



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Boundary Organizations and Collaboration

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Have you ever heard of *boundary organizations*? Probably not, unless you happen to be among a small niche of academics who research the social studies of science. But for those interested in collaboration and partnerships for community and economic development, there are important insights to be gleaned from the nascent research on boundary organizations.

Boundary organizations are “formal relational structures” that create linkages across traditional boundaries—such as the boundary between science and non-science. For example, cooperative extension promotes linkages between university researchers and farmers. What makes boundary organizations like cooperative extension so important is that they play an intermediary role between different realms and thus help facilitate collaboration across boundaries, becoming sites for boundary-crossing interactions.

A strong theme in the literature of community and economic development is the importance of partnerships across several kinds of boundaries: jurisdiction, sector, and policy domain. We all know that collaboration is hard and thus we might ask to what extent there are boundary organizations that help facilitate inter-jurisdictional and inter-sectoral collaboration for community and economic development. Of course there are such organizations. Regional councils of government, many economic development corporations, and regional economic development commissions are examples of organizations established to bridge boundaries.

I have been conducting case study research on regional collaborations in North Carolina over the past three years and one of the clear, strong threads that run through all of the cases I have examined is the facilitative presence of one or more boundary organizations. I don't think that is a coincidence. Sustainable partnerships don't simply happen. There are too many obstacles working against collaboration for that to be the case, chief among them is the ever-present “turf” mentality that comes part-and-parcel with being tied to a particular jurisdiction or organization. Boundary organizations have the advantage of spanning jurisdictions and/or sectors so that they become natural forums for cross-boundary thinking and action.

Yet more often than not, state and local governments are under-utilizing the boundary organizations they have established. Rather than empowering them and emphasizing their facilitative capabilities, they rather look to them primarily as vehicles through which grants can be applied for and managed. What experiences have you had with boundary organizations? What ideas do you have for how governments and non-profit organizations involved with community and economic development can better utilize these organizations?