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Reimagining Global Partnerships in Higher Education through Open Systems Theory

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ABSTRACT

Although global higher education partnerships can promote greater intercultural understanding, establish unique environments for student and faculty development, and generate opportunities for innovative and entrepreneurial ventures, they can be beset with problems that negate their potential effectiveness. This paper proposes that open systems theory offers a constructive lens for reimagining global higher education partnerships so that they not only benefit internal stakeholders, but also society. It begins with the basic concepts associated with systems theory, with particular attention to the differences between rational and natural systems, as well as open and closed systems. To project how open systems theory might encourage global partnerships to embrace institutional outreach with the environment, the relationship of open systems theory with community engagement is then explored. Finally, the paper shows how boundaries can be either reinforced or traversed through deliberate buffering, bridging, and boundary spanning strategies.

Keywords: boundary spanning, community engagement, global partnerships, open systems theory, stakeholders

INTRODUCTION

Although global higher education partnerships can promote greater intercultural understanding, establish unique environments for student and faculty development, and generate opportunities for innovative and entrepreneurial ventures (de Wit et al., 2015; Garrett, 2018; Tierney & Lanford, 2016), they can be beset with problems that negate their potential effectiveness. Three specific issues with global higher education partnerships concern the inequitable relationships forged between institutional partners, conflicts among partners due to contradictory values and norms, and a lack of community and regional engagement (Altbach & de Wit, 2020; Healey, 2015, 2018; Lanford, 2020; Oleksiyenko, 2019). Analyses of institutional cultures have been proposed as an initial step towards diagnosing and addressing problems related to inequitable relationships, as well as contradictory values and norms (Deese et al., 2018; Tierney & Lanford, 2015). Nevertheless, relationships can be impacted by a variety of cultural, social, and political factors which are external to higher education partnerships and institutional cultures. Moreover, values and norms

are not solely curated within institutions; they reflect the values, norms, ideologies, and expectations of the societies in which institutions are embedded (Tierney & Lanford, 2018b).

With these considerations in mind, how might the individuals tasked with developing a global higher education partnership reimagine the partnership's relationship with surrounding cultures, with attention to the possible impacts on local communities? Additionally, how might a global partnership avoid becoming a "cloistered community" (Lanford & Tierney, 2016), in which the benefits of the partnership are solely accessible to individuals within participating institutions, and instead marshal its resources to engage and support individuals outside of the partnership?

This paper proposes that open systems theory offers a constructive lens for reimagining global higher education partnerships so that they not only benefit internal stakeholders, but also society (Boyle et al., 2011; Jongbloed et al., 2008). As observed recently by Kearney et al. (2019), open systems theory is based on the idea that individuals, institutions, and other entities have variable, yet complex, bonds with their cultures. As a result, these entities have a symbiotic relationship with their broader social systems. Moreover, open systems theory challenges the view of higher education as hierarchical, theory-centered, university-focused, homogenous, expert-led, and discipline-specific (Gibbons et al., 1994). Instead, it offers a different perspective - that the production of knowledge can be applied, problem-centered, network-focused, heterogeneous, community-oriented, and transdisciplinary. This latter model suggests that the traditional activities of research, teaching, and service need not be directed by one entity, but can be driven by multiple collaborators who hold divergent cultural values and norms. It further suggests that institutional resources should be shared with society so that marginalized communities are better supported and the various systems which underpin governments, businesses, and civil society are strengthened.

This paper begins with the basic concepts associated with systems theory, with particular attention to the differences between rational and natural systems, as well as open and closed systems. The implications of closed systems for higher education are illustrated through the examples of the Big Ten Academic Alliance in the United States and global education hubs. Afterwards, the fundamental concepts supporting open systems theory - concerning the co-construction of knowledge through information exchange between systems in the environment, the recognition of hierarchies, the mutability of organizations and organizational structures, and the necessity for open communication and feedback for continuous maintenance - are explained. The case of Yale-NUS College is subsequently analyzed through a discussion of Katz and Kahn's (1978) delineation of organizational subsystems.

To project how open systems theory might encourage global partnerships to embrace institutional outreach with the environment, the relationship of open systems theory with community engagement is then explored. Our argument here is that many global partnerships will continue to operate as elite, closed systems - evading important issues pertaining to institutional transparency, knowledge sharing, academic freedom, and human rights - unless they strategically consider how to engage with their respective societies and support their communities. Then, we turn our attention to how organizational boundaries are understood through the lens of open systems theory, with an emphasis on transactions between different types of stakeholders.

Finally, we consider how those boundaries can be either reinforced or traversed through deliberate buffering, bridging, and boundary spanning strategies. As we will discuss in greater detail, it may be necessary, at times, for a global partnership to purposefully buffer individuals, and their work, from outside criticism, especially when such critiques are precursory threats to the health and safety of students, staff,

and faculty. Nonetheless, bridging and boundary spanning strategies are also important for the vitality and innovative potential of a global higher education partnership, as they can ensure that diverse voices are heard and respected. Such strategies can also certify the long-term sustainability of the partnership by making sure that a broad range of entities are invested in the partnership's continued success, rather than a select few individuals who may exploit the resources engendered by the partnership before leaving for other opportunities.

SYSTEMS THEORY: BASIC CONCEPTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR GLOBAL HIGHER EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS

A system is commonly defined as a group of interacting units or elements that have a common purpose (Emery, 1967). Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1950) attributed the survival of living organisms to their ability to import material from their environment, transform to fit the needs of their systems, and then export useful material back into the environment. Through this process, organisms theoretically derive the essential energy required for survival and evolution. These observations were the basis for his framework of general systems theory.

Systems theory is concerned with problems of relationships, of structures, and of interdependence, rather than with the attributes of an object (Katz & Kahn, 1978). These relationships can be explored through at least two different theoretical perspectives (Scott & Davis, 2016): rational and natural. A rational perspective is motivated by the pursuit of specific goals. Rational systems theorists thus posit that attention to clear goals, as well as the formalization of such goals, drive organizations and facilitate rational behavior within limits imposed by an organization. Natural systems theorists recognize that organizations are composed of social groups whose goals may conflict with the overall goals of an organization. Natural systems theorists note that the greatest resources of an organization are its human capital, and it is therefore important to understand and embody their interests and capabilities.

There are two basic types of systems: closed and open. A closed system consists of structures, relationships, and interdependent entities, but the system itself is entirely isolated - or, to borrow a phrase previously used by one of this article's authors, "cloistered" - from the environment in which it is embedded (Lanford & Tierney, 2016). An open system, on the other hand, freely exchanges information, resources, and energy with its societal and cultural environment, and it relies on these transactions for its equilibrium (Katz & Kahn, 1978).

No higher education institutions could exist for very long as completely closed systems. Colleges and universities are dependent on outside human, financial, and physical resources for survival, and they impact their environments to varying degrees through knowledge production, skill development, and community outreach activities. Nevertheless, many higher education institutions may appear to be closed systems due to exclusionary practices rooted in symbolism, elitist rhetoric, and limited information exchange. Physical barriers could discourage interaction with the surrounding environment, as a university campus with large iron gates that only allow faculty, staff, and students to enter may be materially and symbolically closed off from its cultural and social environment. An institution that fails to perform community outreach or share its scientific discoveries and expertise with the general public is also operating more as a closed system rather than as an open one.

In short, a survey of higher education institutions through the lens of systems theory is likely to find that colleges and universities operate on a continuum between closed and open. In fact, one interesting

aspect of higher education is that institutional prestige is often directly related to the degree with which an institution embraces closed systems through several intentional practices: admissions standards that benefit individuals with high levels of economic, social, and cultural capital; the production of esoteric publications that have limited public appeal and impact due to restricted circulation and specialized language grounded in disciplinary conventions; internal reward systems that privilege research and teaching activities within the institution, rather than as outreach to local communities; and the cultivation of academic networks with "peer institutions" that can offer the expanded resources of a marginally open system while preserving the exclusivity of an elite closed system (Bourdieu, 1973; Tierney & Lanford, 2017).

        The Big Ten Conference in the United States is a useful example of an elite, somewhat closed system that nurtures academic cooperation through shared resources. Although most people in the U.S. know the Big Ten Conference through its member institutions' athletic competitions, the Big Ten Academic Alliance (BTAA) is arguably more impactful due to the financial, cultural, and scientific resources that are shared amongst its members, including library materials, patented technologies, and software licenses (Heyboer, 2012). The BTAA also facilitates inter-institutional collaboration for scholars interested in pursuing research projects. In total, researchers working in the BTAA conduct approximately $10.5 billion in funded research each year.[1] University of Maryland president Wallace Loh has testified to the importance of the academic networks offered by the Big Ten Conference, stating that he would not have encouraged Maryland's membership "if it was a conference that did not have this consortium" (Heyboer, 2019). While many of the research and teaching activities of BTAA members undoubtedly serve the public good and function in a more "open" manner, the resources closely held by the BTAA ensure that member institutions hold a certain degree of elite status among universities in the United States and internationally.

        Many global higher education partnerships have been motivated by the same factors - a desire for elite status through association with a limited number of identified "peer institutions." One example is the proliferation of "education hubs" in aspiring and established global cities around the world. Knight (2011) has defined educational hubs as the following:

> A critical mass of local and foreign actors - including students, education institutions, companies, knowledge industries, science and technology centers - who, through interaction and in some cases colocation, engage in education, training, knowledge production, and innovation initiatives (p. 223).

        While education hubs may outwardly appear to be open systems in that they embrace participation from a broad range of entities, they are frequently rather closed systems due to the limited range of individuals and institutions that are invited to reap the benefits of participation. Additionally, two acknowledged problems with education hubs have been 1) the circumscribed exchange of information and resources with the public due to limitations on academic freedom and 2) a lack of transparency concerning financial incentives and activities related to innovation and entrepreneurship. To reiterate, closed systems have relatively little interaction with other systems or their immediate external environments, whereas open systems freely interact with other systems and/or the external environment. Thus, the stated objectives of education hubs - to bring together a diverse and accomplished group of researchers, to forge collaborations on innovative research topics and pedagogies, and to project soft power through scholarly inquiry - often fail to achieve their ambitious goals due to circumscribed relationships with their environments. However,

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[1] See, for example: https://newbrunswick.rutgers.edu/discover-rutgers/big-ten-experience

a deeper interrogation of the fundamental concepts behind open systems is necessary to analyze how global higher education partnerships might benefit from engagement with open systems theory.

OPEN SYSTEMS THEORY

According to Katz and Kahn (1978), an open system is defined as having identifiable repeated organizational processes that import energy from the environment, transform inputted energy into products, export the product into the environment, and re-energize the system from resources in the environment. Open systems theory accepts that organizations are contingent upon their environment, and the environments are concurrently dependent on organizations. One fundamental proposition of systems theory is the generation and co-construction of knowledge. Hence, an open system engages in mutual information exchange with other systems in its environment and relies on these transactions for its equilibrium. The environments are what support the organizations and shape how they are composed. The connections with external elements can be more critical than those that exist among the internal components (Scott & Davis, 2016). This is because, at times, the divisions between organization and environment are constantly changing and evolving.

The organizational structure of open systems theory is one that acknowledges the activities of participants who may have different intentions, but are situated within their larger environments. Open systems rely on processes of communication and feedback for continuous maintenance among specialized and interdependent subsystems. In 1978, Katz and Kahn speculated that there were four types of subsystems for these processes: adaptive, maintenance, production, and managerial. The functions of the adaptive subsystem are designed to ensure that the organization can meet the changing needs of its environment. The maintenance subsystem is responsible for maintaining the stability and internal personnel of the organization. The production subsystem focuses on the activities of converting inputs into outputs and the services that are provided by the organization. The managerial subsystem coordinates the functions of the other subsystems, settles conflicts, and relates the overall organization to the environment. The managerial subsystem crosses all subsystems of the organization to encourage each of the subsystems to attain goals and sustain a high level of operations.

Within all organizational systems, subsystems form and interact. Yet, open systems are distinguished by their recognition of how hierarchical systems function. Trish (1983) identifies the formation of groups, or "clusters," that are positioned - or position themselves organically - in a hierarchical fashion within an environment. Universities have departments, programs, fields of study, and administrative groups that could be considered "clusters." These clusters are part of a hierarchy within the institution that is constantly evolving and determines their resources and range of activities, but they are also responsible to scan the external environment for how they process, and work within, the larger community.

According to systems theory, the university is informed, like any other open system, by constraints related to financial, structural, and physical resources (Scott & Davis, 2016). These constraints provide the constants of the environmental framework within which the system must operate. A system wants to maintain a general state of balance among all external and internal operating forces. Colleges and universities want to be able to thrive during periods of financial duress, fluctuations in the educational periphery, changes in policies or accreditations, and competition with external entities.

One could suggest that a university's primary output/product is knowledge. Students come to universities to develop their skills and their knowledge of various subject areas. Faculty participate in

research to analyze new data, develop theories, and contribute to existing knowledge, ostensibly for both external and internal environments. As noted by Scott and Davis (2016), "the open systems perspective stresses the importance of cultural-cognitive elements in the construction of organizations. Nothing is more portable than ideas" (p. 31). However, an open systems perspective would emphasize that the institution - or system - did not "create" knowledge. Resources and foundational knowledge were initially derived from the environment; obtained as an input; packaged, enhanced, and modified to the desire of the learner, or adapted by the researcher; and then released as an output back into the external environment. As a result, open systems are capable of self-maintenance on the basis of throughput of resources from the environment (Scott & Davis, 2016).

When applying open systems theory to global higher education partnerships, one could further argue that partnerships' sustainability issues are directly related to a lack of open engagement with their immediate environments. Take, for example, the case of Yale-NUS College. Since its founding in 2011, the high-profile partnership between Yale University and the National University of Singapore has been heralded for its audacious goal in contextualizing a "Western liberal arts" education - with small class sizes, an emphasis on critical thinking, and interdisciplinary coursework - for an urban Asian environment renown for early specialization, especially in the fields of finance, commerce, and technological innovation. From its inception, though, Yale-NUS College has faced criticisms that the partnership between NUS and Yale was financially imbalanced (in that the Singaporean government provided the preponderance of funding for the college); academic freedoms on campus were scarcely reflective of the city's environment; and student development was focused on generating an elite class that would enjoy the benefits of a world-class educational experience, as well a prestigious credential, but ultimately have a limited impact on the educational or cultural development of Singapore. Justification for this latter critique was reflected in a 24 September 2010 speech by Dr. Ng Eng Hen, the then-Minister for Education. According to Ng, a primary goal of the Yale-NUS Liberal Arts College was "to provide an education model to develop leaders of industry, academia and indeed of nations, as Yale has consistently done."[2] As a result, Yale-NUS College's engagement with the surrounding environment was minimal, its impact on the city's educational values and pedagogies was restricted, and the activities of the small alumni base in Singapore were equally limited. These institutional issues - indicating a lack of reciprocity and transparency with the environment - have resulted in a surprising and peremptory announcement of the institution's closure by Singaporean officials on 27 August 2021 (Sharma, 2021).

One could analyze the case of Yale-NUS College through open systems theory by engaging with the aforementioned literature on adaptive, maintenance, production, and managerial subsystems. Previous work has noted that the long-term sustainability of global higher education partnerships like Yale-NUS suffers from inadequate planning and funding volatility, poor faculty and staff morale, and leadership turnover (See Lanford, 2020). Thus, durable systems should be developed that allow for institutional adaptation in concert with the environment, a strong maintenance subsystem that provides professional support for faculty and staff (particularly those from foreign countries), a production subsystem that deliberately considers institutional outreach with the environment, and a managerial subsystem that anticipates administrative turnover by preparing emergent leaders within the organization.

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[2] Speech by Dr. Ng Eng Hen, Minister for Education and Second Minister for Defense, at the Grand Opening of NUS Business School's Mochtar Riady Building at NUS Business School, on 24 September 2010 at 4.30 pm.

Of these four suggestions, institutional outreach with the environment is perhaps the least common to be found in global higher education partnerships. Therefore, it will receive extended discussion in the following section, with specific attention to the established literature on community engagement.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement has challenged the dominant epistemology guiding the understanding of the ways higher education relates to the social world, along with what is considered scholarship. When Ernest Boyer (1996) famously addressed the purpose of scholarship, an influential paradigm for the institutional scholarship of communal knowledge sharing was introduced. Boyer's paradigm encouraged faculty engagement within the community to not only be part of the curriculum, but to also be recognized and rewarded in the university. Boyer suggests four functions of the academic profession. The scholarship of discovery participates in basic research, which Boyer emphasizes as the main ingredient of academic scholarship. The scholarship of integration makes connections across disciplines so that research can fit into the "larger picture." The scholarship of application integrates theory and practice. The scholarship of teaching invigorates the entire research enterprise through the sharing of knowledge to develop engaged students. Boyer's proposed functions for a reconsideration of scholarship have had a profound effect on teaching, service, and research in the United States, especially in colleges and universities that seek to serve regional interests rather than compete for "world-class" status.

This reciprocal nature of knowledge acquisition, construction, and sharing between universities and communities are the same foundational features of community engagement. Community engagement requires collaborative, reciprocal processes that recognize - and respect - the value of knowledge, perspective, and resources shared among partners. This perspective is the antithesis of a closed system which presents universities and communities interacting in a unidirectional "expert" paradigm (Benson et al., 2000). In U.S. higher education, community engagement is recognized by the Public Purpose Institute (in partnership with the Carnegie Foundation) as "the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity."[3] Community engagement is consistent with definitions of open systems theory in that "the open systems perspective stresses the reciprocal ties that bind and relate the organization with those elements that surround and penetrate it" (Scott & Davis, 2016, p. 106). One of the motives for community engagement in higher education is supported by open systems theory through the flow of information. Academic conferences, associations, field networks, and scholarly publications are key platforms for information sharing. Participation in community engagement can also open new avenues for information transfer. The external environment, or community, can be viewed as the ultimate source of materials, resources, and information (Scott & Davis, 2016). Community engagement can also provide a new perspective, or lens, on the way the information is processed. External agencies, such as the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, have called for community engagement to be a function of the university, stating that "teaching, learning and scholarship engage faculty, students, and community in mutually beneficial and respectful collaboration. Their interactions address community-identified needs, deepen students' civic and academic learning,

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[3] For updated information about the community engagement classification, see https://public-purpose.org/initiatives/carnegie-elective-classifications/community-engagement-classification-u-s/

enhance community well-being, and enrich the scholarship of the institution."[4] Open systems similarly depend upon interactions with their external environments for knowledge flows and for existential legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

From an open systems perspective, there is a close connection between the condition of the environment and the characteristics of the systems within it (Emery, 1967). One of the features of open systems is that they possess inputs and outputs (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Inputs for the university (as an open system) include staff, students, curricula, and physical and financial resources. Outputs of the university include students who graduate and re-enter their external communities, new research that is presented as public scholarship, and/or institutional contributions to their communities through public service. Hence, an institution needs to be active in the environment from which "inputs" are derived so it can produce a civically engaged "output." This is particularly important for institutions in urban or rural environments where marginalized and/or low-income communities are dependent upon close interactions with a college or university for employment, education, and infrastructure development. If an institution exploits its environment for "inputs," but singularly focuses its "outputs" in the form of scholarship, teaching, and service to aspirational communities in other locations, the result is an imbalanced and unhealthy relationship between the environment and the institution.

Sandmann and Plater (2009) have recognized that the concept of "community" has become increasingly complex in an age of globalization:

At a time when community has attained the fluidity of convenience as we belong to multiple communities that are global, disciplinary, transcendent, and increasingly, electronic, other administrators, faculty, staff, students, and trustees long for the certainty of belonging to a physical community even as they want it to be international in its connections (p. 15).

In an effort to reach these multiple communities and compete in a global economy that is perceived as hypercompetitive, institutions with aspirations to expand their alumni bases, research grant opportunities, and student applicant pools are increasingly branding themselves as "global universities" (Myers & Bhopal, 2021; Shimauchi & Kim, 2020). While internationalization strategies may make sense from economic and human resource perspectives, they have rarely resulted in increased openness and transparency. Rather, administrative plans to open international branch campuses and expand other forms of global partnerships have too often been shrouded in secrecy so that important stakeholders have a limited opportunity to voice their concerns (Aviv, 2013; Deese et al., 2018; Healey, 2018; Wilkins, 2017). Fundamentally important discussions about the role of academic freedom have been ignored, if not dismissed, even when the protection of basic human rights is at stake (Deese et al., 2018; Tierney & Lanford, 2015; Walsh, 2019; Wilkins, 2017). Even though the connections possible through global engagement should facilitate open access to multiple communities, they seemingly endeavor to preserve closed access within elite communities. We counter here that an approach to global partnerships informed by open systems theory should instead embrace community engagement as a core value (Sandmann et al., 2016) so that transparency, knowledge sharing, and human rights are placed at the forefront of discussions and activities. From an open systems perspective, institutional transformation and societal transformation can then work hand-in-hand. The question is how to encourage community engagement when higher education is

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[4] See http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org

perceived as insular and reticent to external critique. For this reason, the remaining discussions will focus on organizational boundaries - and how they might be reimagined.

ORGANIZATIONAL BOUNDARIES

Systems have boundaries that define and impose structure (Scott & Davis, 2016). In universities, boundaries within departments or between colleges are imposed to establish clear lines of distinct processes. A strategy for community engagement should create opportunities for universities and the external environment to permeate the boundaries. Through such a strategy, knowledge and resources can be shared while the importance of the boundaries is still recognized.

Many theorists have produced working understandings and definitions of organizational boundaries, especially within the literature on open systems theory (Aldrich, 1971). While open systems theory focuses on the value of transactional relationships and information flows, boundaries nevertheless exist to demarcate structures that make organizations unique. The ways that organizational boundaries are defined have been related to the people that exist within bounded organizations, the activities they are engaged in, their interpersonal relationships, and/or the roles they inhabit (e.g., Laumann et al., 1983). The identification of individuals as "members" or "non-members" is one way in which organizational boundaries are cultivated. Organizations, such as colleges and universities, can be similarly classified on the basis of their common or divergent features. However, these boundaries - whether established through identification strategies or classifications - can be barriers to the transactions necessary for open systems.

A fundamental principle of open systems theory is the socially constructed nature of boundaries. Socially constructed boundaries can be examined through the roles that individuals assume, the frequency of interactions between individuals, and the strength of their interactions. If norms develop among a group of individuals, and individuals align their behavior according to those emerging norms, then organizational boundaries may be perceptible due to the normative processes that have forged strong bonds among those individuals.

Scott and Davis (2016) further suggest that open systems theory recognizes organizational boundaries developed through external demands. Such an identification of boundaries may be interrelated with the concept of stakeholders. Jongbloed et al. (2008) define stakeholders as any group or individual who can affect or be affected by the achievement of an organization's objectives. University stakeholders can include such diverse groups as students, alumni, research communities, businesses, and community agencies. The government is an important stakeholder in higher education and possesses influence over university policies and financial resources. Similar external stakeholders, such as grant foundations and policy institutes, have the ability to exert considerable pressure on a college or university's internal activities. While such pressures may seem like a negative influence, colleges and universities that involve external stakeholders in decisions and processes can gain a better understanding of current and emerging societal issues; attain key information that helps the organization develop meaningful institutional priorities; and improve and align their research, teaching, and service activities to achieve greater societal impact.

Nevertheless, open systems theory is unique in its emphasis on the transactions that span, permeate, and redefine the existing boundaries. This is not to say that boundaries should cease to exist. Open systems without boundaries can cease to be definable, separate entities, and universities would fail to be the unique organizations they are without limits and boundaries. Our goal here is to point out that higher education

organizations, such as colleges and universities, can strategically invite and cultivate external engagement, or they can deliberately fortify boundaries to limit or close off such transactions. Such practices are known as buffering, bridging, and boundary spanning.

BUFFERING, BRIDGING, AND BOUNDARY SPANNING

Within a university, buffering strategies often focus on protecting the institutional missions of instruction and research from external demands that are perceived as being ill-informed about the nature of teaching and scholarship. One useful example is the recent, concerted attack on Critical Race Theory in the United States by political stakeholders who hope to stifle criticism informed by empirical data and disciplinary expertise. Such attacks have rightfully been viewed by colleges and universities as destructive to core tenets of higher education - such as academic freedom, shared governance, and tenure - that are fundamentally important to scientific progress and humanistic inquiry (Lanford, 2021). In fact, similar attacks on academic freedom have increasingly occurred throughout the world in recent years. These attacks have threatened not only the production of quality scholarship, but also the safety of students and faculty whose research not only questions prevailing societal norms, values, and institutions, but also highlights gross injustices in existing political, legal, and educational systems (Ahmad, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2021; Tierney, 2021).

The university has been traditionally viewed as a "sanctuary," as it generally possesses a physical campus that can be isolated from the external environment. Nevertheless, such institutions are still accountable to the laws of local and state governments. Hence, the concept of a university as a sanctuary is based on the buffering actions that individual members choose to undertake to support their internal members and external communities. For example, universities have refused to share confidential information with authoritarian governments when a student or faculty member's human rights are threatened; they have also advocated for the rights of marginalized people and provided legal resources when necessary (Tierney et al., 2017). The university also embraces an internal culture of its own language, values, and customs that are assiduously passed on to generations of students and reinforced through ceremonies and rituals (Tierney & Lanford, 2018a). One essential component of university culture, identified as early as 1852 by Cardinal Newman in *The Idea of a University*, is the pursuit of knowledge through the interrogation of doctrinaire belief systems (Lanford, 2019). Without buffering, the external environment could place restrictions on such pursuits, especially when new data and analyses raise important questions about the impact of industrial activities on the environment, expose unethical political or business practices, or compel a reevaluation of historical narratives that privilege dominant cultures and perspectives. Without buffering, external demands could also diminish the quality of an institution's activities, whether they include impactful research that improves society or the development of critical thinking skills in students. This concern about the demands of powerful external forces is why colleges and universities steadfastly defend concepts like academic freedom and tenure, which are critical for protecting the pursuit of knowledge, the impact of scholarship, and the overall quality of a student's educational experience.

Buffering strategies are not meant to be solely inclusive or territorial; there is a need for strategic decision-making processes to participate with external demands in limited ways. Honig and Hatch (2004) suggest that "periods of buffering can help organizations incubate particular ideas and ignore negative feedback from their environments that can derail their decision-making" (p. 23). Through strategic buffering, an organization can also demonstrate that potentially damaging external demands are being

symbolically adopted without having to change the dynamics of the organization (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). For instance, universities frequently meet the credentialing requirements of external agents while still developing and testing new curricula to meet the evolving demands of labor markets and society.

Whereas buffering strategies purposefully limit interactions between the organization and the external environment, bridging strategies focus on how to increase those interactions. As noted by Honig and Hatch (2004), "bridging activities involve organizations' selective engagement of environmental demands to inform and enhance implementation of their goals and strategies" (p. 23). Another important bridging strategy involves inviting outsiders to lend their expertise and perspectives to the organization. It has been well established that creative and innovative organizations welcome individuals from diverse backgrounds and disciplines (Lanford & Tierney, 2022). The bridging of external agents into the university may be institutionalized through a Board of Regents or an alumni association, or it can occur on an *ad hoc* basis through informal channels available to influential financial donors or corporate entities. These groups may be brought in to lend their financial support and/or professional expertise to a university's aspirations. In short, bridging between internal and external groups can facilitate organizational progress on a wide range of issues, from external feedback that leads to the development of innovative ideas to the targeted sharing of resources that results in mutually valuable partnerships.

To nurture bridging strategies between groups, work towards common goals, and build durable relationships, careful attention to boundary spanning is necessary. Customarily, in educational literature, boundary spanners are depicted as individuals who operationalize their existing networks and relationships among various groups to create and/or strengthen an inter-organizational relationship (Lanford & Maruco, 2018; Shrum, 1990). These boundary spanners usually have invaluable communication skills and insider cultural knowledge that allow them to understand the unique needs and expectations of the partners in a relationship (Adams, 2014; Fear & Sandmann, 2001; Jordan et al., 2013; Miller, 2008). Organizational leaders who move seamlessly through different roles within and between organizations are given special recognition in boundary spanning literature (Cross et al., 2013). While boundary spanning individuals can be a tremendous asset for a partnership, their departure can also weaken, or even dissolve, existing bonds (Broschak, 2004). Therefore, it is generally good practice to identify and nurture multiple boundary spanners so that a partnership can tolerate inevitable personnel changes.

As colleges and universities continue to imagine themselves as global brands and develop their teaching and research initiatives across boundaries in increasingly complex ways, their global partnerships can benefit from this multi-layered, integrative approach, which underscores the connections, rather than the divisions, between partners. For example, a research partnership that is reliant on a small number of specialists can be bolstered through the deeper exploration of synergies between departments and programs, as well as potential community partners. Even if few synergies exist, an openness to new forms of knowledge could result in unexpected opportunities for greater understanding and innovation.

Although individuals receive much of the attention in boundary spanning scholarship, boundary spanning organizations can also unite different institutions around common goals and foster a sense of trust among partners (Goldring & Sims, 2005; Miller, 2008). Rather than viewing international branch campuses, for instance, as entities that are discrete from the home institution and the host country, such campuses can be operated as boundary spanning organizations that utilize resources from the core and put them to work in activities that respond to local and regional demands. In turn, bonds of trust between the campus and the

host environment can be nurtured through a shared sense of purpose and the flattening of hierarchies and power relations. The local and regional environment would become stakeholders in the branch campus, providing singularly valuable contextual knowledge that could inform future strategies by the home institution. Similar to open systems theory, boundary spanning seeks feedback from community and university environments through stakeholder networks; this information is subsequently interpreted and translated back into the partnership (Adams, 2013). Universities, therefore, benefit by avoiding stagnant partnerships and cultivating new opportunities for knowledge sharing within communities (Sandmann & Weerts, 2008).

Open systems theory recognizes that organizations are inextricably connected to their environments, but many boundaries can be challenging to transcend (Scott & Davis, 2016). These boundaries exist as a filtering system for the transfer of information, resources, and energy. Organizations depend on mechanisms to separate and refine these environmental factors as they adapt to changing systems. Individuals who are able to collect, interpret, communicate, and share information are key players in both open systems communications and in community engagement. Boundary spanners are collaborative, respectful, and able to accurately characterize the interests of different stakeholders. They are thus able to move fluidly through the separate bounded systems.

CONCLUSION

The university is a living and constantly changing organism that interacts with its external environment in countless ways. Other papers in this special issue have demonstrated the power of theories related to neocolonialism and mimicry in critically analyzing how global higher education partnerships can be re-envisioned to better reflect the cultural values and societal goals of the environments in which they are situated (Clarke, 2021; Xu, 2021). In this paper, we have similarly proposed that an engagement with systems theory - and open systems theory in particular - can recognize these interactions in a powerful manner, such that the significance of community engagement can be better appreciated by higher education institutions engaging in global partnerships. Moreover, we contend that successful partnerships strategically manage their bridging, buffering, and boundary spanning strategies so that organizational mission statements and values are protected while a diversity of perspectives that can improve processes and products are welcomed. We further suggest that a reimagining of global higher education partnerships is imperative - especially in this time when authoritarianism is on the rise and scholarly inquiry is subject to increased politicization - for greater transparency with stakeholders, an honest accounting of vital issues like academic freedom and human rights, and the future legitimacy of the academic enterprise.

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