The art of working together: A phenomenological study of inter-departmental collaboration within Ontario universities

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Collaboration within educational institutions impacts its ability to facilitate change, respond to societal pressures and survive. The role of administrative professionals in enacting institutional strategies for innovation and response to change is significant, as staff play a crucial role in collaboration (Karlsson & Ryttberg, 2016). However, collaboration is not straightforward, as it is not a natural phenomenon; only sometimes happening. This in-progress research through a multiple case study aims to understand how Ontario university administrative professionals who engage in collaborative work experience and make sense of collaboration. Ten professionals from Ontario universities have participated in this study, as methods hold a magnifying glass to collaboration within Ontario universities by viewing this through the lens of administrative practitioners. The findings from the study emphasize the role and voice of administrative professionals to increase the system's capacity to collaborate, leading to increased flexibility, innovation, and responsiveness to improve organizations.

Full paper

Collaboration within educational institutions can positively impact an institution's ability to facilitate change and respond to pressures. Furthermore, an institution's capacity to collaborate is comprised of people and processes in various departments that interact to characterize successful and unsuccessful collaboration. Research thus far points to organizational change as a domain in which collaboration thrives and fizzles. Jacobs, van Witteloostuijn, and Christe-Zeyse's (2013) findings highlight that organizational change is riskier and more multifaceted than change initiators typically assume, highlighting the power of internal dynamics. Rigas and Kuchapski (2016) analyzed a 2012 provincial policy for improving higher education; they highlighted mandates to restructure higher education, focusing on efficiency, cost-cutting, and market-driven approaches, pointing towards dually tasked, complex and collaborative roles (job descriptions). Wegemer and Renick (2021) analyzed partnerships within higher education institutions; they found that roles often do not match expectations during collaborations, pointing to variances in five spectrums (focus, task orientation, expertise, disposition, and agency) that may affect collaboration outcomes. Whitchurch (2012, 2015, 2018, 2024) and Smith et al. (2021) analyzed the emergence of third-space professional staff in Canadian universities to argue for a revised view of collaboration due to complex, emerging, and essential institutional initiatives driven by

change and external pressures. Peach et al. (2021) analyzed boundary spanning for work-related programs in university departments to highlight the balancing act of cost/effort and benefits of collaboration. Findings from Peach et al. (2021) highlight that the system's capacity to complete successful collaboration can improve pedagogy, organizational agility, and innovation. Summarized, we know change is constant, market-driven approaches continue to encroach on higher education, collaborations are complex, there is a rise of specialized personnel and roles encompassing collaboration, and the benefits outweigh the costs. The 'what' and 'why surrounding collaboration is known; my research will focus on how collaboration occurs within higher education institutions in Ontario universities.

Objectives and Research Question

The study's objective is to comprehensively understand how collaboration occurs. To understand the difference between real and ideal collaboration, I provide a rich and subjective account of the experiences and actions of specialized administrative professionals with boundary-spanning roles.

Research question: How do Ontario university administrative professionals who engage in collaborative work experience and make sense of collaboration?

Framework

Boundary spanning roles are characterized by a high degree of complex collaborative activities that involve connecting different groups or entities and facilitating communication and information flow between them (Aldrich & Herker, 1977). Boundary spanning facilitates knowledge exchange between units and departments within an institution and provides an excellent framework for inquiry. Furthermore, how administrative professionals make sense of organizational characteristics, culture, and strategy that comprise their higher education environments contextualizes my research question. However, while my research is people-centered it is inextricably connected to culture, thus Whitechurch's (2012) concept of third space that denotes a shift in higher education employees operating in the space between academic and professional boundaries. Third Space professionals are highly adaptable and flexible. They can work effectively in multidisciplinary teams, maintain strong communication skills and cultural competence, and the ability to build relationships to manage challenges successfully (Smith et al., 2021). Boundary spanning and third space provided a robust framework for my exploration of collaboration within higher education institutions.

Methods

I conducted a multiple case study of five to ten appointed Ontario university administrators in community engagement or equity diversity and inclusion roles for at least one year about their perspectives on a recent professional collaboration guided by strategic mandate (experience, purpose, motivation). Each case analysis relied on two sources: an interview and the collection of written job descriptions (and human resource material) or institutional strategic plans relevant to the professional's role. The study progressed in five phases. Phase I: Recruitment of participants. Phase II: Human resource job descriptions or material relevant to strategic mandates. Phase III: Conducting the interview. Phase IV analysis of collected data occurred through evolving inductive coding: to identify themes and patterns. Phase V used cross-case analysis to highlight salient themes central to sensemaking.

Significance of the Research

There is an expectation that collaboration will go smoothly universities have the capacity to collaborate, and that its outcomes will be positive. This paper challenges some of those assumptions and unearths tools that beneficially increase system capacity to complete strategic initiatives successfully. significance is multi-dimensional as tools derived from this research will improve higher education practice, organizational culture, personnel management, and day-to-day operations.

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