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# Boundary Spanning in a Complex System: Leadership Reflections of a Faculty Fellow

Julie Apker, Professor, School of Communication & Faculty Fellow, Graduate College



Academic Leadership Academy Project, 2014-2015

## Faculty Fellow Role & Graduate College

Faculty fellowships provide faculty members with unique opportunities to contribute to WMU in varied roles outside of their home department. Several units on campus employ faculty fellows and each fellowship is designed to meet the needs of the unit sponsor. My fellowship at the Graduate College focuses on student and faculty engagement and success.

The **Graduate College**, as the institution's primary advocate for graduate study, promotes academic excellence by shaping graduate policy, assisting faculty in guiding and mentoring graduate students, and integrating services that support students in becoming accomplished and ethical scholars, researchers and professionals (WMU Graduate College, 2015).

Under the leadership of Dean Susan Stapleton, PhD, the Graduate College serves approximately 5,000 students (21% of WMU student population) (WMU, 2014). The services and resources of the Graduate College extend from students' first days and weeks on campus to post-graduation careers.



Graduate College, Walwood Hall, East Campus

## Faculty Fellow Biosketch

I've worked at WMU for 14 years as a professor in the School of Communication (SoC). My experience and satisfaction teaching graduate courses and mentoring master's students inspired me to apply for the Graduate College faculty fellowship in 2013.



Julie Apker, PhD.

This is my second year as a fellow. The job is incredibly rewarding and complements my faculty role.

Here's a sample of my Graduate College fellowship responsibilities:

- Developing online orientation content.
- Planning and co-leading graduate ambassador training.
- Coordinating university-wide graduate appointee training.
- Contributing to the Graduate Student Teaching Intensive.
- Creating workshops to enhance student socialization.

## WMU: A Complex System

### Systems Thinking

Organizational systems consist of an intricate set of interdependent components (departments, units, people), that work together toward common goals (Bertalanffy, 1968). WMU is comprised of multiple elements that must coordinate to achieve our mission, vision, and three pillars.



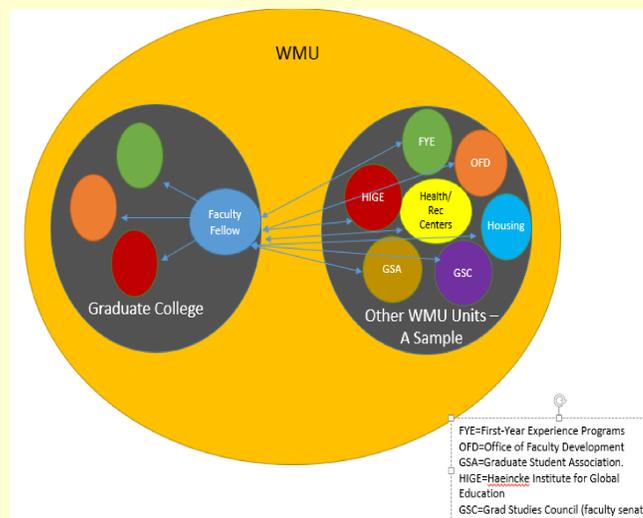
### Systems Doing: A Communication Perspective

Systems doing refers to what is actually done in the system to coordinate and accomplish shared goals (Brethower & Dams, 1999). Leader communication figures prominently in key system processes (Northouse, 2012), such as:

- **Goal setting**—collaborating to set mutual objectives, conveying goal measurement and results, following up on goal attainment.
- **Feedback**—communicating constructive critique and praise, conveying formative and summative assessment.
- **Openness**— sharing and receiving information, engaging in dialogue, soliciting input.

## Systems Boundary Spanning

The faculty fellowship has enhanced my understanding of WMU's complexities and the vast efforts required to serve our students and other stakeholders. My role requires me to span institutional boundaries—collaborating with multiple units, faculty, staff, administrators, and students across campus—to accomplish Graduate College initiatives (Figure 1).



## Boundary Spanning Preparation

Those interested in experiencing a faculty fellowship, or another boundary spanning function, can take several actions to prepare for these roles. Here are two which I found especially useful:

Research the Sponsoring Unit	Ask Lots of Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spend time online researching the goals, mission, leaders, staff, resources/services, and key functions of the unit.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask questions of leaders and coworkers in your new unit.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do they perform their tasks? How does their job fit into the larger scope of the unit/WMU?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk to your new leader and coworkers early on.</li> <li>• Schedule one-on-one time to learn what they do.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask questions of people working in other parts of the university.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do they do? How do they connect with your sponsoring department?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider what you can do to contribute to what the unit already does.</li> <li>• Think about what you can do to innovate.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Become comfortable with not knowing something and solicit information from others to fill in gaps.</li> <li>• It is okay to say, "Tell me more..." or "I don't understand."</li> </ul>

## Boundary Spanning Communication

Boundary spanning requires interacting with others within your unit and between units of the university. At times, you are the main conduit of information seeking and giving between multiple parties. Below are two communication behaviors that I've found to enhance boundary spanning.

### 1. Active Listening

- **Pay attention to what others say** (and do) not only when communicating with you, but with others.
- **Seek out opportunities to listen.**
  - Attend staff meetings and other unit functions
  - Work mostly at the campus office
  - Initiate informal interactions
  - Follow up with others

### 2. Perspective Taking

- **Learn and validate the perspectives of others.**
  - What are their viewpoints, motivations, goals, challenges, frustrations, interests, rewards.
- **Offer alternative perspectives based on your faculty member role.**
  - The people you work with may lack such background, may have had negative encounters, etc.
  - You can offer unique insights helpful to unit decisions (e.g. the faculty point of view on ...).

## Personal Reflections on Value of Faculty Fellows

### •For the University

- Enables faculty to learn about administrative careers.
- Prepares faculty for further leadership roles.
- Heightens faculty understanding of system goals, challenges, and opportunities.

### •For the Unit(s) (home department, sponsoring unit)

- Creates opportunities for faculty to collaborate with staff, administrators, and students outside of home department.
- Accesses and integrates faculty viewpoints into decisions.
- Provides greater information sharing and institutional knowledge between home department and other units.

### •For Faculty Members

- Increases awareness of the different components, processes, and people that make WMU successful.
- Enhances leadership skills.
- Explores administrative careers.
- Promotes networking



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