Letter to the Editor

Boundary spanning in the context of academic education

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The global society, we live in today, is very intertwined and complicated. Hence, an ability to expand organizational and trans-organizational boundaries plays a critical and vital role in educational systems (1). The concept of boundary spanning, which was formed in the fields of behavioral psychology and organizational theories in the mid-1970s (2), is somewhat unknown in the medical and health education system (3). Meanwhile, one of the important approaches and activities that can help the improvement of health and medical education systems is boundary spanning activities (4). The boundary spanning theory, which was formed based on socio-technical and open systems theories (5), is defined as creating a capacity for orientation, alignment, and commitment across the borders of an organization in order to realize the goals and visions of that organization (6). The individuals who are called boundary-spanners play an essential role in boundary-spanning activities (7). In the context of a university system, boundary spanners can include faculty members, staff, and university administrators (8). Therefore, at the level of an academic system, boundary spanners should be aware of the priorities and needs of their academic community, as well as their surrounding environment at organizational and extra-organizational levels (9). On the other hand, faculty members, as one of the important human capital of any university, apart from the three roles of education, research, and service delivery, perform a fourth role, which is boundary spanning. In this role, the faculty member can act at two organizational and extra-organizational levels. In this regard, at the organizational level, the boundary spanning role of faculty members is the reduction of tensions and environmental complications, as well as making a link among individuals, disciplines, faculties, and academic departments. Moreover, they contribute greatly to the facilitation of knowledge exchange between individuals and academic departments and, subsequently, the enhancement of teaching and learning quality (9-10). In this regard, recent studies have pointed out that in the context of academic education, faculty members' boundary spanning activities have an influential role in teaching and learning. In the role of a boundary-spanner, the faculty members strive to create a bridge among learners of different genders, cultures, and ethnicities by establishing interaction and communication. In so doing, they not only help create a collaborative learning process but also improve the teaching-learning process through sharing and transferring knowledge and information (11). Hence, the faculty members' use of organizational boundary spanning methods in educational contexts contributes greatly to teaching and learning leadership, creating and maintaining key relationships in the teaching-learning process.

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Consequently, boundary spanning activities in educational contexts lead to the mutual participation of learners in the teaching-learning process (12). On the other hand, at the trans-organizational level, the role of faculty members is to participate in social activities in order to provide opportunities for direct interaction and cooperation with social institutions, as well as professional and disciplinary associations (10). Thus, a thorough understanding of the role of faculty members at two organizational and extra-organizational levels requires an awareness of the academic culture in which the faculty member works.

In general, boundary spanning activities should be considered from two perspectives. The first aspect is the importance of boundary spanning as a critical characteristic for medical and health education professionals. In this context, boundary spanning facilitates knowledge and information exchange, improves management and teamwork, develops knowledge and innovation, and encourages interdisciplinary and inter-organizational research in this system (4). Therefore, in the medical and health education system, boundary spanners are often striving to create integration between health institutions and medical science (13). The second aspect is the importance of boundary spanning in the university system, especially in academic education. In this context, boundary spanning helps to establish communication and interaction in the teaching-learning process, develop faculty members' professional growth through creating opportunities outside the educational organization (university), and consequently, increases their performance and efficiency in teaching and research.

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