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

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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.

WMU: A Complex System
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 Thinking
Systems doings 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
- Spend time online researching the goals, mission, leaders, staff, resources/services, and key functions of the unit.
- Talk to your new leader and coworkers early on.
- Schedule one-on-one time to learn what they do.

Ask Lots of Questions
- Consider what you can do to contribute to what the unit already does.
- Think about what you can do to innovate.

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.

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 …).