaluators of faculty work.

The experience of having a PhD seemed to also evoke opportunities for conflict. Janice intentionally tries to minimize her outward identification with the academy while claiming academic skills –“I refuse to make a vita; I get asked for a vita and I’m like, you can have my resume. . . . I did receive these letters behind my name, I know the methodology.” Candice is clearly aware of her own biases related to having an earned a PhD later in life:

I admit, I have a big huge chip on my shoulder, I got my PhD late, so that’s . . . later than typical, I was in my mid 40s when I got it, so there’s a chip. . . . I’ve been out in practice and you all are teaching about stuff you’ve never done.

Fred, who works at very large research university, found that his lack of PhD served to minimize others’ expectations of his role: “so I’m not quite office staff, not quite research because I don’t have a PhD, so I live in this gray space that I kind of like. I like the way it is.”
Given the perceived distinction that doctoral degree status frequently conveys within universities, is seems highly questionable to say that educational background does not matter. While this research did not to question attitudes about doctoral degrees other than a PhD, such as EdD, it seems likely that similar dynamics may be evident whenever perceived differences in academic training exist. What seems more important than a boundary spanner’s educational background is that there is an understanding of how that status may be perceived by others and the boundary spanner’s awareness of when they are claiming an expert evaluative role versus a facilitative role. Equally important is the boundary spanner’s clarity in communicating this role choice to partnership participants.

The last element proposed as part of the concept of boundary spanner identity is amount of boundary spanning experience. Three participants had been in their positions less than a year. While all three had at least one example of role conflict, they were less likely to see such circumstances as posing role conflict. Boundary spanners with greater tenure in their positions were more likely to have identified role conflicts and to have reflected on them.

Stryker (2007) positions identity theory within the construct of symbolic interactionism—“society shapes self, and self shapes society behavior. The proposition not only admits to, but insists upon, the possible reciprocity of its components: social behavior can impact self, and society and self can impact society” (p. 1089). The proposed concept of boundary spanner identity—consisting of the elements of professional background, self-identified role framing, claiming of personal power, PhD status, and amount of experience as a boundary spanner—is consistent with the mutually reactive nature of symbolic interactionism and Stryker’s approach to identity theory.
One’s professional background is born of social experience as distilled through individual choice and response; self-identified role framing reflects the individual response to formal external expectations. The process of claiming personal power is part of the self reaching out and seeking to shape society. PhD status is an important marker within the academy conferring status and expectation. The amount of experience as a boundary spanner is important because the role of boundary spanner is one that is constructed in interaction with partners. To the extent a boundary spanner is less experienced, their understanding of their role may be less fully developed.

The concept of boundary spanner identity is relevant to the experience of role conflict for two reasons. First, the boundary spanners’ experiences of their own identity are part of the lens through which they view the world generally and their work specifically. Secondly, the attributes of a boundary spanner’s identity may reflect both useful assets for creating alignment and stronger partnerships and potential sources of conflict between the boundary spanner and external parties. It is very important for the boundary spanner to be aware of how her or his constructed identity may either support or restrict partnership formation and the work of university community engagement. It is equally important to make the boundary spanner’s role explicitly understood by potential project partners.

_ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS DRIVING BOUNDARY SPANNER ROLE CLARITY AND AMBIGUITY_

Three environmental factors have been identified which appear to influence boundary spanner role clarity and ambiguity. These are specificity of university’s community engagement program purpose, the statement of additional partnership
requirements, and the presence of institutional leadership for engagement and strength of the boundary spanners’ vertical linkage with superiors.

While all the participants had formal duties related to partnerships, some roles were framed with more specific direction than others were. A few boundary spanners seemed as if they told to “go forth and do well”, absent other direction or objective, and proceed to create projects linking faculty and community needs, whatever those may be. This softer approach to structure seemed to be associated with greater role conflict. For those boundary spanners with less specific direction or focus, success seemed to be equated with having faculty and community agencies express positive comments, or at least not voicing negative feedback. Those boundary spanners with more specific role focus, such as creating partnerships for service learning or partnerships for minority health care, reported less role conflict.

Anna works at a university that has “not as explicitly as they could, stated a concrete engagement or concrete commitment to community engagement.” While Candice’s institution has committed a number of professional and support staff to help implement university-community partnerships, budgeted funds for faculty grants, and identified some specific partnerships to support, their overall engagement program is still in process of definition. She states, “so, we’re still . . . every conversation we’re having is, who are we, what are you doing? That question the other night of, ‘what the hell do you do?’ is something we hear every day.” Her office has made the deliberate decision to attempt to assist all community partners and faculty who knock on their door. While Ida’s role of providing project management support to faculty seems relatively straightforward, the range of potential engagements seems wide open: “We don’t have a specific focus, so
if there’s a community need, we will try to figure how to solve that.” For a boundary spanner to work in a setting that is open to a broader range of engagements can be a good thing for the community and the university. However, the extent to which an engagement program has broader or even less well defined purposes causes the boundary spanner’s role to be less defined or bounded, and increases the opportunities for unmet expectations and related role conflict. As Fred reflected on the flexibility within his environment, “there’s enough rope you can hang yourself.”

Some of the participant boundary spanners had very specific partnership requirements beyond more general statements of program purpose; most frequently they focused on resources. In framing community health partnerships, Henrietta had to show a return on investment as measured in reduced emergency room visits, lessened use of intensive care services for newborns, or related measures. Fred had an explicit role requirement of supporting his work in K to 12 education with grant funding—“If I don’t get revenue coming in through grants, I lose the position.” Donna works to develop partnerships that provided service-learning opportunities. Guen’s work is intended to create profit and encompass a broader value proposition—

We really look to them to provide value at all levels and that could be providing opportunities for students for internships, it could be having a practitioner that would be willing to come into the classroom and share their experiences and expertise. So, there has to be a commitment to really want to be involved and be part of a relationship and not just receive something.
The presence of these additional requirements, including the influence of resource issues, limits the range of possible partnerships and provides greater role clarity for the boundary spanner.

The third factor identified as influencing boundary spanner role clarity was the presence of institutional leadership for engagement and strength of the boundary spanners’ vertical linkage with superiors. While formal statements of community engagement program purpose are influential as stated above, institutional leaders become the formal agents of organizational intent. Boundary spanners with strong vertical linkages to their immediate superior or other campus engagement leaders seemed to experience greater role clarity and less role conflict.

Greater boundary spanner role clarity seemed to enhance the ability of participants to continue to drive toward an alignment of interests and to say no to potential partnerships early in the process of exploration. Those factors, which supported greater role clarity—an identified program purpose, known constraints, and strong program leadership and supervisory support—also seemed to lessen opportunities for role conflict and to promote formative responses by the boundary spanner when such conflict did emerge.

**Formal job duties and specific assignments**

All of the participants were non-tenure track administrative staff at urban universities that espoused an urban mission. They worked within various administrative structures including an applied research center, a business college, student personnel, a medical school, branch campus administration, and specialized structures to segregate
their roles from the regular academic structure. They focused on health care, science, K to 12 education, faculty research priorities, and civic and community needs. How they were structured or the content areas of their focus did not in and of themselves seem to reflect any patterns in how boundary spanners experienced role conflict. These elements situate the work of the boundary spanner and may also assist with greater role clarity. They also represent an element of randomness in the process of boundary spanning and the experience of role conflict.

**Boundary spanner responses to role conflict**

When participants were asked how they responded to the experience of role conflict, they reported behaviors that this researcher has labeled and categorized as responding formatively and responding adaptively. Behaviors labeled as responding formatively were behaviors directed towards continuing to seek agreement and alignment of the parties' positions. Behaviors labeled as responding adaptively were behaviors which seemed to indicate that the role conflict is not readily resolved by reaching agreement and hence the boundary spanner needs to adapt or adjust his/her behavior, expectations or attitude.

Behaviors categorized as responding formatively were listening, translating, mediating, expanding problem solving space or creativity. Participants identified additional responses, characterized as reflecting internal choices to depersonalize the experience of conflict and displaying patience and trust.

Behaviors labeled as responding adaptively are those behaviors that seem to indicate that the role conflict is unlikely to be resolved by reaching agreement and hence the boundary spanner needs to adapt or adjust his/her behavior, expectations, or attitudes.
In responding adaptively there appear to be instances of boundary spanner acting in and acting out. Identified acting in behaviors consisted of internalizing conflict, feeling vulnerable, and becoming more cautious. Acting out responses included picking one side, advocating, identity shifting, seeking support, and renegotiating the boundary spanning role.

When participants described their experiences of role conflict (i.e. having insufficient resources, experiencing role demands that conflict with values, conflicting demands of multiple roles, and differing expectations of partners), it was clear that, for the most part, their responses reflected high personal involvement or agency. There were a few examples offered by boundary spanners wherein the resolution of a role conflict was to default quickly to their employing institution’s view. When Donna was asked what she did when she experienced role conflict that she found helpful, she acknowledged the need to side with her employer. This example of an adaptive response of picking one side (in this case her employer’s) seemed to this researcher to reflect low personal agency. Vallacher and Wegner (1989) describes low-level personal agency as follows:

[operating] on the world primarily at the level of detail. This person tends to approach an action with its mechanistic component in mind. At the other extreme is the high-level agent, someone who routinely views his or her actions in terms of causal effects, social meanings, and self-descriptive implications. This person attempts to control action with respect to these consequence-defined identities. (p. 661)
Participants provided examples of high-level agency. Examples of high-level personal agency formative responses by participants included Ida’s work mediating a disagreement between faculty members who thought their academic work was being compromised by the marketing firm working on behalf of a corporate funder. Guen experienced her response to role conflict as a conscious, creative choice to expand the parameters for a solution—“conflict’s inherent . . . but to me it’s seeing those opportunities within that conflict…that’s where you really start to go beyond those boundaries.” High level agency was also reflected in many adaptive responses described by boundary spanners. Anna offered an example of how she sometimes responded to role conflict by internalizing the conflict—“taking responsibility . . . having to take responsibility for some of those failures makes you feel like a failure.” Candice described how she had become more cautious in her boundary spanning work and was sometimes less willing to take risks.

Boundary spanning work and the inherent management of role conflict generally reflect high personal involvement or self-agency on the part of the boundary spanner. According to Vallacher and Wegner (1989), “high-level agents . . . perform many of their behaviors with a view toward the more significant meanings of what they are doing” (p.662). To the degree that this is true for administrative staff serving as university-community boundary spanners, such intensity of focus will further the work of partnership formation and university-community engagement when it is reflected in formative responses to role conflict. Ida offered an example of this high personal agency in describing her development as a boundary spanner: “I think for me, I’m probably a lot more patient than I was, I think that I am a lot more thoughtful in how people are acting
and reacting.” It is important to note though, that high personal agency on the part of the boundary spanner can be a source of further role conflict.

When the boundary spanner chooses adaptive responses to role conflict, partnership formation and community engagement are not supported. The specific adaptive responses of internalizing conflict, feeling vulnerable, and becoming more cautious appear to have at least short-term negative consequences for the boundary spanner and potentially longer term negative consequences for partnership formation and community engagement. While the process of becoming more cautious may be a very appropriate response for the individual staff boundary spanner, it also seems to lessen the possible solution space for partnerships and the overall work of engagement.

Figure 2 adapts Clarke’s (2005) concept of positional mapping to align boundary spanner responses to role conflict in relationship to their perceived benefit to the university and community partners. Picking one side typically meant the boundary spanner defaulted to her/his employing institution’s view. Advocating typically meant promoting the needs or wants of the community partner. Adaptive responses of feeling vulnerable, becoming more cautious and internalizing conflict were seen as having low value to both the university and the community. Formative responses of expanding problem solving, listening, mediating, and translating were seen as having high potential value to both the university and community partners.

The experience of role conflict by the university staff boundary spanner has significant implications with respect to the processes of partnership formation and community engagement. In general, aspects of the boundary spanner’s experience, which help affect a formative response by the boundary spanner, further the purposes of
partnership formation and community engagement. Aspects of the boundary spanner’s experience, which affect an adaptive response, limit the potential for the development of mutually beneficial partnerships and the related effectiveness of community engagement efforts.

**Figure 2.** Behavior mapping of boundary spanner responses to role conflict in relationship to value to university and value to community partner

(Adapted from Clarke’s [2005] Positional Map)
Question 3: What individual and institutional strategies have been identified by boundary spanners to assist with the management of role conflict?

Participants did not identify any formal institutional strategies or procedures to assist staff boundary spanners when they were experiencing role conflict. While no explicit institutional strategies were identified, some of the participants described strong vertical linkages with their immediate supervisors and senior university officials who provided personal support, mentoring, and tangible assistance; these experiences were viewed as being of great assistance in helping to resolve instances of role conflict. Guen spoke about enlisting the dean of the business school to dissuade a faculty member from attempting a community partnership that Guen judged not a good fit with the faculty member’s skills. Her experience was that she could ask for and receive explicit support and specific assistance:

And being able to precisely say, I need this X, Y, and Z and having them kind of fulfill that role in helping meet those needs. And so far in my case, I’ve had access to that which I think has been extremely helpful.

Fred’s experience was that his boss would both urge him to take risks and provide guidance in assessing these risks: “You can do whatever you want, here’s some things to think about.”

Other strategies explicitly identified by participants included organizing peer support with other boundary spanners, sharing decision making with a boards and committees, redefining the area of focus or boundary spanning role, using participants in past partnerships as endorsers and encouragers of current prospective partners, listening for deeper understanding of perceived conflicts and disagreements while keeping the
parties talking, affirming the value of the work or the relationships, and defaulting to the adaptive response of supporting one side of the dialog.

Anna organized an on-campus coalition of staff boundary spanners to provide peer support—

So, I think that’s one way I’ve coped, is by getting . . . just asking for help when I need it, because I feel like I can’t do everything and the generalist role fits most of the time and then there are sometimes it’s just not enough. So, that’s one thing I can think of. I guess another thing I can think of is retreating from the things that don’t work well for me, and I have done that.

Janice spoke of how she challenged her board members to take a more active role in guiding future partnerships projects as a pathway to addressing tougher issues and generating support for the work:

And so I pretty much have a small committee from the board, a lot of the power players, and said, these are my concerns, this is where I need guidance from you because I report to you, this isn’t my institute.

Kevin created steering committees for his community arts partnerships; the group then helps to ensure a broad representation of interests and assists in decision making, while Candice uses past project participants as cheerleaders for current efforts:

Bringing others onboard to help convey the meaning of a piece of . . . a mutual . . . partnership, help where we’ve already got successes and now we’re working with somebody new, it’s being able to rely on these other people, sort of references.
On her campus where her formal boundary spanning role is relatively new, she believes this has been a very helpful way of validating their emerging work with newly interested faculty.

The seemingly simple task of listening was repeatedly referenced as a conscious and deliberate strategy supportive of the interests of all the parties to the conversation. Ida spoke about the importance of “understanding that everybody at the table is right, we’re just right in our own way and nobody’s wrong.” While no individual boundary spanner grouped responses in the following manner, there appears to be a natural congruence and unity to the processes of listening, keeping parties talking, affirming the work, and affirming the relationships. Fred described one of his examples as follows:

working through . . . people get a little polarized when you start arguing funding and stuff; but working . . . we got that far, we got some innovative people there, I was able to push, push, push to get them keep reading and keep talking.

One of Ida’s projects required her to rely upon bilateral conversations with separate parties before bringing everyone back together. Janice introduced the concept of “the love bank” in describing her deliberately appreciative style –

I know my love banks with different people and I know when I need to make a deposit and when I can make a withdrawal. So I am very quick to do that. I do a lot of public accolades for people; I do a lot of praising.

Two of the participants described default adaptive responses for dealing with role conflict. For Donna, it’s very clear—“I remind . . . myself where my paycheck comes from. . . . honestly, my job always comes first.” For Ed, the focus in resolving conflicts is the perception of his employing university as it is mediated through its responsiveness to
the local community: “I put priority to the reputation the university has in this community, because that’s where I live; that’s where I work.”

Summary

The experience of role conflict is an integral element of the work of university administrative staff members working as boundary spanners. The examples of role conflict reported by study participants was consistent with the four dimensions of role conflict as defined by Rizzo, House, and Litzman (1970): conflict between an individual’s values and the demands of a role, conflict stemming from insufficient resources and role expectations, conflict between multiple roles assigned to the same individual, and role conflict stemming from competing external expectations. While most examples of role conflict were evident as such at the proposed initiation of a partnership, participants reported examples that showed that role conflict can surface at any stage in the partnership process, including termination.

The Social Worlds/Arena mapping (Clarke, 2005) identified a broad diversity of actors, with diverse motivations and interests, within the arena of university-community engagement. Such mapping provided an ecological affirmation of the lived experience of boundary spanners who reported the frequent experience of role conflict. Such mapping also identified how individual actors—such as staff boundary spanners, faculty, and senior administrators—may have separate identities with related role expectations within the different worlds identified.

Five themes emerged as critical constructions relevant to the experience of boundary spanners. These were the challenge of mutuality, boundary spanner
vulnerability and power relationships, the influence of resources, formative response to role conflict, and adaptive responses to role conflict. Creating partnerships with mutual, reciprocal value is the central challenge faced by boundary spanners. University administrative staff members who serve as boundary spanners frequently experience themselves as personally and professionally vulnerable amidst the power relationships operating within the arena of university-community engagement. Issues of resources and funding not only were sources of role conflict but also directly and indirectly influence what work got done; resource needs were also found to be sources of greater role clarity and contributing causes to boundary spanner feelings of vulnerability. Two categories of boundary spanners responses to role conflict were identified: responding formatively and responding adaptively. Behaviors labeled as responding formatively are behaviors seemingly directed towards seeking agreement and alignment of the parties' positions. Behaviors labeled as responding adaptively are behaviors that seem to indicate that the role conflict is not readily resolved by reaching agreement and hence the boundary spanner needs to adapt or adjust his/her behavior, expectations or attitude.

Boundary spanner self-identity was also highlighted as an important element with respect to both the experience of role conflict and the response to role conflict. As proposed by the researcher, this concept includes the following elements: professional background, self-identified role framing, claiming of personal power, PhD status, and amount of experience as a boundary spanner. It was also found that most research participants reflected high involvement/self-agency when engaged in their boundary spanning duties.
The research did not identify any formal institutional strategies or procedures to assist staff boundary spanners when they were experiencing role conflict, or if these formal procedures existed, that they would be helpful to boundary spanners. It is unknown whether the lack of such policies results from failure of institutional policy making to keep up with emerging practice or other factors.

Participants described several practices used to assist with role conflict resolution. These included seeking supervisory support for specific needs, sharing decision making with boards and committees, organizing peer support with other boundary spanners, redefining the area of focus or boundary spanning role, using participants in past partnerships as endorsers and encouragers of current prospective partners, listening for deeper understanding of perceived conflicts and disagreements while keeping the parties talking, affirming the value of the work or partnership and the relationships, and defaulting to adaptive responses of supporting one side of the dialog.

In Chapter VI Discussion, which follows, an emerging framework of boundary spanner role conflict is introduced. The framework seeks to identify (1) factors, which potentially increase opportunities for role conflict and the intensity of that role conflict, and (2) factors, which by their presence, appear to support formative responses to role conflict by the boundary spanner.
CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

This research project utilized the Rizzo, House, and Litzman’s (1970) definition of role conflict, which includes four scenarios: conflict between an individual’s values and the demands of a role, conflict stemming from insufficient resources and role expectations, conflict between multiple roles assigned to the same individual, and role conflict stemming from competing external expectations or demands. As previously reported herein, participants provided frequent examples of role conflict consistent with this definition. Participants did not report examples of role conflict inconsistent with this framework. Rizzo, House, and Litzman’s work provides an appropriate basis for defining and classifying role conflict as experienced by non-academic administrative staff members who serve as university-community boundary spanners.

While Rizzo, House, and Litzman’s (1970) work provides an appropriate structure to sort and classify university-community boundary spanner experiences of role conflict, the operative processes which help to generate and resolve role conflict seem best
described by symbolic interactionism wherein “society shapes self, and self shapes social behavior. The proposition not only admits to, but insists upon, the possible reciprocity of its components: social behavior can impact self, and society and self can impact society” (Stryker, 2007, p. 1089).

The previously presented Social Worlds / Arenas analysis (Clarke, 2005) described the ecological and societal context in which university community boundary spanners are both acted upon and in turn impact the respective described social worlds as well as the overall arena of university-community partnerships. It is within this context that boundary spanner roles are negotiated, conflicts are realized, and conflicts are resolved or not resolved. This arena and its diverse worlds reflect the reciprocal process of symbolic-interactionism wherein the various actors and actants impact the boundary spanner and are, in turn, acted upon by the boundary spanner.

From within this university-community engagement arena, several themes emerged from the reported experience of university-community boundary spanners. The challenge of mutuality, experienced when working to create partnerships with reciprocal benefit to university and community partners, is the focal point of boundary spanner work and boundary spanner role conflict. Various situational factors contributed to boundary spanners’ feelings of vulnerability. The influence of resources was identified repeatedly as a source of role conflict and as an actant presence contributing to boundary spanners feelings of vulnerability. Boundary spanners’ responses to role conflict—the behaviors through which the boundary spanner impacts the various actors and worlds within the university-community engagement arena—were labeled as responding formatively and responding adaptively. Behaviors labeled as responding formatively were behaviors
seemingly directed towards seeking agreement and alignment of the parties' positions. Behaviors labeled as responding adaptively were behaviors which seemed to indicate that the role conflict can not be readily resolved by reaching agreement, and hence the boundary spanner needs to adapt or adjust his/her behavior, expectations or attitude.

This research proposed the concept of boundary spanner identity as including the elements of professional background, self-identified role framing, claiming of personal power, PhD status, and amount of experience as a boundary spanner. Elements of boundary spanner identity, coupled with the boundary spanner’s degree of self-agency, appear to be influential factors in the selection of formative and adaptive responses to role conflict. By the definition of this researcher, formative responses, which are directed toward seeking agreement of the parties within the context of creating partnerships of mutually reciprocal value, are directly responsive to the purposes of university-community engagement.

The following section introduces a theoretical framework of factors influencing the presence of role conflict and boundary spanner choices of formative responses to role conflict. Imbedded within the construct of symbolic-interactionism, the framework seeks to highlight both ecological and intrapersonal factors as reported by study participants.

6.2 Emerging Theoretical Framework of Boundary Spanner Role Conflict

The arena of university-community engagement and its diverse worlds reflect the reciprocal process of symbolic-interactionism wherein the various actors and actants impact the boundary spanner and are in turn acted upon by the boundary spanner. Acknowledging that role conflict was found to be an inherent aspect of the boundary
spanner role, the situations and factors shown in Figure 3, which are frequently evident within this arena, are proposed as a theoretical framework to further the overall understanding and discussion of role conflict as experienced by non-academic administrative staff serving as university-community boundary spanners. Figure 3 identifies those situations and factors that (1) increase the opportunities for role conflict and the intensity of role conflict and (2) support adaptive responses to role conflict by the boundary spanner.

Factors Increasing Role Conflict

Limited commitment to mutuality of benefit by university and community partners

The research identified numerous instances wherein university and community partners seemed to display a limited commitment to mutuality of benefit. Betty was ordered by her university superior to do a book drive that the community partner did not want or need. It was Henrietta’s experience that potential community partners called her because they were seeking funding. It is to be expected that university and community actors will initiate requests for assistance with their own needs immediately in focus. Such one-sided-ness is inconsistent with the principles of university-community engagement. To the extent that potential partners are unwilling to consider alternatives or unaware of the value of mutually beneficial partnerships, these competing external expectations intensify the boundary spanner’s experience of role conflict.
Figure 3. Theoretical framework for boundary spanner role conflict
Weak or inconsistent strategic framework to guide university-community partnerships

If the university has not adopted a formal statement of mission or purpose for its community engagement work or if there is a weak alignment of its overall strategic framework—mission, values, structure, goals and strategies—then the lack of organizational consistency may fail to inform participants about the purpose of the university’s engagement activities and may result in a splintering of intended messaging. Such of lack of clarity is especially problematic in universities, which are not characterized by rigid command and control hierarchies; structurally, such entities are held together with “loose coupling[s]” (Birnbaum, 2000, p. 14), which make them resistant to change and external influences. A weak strategic framework can make it more challenging for the boundary spanner to resolve role conflicts given the diffuse authority and power evident within the different worlds within the university. Fred’s experience was that there was “a big disconnect” as to what his university was trying to achieve through its community engagement initiative.

Boundary spanner identity inconsistent with employing institution’s values

This research proposed the concept of boundary spanner identity, inclusive of the element of claiming personal power, as a reflection of boundary spanner values. One of four classifications of role conflict as proposed by Rizzo, House, and Litzman’s (1970) is conflict between an individual’s values and the demands of a role. Anna had a very clear, perhaps a priori, opinion that “the university has such tremendous resources that there should be a whole cadre of people working to figure out how to maximize those
resources for community use.” Such advocacy efforts by the boundary spanner represent an adaptive response to role conflict wherein mutuality of benefit is not sought, thus increasing the potential for role conflict.

*Unbounded boundary spanner role or poor role clarity*

Having unbounded boundary spanner roles, or having boundary spanner roles with poor role clarity, also increases role conflict. It was Betty’s experience that her role was still being defined: “But, what my role, with the provision that we are still forming it, is that I help draw together the different efforts that are happening all over our very large and distributed campus.” Candice had a very clear role in that she was to attempt to work with any faculty or community partner requesting assistance, but the broader purposes of her work were still in process of being defined: “We’re building as we fly, as we’re calling it, we’re building as we’re flying.” If the potential areas of work for the boundary spanner lack boundaries or if it is unclear what success looks like, this broadens the range of demands upon the boundary spanner and offers little direction or guidance as to the appropriateness of given request for assistance.

*Boundary spanner has multiple formal roles within the university*

Ed and Janice were both boundary spanners with multiple formal roles within their respective universities. Ed managed a branch campus and was also formally charged with university-community partnership formation. As a boundary spanner, he had to go to the administration to get follow through on a community commitment made by the nursing program. As a campus manager, he relied on the good will and faculty involvement from the nursing program to optimize enrollment and class offerings. Janice was the director of the university-community research institute, the acknowledged K to
12 content expert, and occasionally served as the lead researcher on projects. One of her early projects involved an evaluation of community agency services that was also funded by community sources. Citing her background in education and skills as a researcher, she threatened the continuation of one the research institute’s projects with area non-profit organizations. When boundary spanners have multiple roles, they frequently also exist within multiple worlds within the university. When multiple, formal roles are held by boundary spanners, this increases the opportunities for role conflict due to the varying expectations of their different roles.

Poor communication of boundary spanner role

Even when boundary spanners have explicit roles, the failure to clearly communicate and explain the role can be a source of role conflict. Ida described a situation wherein she was presenting community feedback on a proposed faculty project, and the faculty member felt his work was being criticized by Ida. She felt this incident helped her to be clearer about her role in the future and to lessen future conflicts; she began to deliberately and explicitly explain her role as someone whose job it was to support the overall process but not to evaluate the work produced by faculty partners.

Insufficient resources in light of role demands

Almost every participant had examples of role conflict stemming from insufficient resources of one type or another. Fred pointed out that demand from local schools for help exceeded his capacity to respond. Candice’s institution has a small staff to assist faculty with partnership activities but feels sometimes that her staff resources may get bogged down with low value, logistical tasks that faculty or graduate assistants could do themselves. Henrietta expressed frustration that her institution makes resources
available in the short term but does not work toward longer term relationships with community partners. Conflict stemming from role expectations and insufficient resources is one of the drivers of role conflict as defined by Rizzo, House, and Litzman (1970). While insufficient resources is a factor in greater role conflict, the presence of resources does not seem to preclude role conflict, given that community needs will most likely always surpass available resources.

The researcher posits that situational presence of the factors defined above increases the prevalence and intensity of role conflict and thus increases the challenge of creating mutually beneficial university-community partnerships. The following section describes those factors shown in Figure 3, which appear to support formative responses to role conflict by the university boundary spanner.

*Factors Supporting Formative Response to Role Conflict*

Five factors have been identified as supporting a formative response to role conflict, wherein the boundary spanner continues to work toward a resolution mutually acceptable and mutually beneficial to both university and community partners. These factors are the strong commitment of the parties to mutual benefits stemming from the partnership, the presence of a strong vertical linkage between the boundary spanner and her or his superior, greater role bounded-ness and clarity for the boundary spanner, greater professional experience and maturity of the boundary spanner, and budgetary support for the boundary spanner within the core university budget versus soft money.
Strong commitment of parties to mutual benefit

Ida described her conversations with faculty members in which she attempted to increase their support for a project being beneficial to the community partner as well the university. Through listening and dialog with faculty partners about their concerns and those of the community partner, she was able to create a more inclusive understanding of the benefits sought by each party. Faculty member support for the benefit sought by the sponsoring firm then became a basis for dialog, which resulted in the firm modifying some of its positions that made faculty members concerned about their academic integrity. Strong commitment by the parties to the creation of mutual benefit allowed for the acceptance of new options by the parties and the resolution of the conflict.

Strong vertical linkage with superior

The presence of a strong vertical linkage, between the boundary spanner and her or his supervisor was also identified as a factor supporting the boundary spanner’s formative response to role conflict. Strong supervisory relationships were experienced as support for risk taking and in the provision of tangible assistance. Fred reported that his director was actively urging him to take risks and offered tangible support when he did so: “The good thing is that our director and other people that are way senior to me, world-renown, were willing to say, we’ll help you through it.” Guen reported that her dean was openly supportive of her work, and she gave an example of how she used that influence to improve alignment between faculty members and community. In this instance, the faculty member was asked to decline a project due to the perception that it was not a good fit. The supportive position of her dean was active and immediate: “What do you
need for me to get . . . what you’re doing moved forward?” In addition to strong supervisory support being of direct assistance to the boundary spanner in resolving conflict situations, it also seems likely that strong supervisory support may serve to lessen feelings of boundary spanner vulnerability and enable boundary spanners to continue to push university and community partners to mutually beneficial solutions.

**Greater role bounded-ness / clarity**

Those boundary spanners with greater role boundedness and role clarity seemed to have clearer goals and be more likely to respond formatively to role conflict. Guen’s role is to “to generate revenue.” For Henrietta, her projects had to make clear financial sense to the university hospital for whom she worked. She evaluates “the return on investment” in relationship to “reducing NICU [neo-natal intensive care unit] days and emergency room” use when evaluating her partnership opportunities. Both of these boundary spanners had clearly bounded roles and well-defined measures of success, which seemed to help them respond formatively within the limitations of their roles.

**Greater professional experience and maturity of the boundary spanner**

Also, those boundary spanners with greater professional experience and maturity seemed more likely to respond to role conflict formatively. Candice and Guen had worked across government, for-profit, and non-profit sectors before assuming their current boundary spanner roles. Candice believes that her background has not only given her a strong skill base but positioned her to have a deep understanding for the needs of her community partners. Ida reported, “I guess I’ve learned how to de-personalize a lot of reaction” when dealing with partner reactions that seem hostile. Similarly, Janice described a recent experience wherein she was “attacked” verbally by a university but she
was able to respond formatively; she cited her background in public school leadership as a formative experience which allowed her to focus on the project versus responding emotionally. In addition to the professional skills and background knowledge that boundary spanners bring to their roles, high personal maturity seems to help boundary spanners avoid internalizing conflict and continue to respond formatively to role conflict.

*Boundary spanner funded in core budget (versus soft money)*

Boundary spanners who reported that their positions were funded out of ongoing university funds seemed more likely to exhibit formative responses to role conflict. This was true for the majority of participants. This seemed especially true when core operating support was provided for those roles with greater role clarity and bounded-ness. It seems likely that a boundary spanner, who knows that her or his position is funded and clearly understands what results constitute success, will feel less vulnerable and more likely to respond formatively to pursue mutually beneficial projects.

This section identified those situations and factors that (1) increase the opportunities for role conflict and the intensity of role conflict and (2) support adaptive responses to role conflict by the boundary spanner. It is important to note that while some factors may appear as constants for a particular boundary spanner, others may be situational and vary by individual partnership. For example, while a weak or inconsistent university strategic framework may appear as a constant, the commitment of parties to creating a mutually beneficial partnership may vary with each partnership.

The concept of the degree of personal agency of the boundary spanner is intentionally excluded from this model at this time, because there appears to be varying relationships between personal agency and adaptive and formative responses to role
conflicts. While low personal agency appears to be linked to adaptive boundary spanner responses, high personal agency appears to be linked to both adaptive and formative responses. Examples of high-level personal agency formative responses by participants included Ida’s work mediating a disagreement between faculty, who thought their academic work was being compromised, and the marketing firm working on behalf of a corporate funder. Guen experienced her response to role conflict as a conscious, creative choice to expand the parameters for a solution. High level agency was also reflected in many adaptive responses described by boundary spanners. Anna offered an example of how she sometimes responded to role conflict by internalizing the conflict—“taking responsibility . . . for some of those failures makes you feel like a failure.” Candice described how she had become more cautious in her boundary spanning work and was sometimes less willing to take risks.

It is intended that the above framework for boundary spanner role conflict offer both a starting point for the exploration of revised university community engagement practices directed towards reducing boundary spanner role conflict, as well as a launching pad for further research. Both of these topics are further described in the next two sections.

### 6.3 Implications for University-Community Engagement Practice

While recognizing that the experience of role conflict is inherent to the role of university-community boundary spanners, universities should work to reduce the experience of role conflict when possible. Toward this end, universities should seek to implement a strong strategic framework in which the core principles of university-
community engagement are reflected within cascading statements of mission, purpose, values, strategies, goals, and objectives. Universities should seek to define boundary spanner roles that are explicitly linked to the university strategic framework and have clarity of focus and measures of success. Strong supervisor-boundary spanner vertical linkages should also be implemented. While individual management and supervision styles will always vary, supervisors should be attentive to the specific risks faced by subordinate boundary spanners and should be clear as to their performance expectations while providing regular feedback and support to staff boundary spanners. To the extent possible, formal boundary spanning roles should not be combined with other university staff roles and should be supported with adequate, ongoing funding. Lastly, universities should seek to hire experienced professionals with a diverse skill base, personal maturity, and values which align with (or at least do not conflict with) those of the university to serve as sanctioned university-community boundary spanners.

Individual boundary spanners can also modify their practice to reduce the experience of role conflict and support themselves in responding formatively to these challenges. They should be clear and direct in describing their roles. Perhaps most importantly, they should work toward a sense of mindfulness in their response to role conflict, both seeking to avoid personalizing the negative stresses of role conflict and making explicit choices as to when to respond formatively and when to respond adaptively. It is expected that such increased mindfulness will also allow the boundary spanner to challenge her or himself to respond formatively. Lastly, staff boundary spanners should seek out the company of other university-community boundary spanners.
for peer support, discussion, and learning. This can be done through the formal use of communities of practice and informally via personal contacts.

6.4 Recommendations for Further Research

As a constructivist grounded theory study, this research and its findings by definition reflect “emergent, multiple realities; indeterminacy, facts and values as linked; [and] truth as provisional” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 128). The research limitations, findings, and the proposed theoretical framework for boundary spanner role conflict, each offer trajectories for future research.

This research included only university-community boundary spanners in public urban universities. It is possible that private colleges and universities, frequently organized in concert with a religious purpose, may pose additional examples of role conflict not identified within this research. Also, it is possible that such private settings may allow for the emergence of actors and actants not identified herein.

Furthermore, this research did not seek to define nor differentiate between varying levels of staff competencies. While the findings do speak to the perceived utility of greater overall professional experience, personal maturity, and tenure of boundary spanning experience, the job performance of individual boundary spanners was not evaluated herein. Similarly, neither this research nor existing literature provides evidence to evaluate the use of administrative staff as boundary spanners versus other university actors including top administrators and tenure track faculty. The development of evaluation schemes by institutions to assess the performance of individual boundary
spanners and to explore the overall strategy of administrative staff as boundary spanners is recommended.

The research posits a concept of boundary spanner identity—inclusive of the elements of professional background, self-identified role framing, claiming of personal power, PhD status, and amount of experience as a boundary spanner—as a potentially influential factor in the choice of formative and adaptive responses to role conflict. Further research is recommended to both validate these components of boundary spanner identity and to assess their relative impact on boundary spanner role choices. Similarly, further research is recommended to articulate the relationship between the degree of boundary spanner self agency and the relationship to the selection of formative and adaptive responses to role conflict.

The research findings stopped short of having sufficient data to chart the relative value of the boundary spanner responses of seeking support, renegotiating roles, and identity shifting as shown in Figure 2. Further research is indicated to assess the impact of these responses to role conflict. In addition, the findings did not identify any institutional strategies to assist with the management of role conflict. Further research is recommended to explore this circumstance along the attitudes of top university administrators regarding the concept of mutually beneficial partnerships and it perceived centrality to university-community engagement.

The key principle, central to the questions asked in this research, is that university-community partnerships should be of mutual, reciprocal value. Study participants had widely varying measures when asked how they assess if a partnership is mutually beneficial. For some it was simple agreement of the parties. Some thought of it
in terms of equitable financial investment and return. Others saw it as more of process wherein there was shared planning and decision-making. Further exploratory work to better define applicable dimensions of mutuality and reciprocal benefit is also recommended.

As pointed out in the research, a few of the boundary spanner participants worked in settings where their broader purposes and metrics were crystal clear—the need to generate profit for a business school was one such example. Most of the participants worked in setting and roles where success was less clear. Much time, attention, and scholarship has been devoted over the last few decades to the importance of university-community engagement and the diverse facets of the scholarship of engagement. There has been less attention given to evaluative frameworks that universities could use to evaluate their own effectiveness in addressing Boyer’s (1990) challenge for engagement—“Can America’s colleges and universities, with all the richness of their resources, be of greater service to the nation and the world?” (p. 3). Additional research in this area would benefit universities and the communities with whom they attempt to partner.
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Opening Statement: Thank you for your willingness to work with me as a participant to carry out this study of role conflict as experienced by non-academic staff in urban universities. Your experience – as you perceive it and describe it – is the most important element of this research process. While I will ask you certain questions to attempt to focus your attention and reflection on your experience of university-community engagement, at any time and for any question you should feel comfortable in expanding the question or your response, especially when some aspect of your experience, thoughts, feelings, or memories draws your attention. It is expected that the interview will be about 90 minutes in length.

If at any time you would like to delete an answer or response, you are free to do so. You will also be provided with a typed transcript of the interview with my initial coding of the interview and given the opportunity to make changes and deletions and add comments.

In this study, we are using the term boundary spanner to identify individuals who help to develop and or manage partnerships between their employing institution and one or more community groups.

As agreed to in the already completed release, the interview will be audio recorded.
1. What is your current title within the university and how would you describe your role and responsibilities? How long have you had this role? Have you held similar positions elsewhere and if so for how long?

2. Can you tell me about your professional background? Do you have prior experience working in higher education? How about working in government, business, and or community settings? What about your previous positions, helped prepare you for your work as a boundary spanner?

3. In what ways does your institution support, strive for, or reflect an urban purpose or mission? How is this evident in your mission statement, operating philosophy and/or operational programs? [If useful read part or all of Bonner’s definition of an urban university as shown immediately below:]

   What exactly is an urban university? It is not merely a university located in a city; it is also of the city, with an obligation to serve the needs of the city’s diverse citizenry. It has a special concern with issues of urban life. It does research and provides intellectual leadership in efforts to deal with urban problems. It educates skilled professionals to meet the city’s needs. It is a major resource for private industry and organized labor. It uses the city as a laboratory, clinic, and workshop for students of social sciences, law, medicine, fine arts, and municipal government. It offers access to higher learning to people of all classes, races, and backgrounds, at all hours of the day and on weekends. Its population is broadly representative of the poor and the middle class, the minority and ethnic groups, the young and the old. (Bonner, 1981, p. 48)
4. What duties or responsibilities do you currently have with respect to developing or maintaining community partnerships between your employing institution and community partners?

5. If possible, please describe any other positions or responsibilities, current or past, in which you were involved in helping to develop or maintain joint projects or partnerships between a university and one or more community partners?

6. What life experiences, choices, and opportunities led you to this work? What motivates you to keep doing it?

7. As you reflect upon your experience as a boundary spanner employed by the university, what do you believe is important to your employer and what do you think is most important to the community groups you deal with?

8. What do you think are the most important elements and characteristics of university-community partnerships?

9. In your work, what were the circumstances in which you may have felt that you were in the middle of competing demands by university and/or community groups? [Seek thorough descriptions of instance, relevant actors, identify each instance – ask for memories, feelings, reflection]

10. Again, in your work, please describe those instances in which you felt competing internal demands or conflicts as to how to proceed? [Seek thorough descriptions of instance, relevant actors, identify each instance – ask for memories, feelings, reflection]
11. How did these experiences affect you? Did they affect your experience of developing and or managing partnerships and your work overall?

12. How have these experiences changed how you think and feel about your work developing and managing partnerships?

13. How important is it to you that university-community partnerships be mutually beneficial to both the university and the community? [If important – how do you judge whether or not some arrangement is mutually beneficial?]

14. What did you do when you were experiencing role conflict that you found helpful? How did it help? What did others do that was helpful? How did it help?

15. As you reflect on your career, what one memory or critical incident strikes you or stands out as especially powerful or important in which you were working to develop and or manage a partnership between a university and one or more community partners and felt competing demands and or conflict?

16. As an active participant in this project, what else can you tell me to help me understand your experience of role conflict as a boundary spanner?
APPENDIX B.

NVIVO Coding Structure

Notes: All items in bold are nodes with parent nodes on the left margin; bser = boundary spanner.

**Constructing identity**: bser’s experience of identifying, shaping and describing their expectations of themselves
- **being new**: bser experience of being in a new role
- **being PhD-ed**: bser’s internal reaction to perceived attitudes and behaviors as related to the bser having a PhD or not having one
- **claiming power**: bser asserting the appropriateness of a personal position, presence, or role choice stemming from personal values or other personal characteristic
- **describing background**: bser statement of professional and personal background elements and experiences
- **role framing**: bser experience of defining bser role choices within and among their role behaviors and attitudes

**Describing role conflict**: examples and description of role conflict
- **values vs. role demands of boundary spanner**: role conflict stemming from a boundary spanner’s values and the demands of his/her role
- **in sufficient resources**: conflict stemming from insufficient resources and role expectations
- **multiple roles**: conflict between multiple roles assigned to boundary spanner
- **external expectations**: role conflict stemming from competing external expectations.

  - **intra-university conflict**: examples and description of role conflict stemming from agents of the university (not including boundary spanner.
  - **university vs. community conflict**: examples and description of role conflict stemming from agents of the university (not including boundary spanner) and one or more community representatives
  - **community vs. community conflict**: examples and description of role conflict stemming from community representatives
Describing bser role: description of bser responsibilities and activities as a bser as well as the context of the work

- **affirming the work**: bser describing sought after accomplishment or attributes of the work
- **aligning partners**: bser working to reduce differences or better align expectations and behaviors of one or more university agents and/or one or more community partners.
- **clarifying partner expectations**: bser work to elicit, define and/or clarify expectations of partners
- **defining duties**: description of bser work responsibilities
- **describing urban mission**: bser describing urban context of university and bser’s work
- **evaluating the work**: bser critically evaluates the partnership activities and outcomes
- **nurturing relationships**: bser works to build or strengthen interpersonal relationships between bser and partners
- **resourcing the work**: financial and other resource issues in support of bser work
- **valuing and assessing mutuality**: bser perspective on importance and attributes of partnerships being mutually beneficial
- **responding to role conflict**: behavioral, cognitive, or affective response by boundary spanner to role conflict
  - **responding formatively**: bser responds to role conflict in a formative manner to continue to work toward agreement
  - **expanding problem solving/creativity**: reaction by bser to seek alternative solutions to address constraints or concerns causing role conflict by broadening the range of possible solutions and/or dealing with known constraints
  - **listening**: choice by bser to focus on listening and attending to another as a response to role conflict and to continue to work toward agreement
  - **mediating**: bser works to reconcile differences between parties to bring an agreement, may involve promoting dialogue, compromise, and focusing on the work to be accomplished as an outcome of the partnership
  - **translating**: bser reframes position of one or both parties using different language as a response to role conflict and to continue to work toward agreement
(the following is subordinate to responding to role conflict)

- **responding adaptively:** bser responds to role conflict in manner which seems to indicate that the role conflict is not readily resolved and hence the boundary spanner needs to adapt or adjust his/her behavior or attitude.

  - **advocating:** bser takes a clear position to advocate for one side after trying to resolve the conflict
  
  - **becoming more cautious:** active or passive choice by bser to exercise increased restraint or caution in interactions as a response to role conflict
  
  - **feeling vulnerable:** bser awareness of feeling vulnerable as in open to attack or professional sanction, including loss of job
  
  - **internalizing conflict:** bser internalizing stress / emotive impact of role conflict
  
  - **picking one side:** bser chooses one side with little or no attempt to lessen conflict
  
  - **renegotiating role:** choice by bser to restructure or limit role as a response to role conflict
  
  - **seeking support:** bser seeks support from internal or external colleagues in response to role conflict

**Promoting role clarity and ambiguity:** factors external to the bser which have the impact of reducing or increasing bser role clarity and thereby promoting or lessening interpersonal tensions and/or congruence in bser role-related interactions

**Viewing with a critical lens:** identifying instances and circumstances of power and authority which affect boundary spanner role choices