



E-PARCC

COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE INITIATIVE

Syracuse University

Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs

Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration

NETWORKS AND PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

Teaching Note

As noted by numerous public management scholars, as well as scholars in other fields, working collaboratively has become a fact of organizational life. Due to such reasons as limited resources, extremely complex problems and tasks (sometimes referred to as “wicked problems,” fragmented services, categorical funding of programs, geographical dispersion of providers, vulnerable clients, and so on, collaboration across organizations (and often across sectors), forming network arrangements, has become commonplace. Despite a large amount of research that has been conducted on the topic over the past 15 to 20 years or so, there is still a great deal we do not know about these collaborative systems.

Two of the central challenges now confronting public, nonprofit, and even private sector managers are how to arrange organizational networks and partnerships, and then, how to manage them effectively. The challenge is unique since it involves managing across, rather than within, organizational boundaries. The proposed new course is designed to address this challenge. Students will learn the basic principles and concepts concerning networks, how ideas and research regarding social networks can be applied to an understanding of organizational networks in the public sector, how multi-organizational collaboration can be achieved, and how to manage in a network context, whether as a manager *of* a network, or as a manager working *within* a network.

As indicated in the syllabus under the heading, Major Topic Areas, the course is organized around a number of key ideas and themes that I believe are critical for an understanding of what networks are and how they operate. The course focuses primarily on organizational

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networks, since such networks are how so many public and nonprofit services and activities are provided today. But the course also addresses social networks; that is, the networks that the individuals who work in organizations maintain. In part, discussion of social networks is important for understanding how individuals interact in a work-based setting, especially for achieving both their own personal goals and for addressing the needs of their clients. However, it is also important for understanding how organizational networks operate, since it is individuals who act on behalf of their organizations when working in a network context. In addition, many of the ideas and concepts concerning networks and network relations were first developed by scholars studying networks of individuals, or social networks. Thus, a course on networks and network management must draw on ideas and research from both social networks and organizational networks if the phenomenon is to be understood fully.

In addition, much of the literature on organizational networks has focused on the structure of these arrangements and the process by which networks are built, established, and maintained (including conflict resolution). Covering what we know about these issues will be an important part of the course. However, students will also be exposed to what is known about network effectiveness. If networks are to be considered as a viable way of delivering services using public dollars, then the complex issue of effectiveness must be considered. It is not enough to simply assume that collaboration is a good thing and that networks will always be the preferred form for organizing public services. Under what conditions and circumstances will networks be preferable compared with markets or traditional hierarchies? And even if networks are the best mechanism, which form of network organization and governance should be adopted and under what specific conditions? Finally, how should network effectiveness be assessed? We will address these complex but critical issues throughout the course.

Teaching Strategy

The teaching strategy for this course will be to expose students to the broad range of issues related to network structure, process, management, and governance, as outlined above in the syllabus. In particular, emphasis will be placed on comparing traditional concepts of organizational/hierarchical management and organization with what is known about networks. Students will be exposed to networks operating in many different public and nonprofit contexts and governed in many different ways, some formal and some informal. By using a variety of teaching methods (see below), students will be expected to achieve the following outcomes and benefits:

- Understand more clearly the logic of network involvement
- Better understand the student's own networks, both social and organizational, how they operate, and how they are constrained
- Have a strong understanding of how public tasks and problems can be addressed through networks
- Be able to work effectively in a multi-organizational environment
- Learn how to be responsive to both organizational (i.e., employees and key stakeholders) and network demands and pressures

- Recognize problems and roadblocks in network development
- Recognize and enhance the benefits of network involvement (for the employing organization) while minimizing drawbacks
- Be able to design an effective organizational network
- As a public policy official, be able to decide when and under what conditions a network may be the appropriate mechanism for addressing public problems, and how such networks might best be constructed and governed
- Becoming an effective leader of and manager in a network
- Be able to evaluate network effectiveness, both from the perspective of a manager of an organization operating within a network and from a network-level perspective

Teaching Methods and Philosophy

The course will employ a number of different teaching methods:

- Readings – There has been a large volume of literature on networks written since about 1990. The course will draw on this literature and a range of readings will be assigned to students. Wherever possible, the literature selected will focus on what has been written on public sector and publicly funded networks. However, this literature is limited in scope, tends not to draw on the research that has been done on networks in other fields, and is often descriptive and not analytical. While this course will draw on what I believe to be the best of this literature, much of the cutting-edge theory and empirical research conducted on networks has been in the business management and sociology literatures, so I will draw selectively on those literatures as well. The problem with this literature (in management and sociology) is that most of the research has focused on the organization as the unit of analysis (i.e., ego-centric networks examining the impact of network involvement on organizational performance) or only on dyads (strategic alliances, partnerships, and joint ventures). In contrast, the public sector literature has focused much more heavily on what has sometimes been referred to as the “whole network.” The focus of this course will primarily be on the whole network – its management, governance, impact on community and societal outcomes, policy implications, etc. I view this perspective as critical for public managers since the joint production of services is essential to address so many public problems, which are too complex to resolve by single organizations operating autonomously. However, to truly understand how networks operate and whether or not they are successful, both perspectives are needed (i.e., both the organization-focused, ego-centric view and the “whole network” view).

Many of the assigned readings will have a practical focus, with the idea that the course is designed for students who will be going into the world of practice, rather than research. However, it is important that serious students of public management, whether as working as organizational managers working in a network setting, as network managers, as policy officials, or as funders, have a strong understanding of how networks can be analyzed and assessed. Thus, research on networks will be presented and discussed, including methods for collecting and analyzing network data. Rather

than choosing two or three books to read, I believe that students will learn most from a broad exposure to the network literature. I have systematically reviewed this literature and have selected readings from journals and books that cover a broad range of network topics and perspectives. There is no book currently available that draws broadly on the literatures and ideas on networks in both public and private sectors, and on both individual social networks and organizational networks (both ego-centric and whole network perspectives). This course will expose students to these various perspectives through a broad range of literature and thinking on the topic of networks. I believe such a broad exposure is critical for public management students if they are to be prepared for working in and with networks.

- Lectures – There is a great deal of material that students need to know concerning networks, as outlined above in the list of topic areas. Thus, there will be a sizeable lecture component to the course. Lectures will draw on general knowledge in the broad area of public management and organization, but in particular, in the more focused area of networks. This lecture material will provide students with the in-depth knowledge they will need to know if they are to be effective public managers in a network context.
- Case Studies – There are few case studies available that focus directly and explicitly on networks. However, several cases, published by the University of Washington’s (Evans School) Electronic Hallway and by Harvard Business School (but focusing on public and/or nonprofit sectors) will be gathered as vehicles for in-class discussion. Several more generic cases will also be used, especially those that address public and nonprofit management dilemmas that might best be resolved using a network approach. Some case studies that will be used include: “Integrating Housing and Social Services: Local Initiative versus Federal Mandate” and “Creating a Youth Services Collective in Savannah” (both from the Electronic Hallway).
- Videos – Relevant videos will be shown as they are identified. For instance, in the recent PBS series (2006), *Remaking American Medicine*, one segment addresses how a unique partnership between physicians, patients, and families is transforming a teaching hospital. This segment is entitled, “Hand in Hand.”
- Exercises – Several exercises will be developed for use in this course. I have developed several exercises (some with another colleague), which I plan to use for this course. I believe it is very important for learning to have students think through many of the issues that will be discussed in the course, rather than just listen to lectures, so that they can better understand the critical issues surrounding network management. For instance, one exercise involves constructing the social network of each student and then analyzing its implications for successful job performance (for use in session 3), focusing on both personal advancement/career issues and on effectiveness in serving clients. A second exercise requires students to play the roles of different managers within the same public organization. This leadership team must work together to develop a common approach to participating in a collaborative network with other organizations, focusing on the

advantages and barriers to successful collaboration, based on their role within the organization (for use in session 6). Another, final exercise actually gets students involved in constructing a multi-organizational network in a community, addressing a particular problem such as homelessness, economic development, illegal immigration, disaster response, mental health, and children's services. Students are assumed to have received grant funding from a government agency requiring them to address one of these problems by forming a network. Students spend several hours on this exercise (on session 14), developing a detailed plan for network implementation. They must focus on such issues as establishing network goals, structure, governance, leadership, conflict reduction, and evaluation. Each student group must present their network plan to the rest of the class and defend their thinking. This case has generated excellent results and has proven to be a great learning tool for students.

- Class Discussion – This will be a key element of the course. Lectures, case studies, and exercises will be highly interactive.
- Guest Speakers – If the course is to have practical relevance, practicing managers must be invited to speak and interact with students. I plan to invite several public and/or nonprofit managers who work in and/or run networks to talk to the class and give their views about network management and governance.
- Group Paper – The major class project will be to write a group paper. This is a project that will span the entire class, culminating in a final paper. The paper will be an analysis of an existing public/nonprofit network operating in the local community. Students will address most of the key topic areas presented in class, both to describe the network and to make recommendations for how network effectiveness can be achieved (or maintained) and how the network can be sustained. Consistent with work by Provan and Milward (2001), network effectiveness will be addressed at the organizational/participant level, the network level, and the community level. Additionally, students will be required to keep track of their own, personal network, as they work together as a team and as they reach out to others to collect the information needed to analyze the network being studied.

Overall, this course is designed to give master's level students in schools of public administration and policy a broad exposure to the critical issues that must be confronted by managers who work in a network setting collaborating with other organizations, and by those who manage and govern networks. The course draws on a wide range of literature from the primary disciplines that have addressed the topic of organizational networks over the past 15 years or so. The course also utilizes a variety of teaching methods to make the class informative, interesting, and enjoyable.