“Education is perhaps the most important engine of economic growth and individual success,” according to an organization called Strive (2010), which uses a community-driven approach to address issues relating to student success. Leadership is necessary to support this so-called “education engine.” Network leadership is an emerging approach that can have an impact on change in education and in society. According to Merriam-Webster (2011), a network is “an interconnected or interrelated chain, group, or system.” Intentional interconnectedness is what separates network leadership from other leadership theories. Network leadership can be considered one of the newest 21st-century leadership theories. Zoller and Fairhurst (2007) would call it a deviation from conventional leadership approaches.

Network leadership has the potential to redefine strategic enrollment management through an expansion of connectedness. At a time of scrutiny and demands for increasing accountability, colleges and universities can benefit from collective action associated with network leadership.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Even though network leadership is not a current, formally-accepted leadership theory, it is being referenced, and it reflects the future of leadership—especially in education. The literature focuses primarily on collective impact, community organizing, and coalition structure (Kania and Kramer 2011, Kaye 2001, Renee and McAlister 2011).

Collective impact

The primary outcome of network leadership is the concept of collective impact. First described by Kania and Kramer in a 2011 article about large-scale social change, collective impact is “the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem.” Kania and Kramer (2011) identify seven necessary elements for a successful collective impact: “common agenda, centralized infrastructure, dedicated staff, structured process, shared measurement, continuous communication, and mutually reinforcing activities.” Network leadership requires “abandonment of individual agendas in favor of a collective approach,” particularly as it applies to student achievement (Kania and Kramer 2011). Furthermore, Kania and Kramer (2011) indicate that collective impact is rarely achieved because it is rarely attempted. Network leadership has the potential to radically change how problems are solved and how solutions are approached.
Community Organizing

In a 2011 report issued by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, researchers Renee and McAlister introduce and describe the concept of community organizing for school reform. This approach is an alternative to the typical changes attempted in the field of education. According to Renee and McAlister (2011), the tangible benefits of community organizing (network leadership) include increased funding, equity in educational resource allocations, and increased access, to name a few. Community organizing seeks to redefine problem identification, inclusivity in the process, decision making, and role definition (Renee and McAlister 2011). Renee and McAlister (2011) state that community organizing “leverages the collective power... to alter existing power relationships and policies and create more accountable, equitable, and high-quality schools.” Community organizing works because education is a vital part of the health of a community (Renee and McAlister 2011). Finally, community organizing is “a force...that uses democratic participation to shift the space so that it becomes more hospitable to equity” (Renee and McAlister 2011). It seeks to advance equity, create innovative solutions, and build long-term social capital in the same way as network leadership (Renee and McAlister 2011).

PRINCIPLES OF NETWORK LEADERSHIP

Network leadership is differentiated from other leadership theories and best explained through an overview of eight distinguishing attributes: scale, cross-sector coordination, capacity building, reduction of independent action, process, reframing, long-term mentality, and collective communication.

Scale

Embedded in network leadership is the concept of scale. That is, a network implies more than an individual organization. When a network is formed, it encompasses multiple organizations in order to address deeply rooted challenges to which there is no single solution.

Cross-Sector Coordination

According to Kania and Kramer (2011), “Large-scale social change requires broad cross-sector coordination.” Cross-sector coordination involves connection across industries or any other structural boundary. Renee and McAlister (2011) also discuss the need for powerful collaborations and integration through alliance building. Cross-sector coordination ensures that discontinuity is reduced.

Capacity Building

Capacity building identifies challenges and increases the ability to solve those challenges through the strategic identification of resources. Capacity building is how networks provide the infrastructure to accomplish the goals established through the common vision of involved parties.

Reduction of Independent Action

In order to successfully implement network leadership for collective impact, an organization and its leaders must be willing to look beyond its/their own self-interest(s) and take on a more global, or macro, perspective. The University of Southern California’s Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice (2011) refers to the development of “common wisdom” when collective accountability is achieved. Notice that this principle does not call for the abandonment of but merely a shift in organizational goals and focus.

Long-Term Mentality

Another attribute of network leadership is that it is best practiced when working on long-term solutions (Renee and McAlister 2011). A long-term commitment requires looking beyond the “quick fix” to many education-related and societal problems. It demands a finite and simultaneous focus on process and progress. In higher education, issues such as college access and degree completion often are handled best through the practices and processes of network leadership.

Collective Communication

As is known from the skills approach of leadership, communication is a social performance skill set (Northouse 2010). Kania and Kramer (2011) assert that regular, ongoing communication, whether in person or conducted virtually, assists in creating trust within the network. Here, “collective” means communication conducted in community; constructive dialogue is communication oriented toward goal accomplishment.
Reframing

Network leadership requires reframing the current concept of accomplishing goals. According to Bolman and Deal (2008), “Reframing requires an ability to think about situations in more than one way.” Network leadership requires a new type of command—one in which leaders may be led by the leader of the network. As a result, command requires the skill of flexibility. Finally, control is shifted to collective control—the sharing of power.

Process

Given the aforementioned principles, process is critically important. According to Reinelt (2010), “As we expand our leadership mindset to understand leadership as a collective process, more people are questioning the leadership assumptions that are embedded in traditional organizational structures and process.” Network leadership, because of its scope and scale, multiplies the volume of transactions that take place.

EXAMPLES OF NETWORK LEADERSHIP

The last decade of education reform has brought about a variety of organizations formed specifically to facilitate network leadership. These organizations include student success networks, college access networks, and policy/practice networks. This section highlights these organizations and describes how they exemplify network leadership.

Strive

Strive is an organization focused on education reform in the Cincinnati/northern Kentucky area (2010b). Often cited as a national model for network leadership (Bathgate, Colvin and Silva 2011, Kania and Kramer 2011), Strive is one of the largest examples of network leadership: more than 300 local organizations work together to support students’ academic success (Bathgate, Colvin and Silva 2011). According to Strive’s (2011) annual report,

The Strive Partnership serves as a catalyst for working together, across sectors, and along the educational continuum, to drive better results in education, so that every child is prepared for school, is supported inside and outside of school, succeeds in school, enrolls in some form of postsecondary education, graduates, and enters a career.

Embedded in this description are elements of network leadership: “working together,” “across sectors,” “driving results,” and “specific goals.” What is unique to Strive (2011) is its continuum, from cradle to career. This represents a commitment to the long-term, systemic changes needed to support students in their education-related pursuits (Strive 2006). It is similar to the “cradle-to-grave” funnel (model) used in strategic enrollment management.

National College Access Network (NCAN)

The National College Access Network (NCAN) was formed in 1995 as a nonprofit organization designed to provide leadership to a growing number of education professionals working in support of increased access to college (n.d.a). NCAN (n.d.a) demonstrates leadership by making education its first priority, advocating for all students, and providing the assistance necessary for college access programs to be successful. As part of its strategic plan, NCAN (2011) works to build the capacity of its members, primarily through fund raising, training, and technical assistance. NCAN (2011) also partners with school districts in Houston as well as with statewide college access networks throughout the country to foster a college-going culture. A fundamental value of NCAN (2011) is equity; NCAN demonstrates this value through its equity assessment, a member advisory committee on this topic, and a potential alliance with the National Equity Project. All of these efforts are at the national level and have as their goal the increase of college access and degree completion rates. Often, they unite disparate organizations by streamlining their services.

Michigan College Access Network (MCAN)

The Michigan College Access Network (MCAN) provides network leadership at the state level. As a network leader, MCAN plays six major roles: coordination; leadership and advocacy; professional development; local college access network (LCAN) development; statewide initiatives; and partner initiatives (n.d.b). MCAN provides leadership to a network of 48 and growing LCANS (MCAN 2011).

Community organizing, according to Renee and McAlister (2011), requires the inclusion of a broad constituency. That is why MCAN grant proposals, when evaluated by external reviewers, receive points for representation from a “diversity of stakeholders from multiple sectors, including
calls for colleges and universities to forgo an institutionally focused lens in favor of a more collective lens when administering college admissions. Specifically, it identifies the conceptual need “to recognize themselves as part of the larger system of institutions that make up the terrain of college choice and impact educational values and behaviors” (USC 2011). The report’s (USC 2011) authors call for leadership to support the public interest and encourage individual colleges and universities to “distinguish themselves by serving as leaders on this stage.” According to the Center (2011), this type of network leadership demands courage, imagination, and commitment. In addition, the Center (2011) notes that the actions associated with network leadership will “require a substantial coordination of efforts.” Collective commitment to appropriate moral action is emphasized throughout the report (USC 2011). Finally, given that college admissions practices are highly sensitive, USC’s Center (2011) believes that courageous leadership must be embedded in network leadership. “Creating a college admissions process that contributes more directly to the nation’s public interests will require an altered mindset in the leadership of higher education institutions,” That statement is evidence of the “reduction in independent action” principle of network leadership.

In 2011, the USC Center convened nearly 200 leaders from across the nation to discuss this very topic. In so doing, the Center became the network leader. “CERPP brings together individuals and groups to examine college enrollment issues and practices and [to] better meet the collective needs of students, institutions, and society” (USC 2011). CERPP demonstrates network leadership in its efforts to collaboratively examine and develop unified practices.

NETWORK LEADERSHIP IN ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

Network leadership is emerging as a leadership practice in various capacities. In the field of enrollment management, several grassroots efforts are proving to be examples of network leadership. For example, the creation and expansion of concurrent enrollment initiatives whereby college students can enroll simultaneously at a community college and at a four-year university exemplify how network leadership is being facilitated. Another example is the reverse transfer agreement, which requires colleges and universities to provide co-leadership in order for a transfer student to receive his or her associate’s degree retroactively using...
credits earned at the senior institution—all in the name of increasing degree completion rates. These examples represent more limited practices of network leadership, but they exemplify nonetheless many of the aforementioned principles. As more and more such coordinated opportunities arise, network leadership will expand and play an increasingly significant role in the progress and success of the field of education.

CONCLUSION

Never before have partnerships, coalitions, collective actions, networks, and leadership been more critical for improving social conditions, facilitating democracy, and increasing education attainment rates. Though still new on the horizon of leadership theories, network leadership is growing in terms of recognition and action. It is emerging as a leadership practice that has the potential to make long-term contributions—and so to leave a significant legacy. Network leadership already has demonstrated its ability to effect change at the local, state, national, and societal levels. Given that “shared power and collective competence” (Drath 2008) are necessary for social change, network leadership has the power to create synergy to facilitate social change (Marx 2008). Bottery (2008) refers to network leadership as “connective tissue.”

Historically, individual organizations have focused on leadership from within; this is understandable as each organization has unique goals. Kania and Kramer (2011) refer to this as “isolated leadership.” In 2010, Education Sector, an independent think tank in Washington, DC, identified one of the four key elements of shared accountability as “strong, sustained, civic leadership” (Bathgate, Colvin and Silva 2011). Marx (2008) reminds us that network leadership will enable individuals to “get connected to forces affecting the whole of society”; surely this is what education does. Marx (2008) further describes network leadership as “connective tissue.”

Even as education organizations show strain as a result of the demands upon them, network leadership can provide support and opportunity (Munro 2008). After all, in addition to supporting the achievement of important goals, network leadership presents opportunities for leaders to enhance their skill sets (Renee and McAlister 2011). Leaders expand their knowledge, become data savvy, and cultivate personal aspirations (Renee and McAlister 2011).

Network leadership is emerging, evolving, and having an impact on social change and education reform. Specific examples in Michigan demonstrate that network leadership can arise within any given context (Renee and McAlister 2011). Particularly in Michigan, the creation of networks at the local and state levels followed the example of national networks and constituted a response to the Cherry Commission’s final report (2004), which called for leadership, the creation of networks, and significant change.

Network leadership in education can support the need to produce educated citizens (Renee and McAlister 2011). After all, the root of network leadership in education is reform and social change. Network leadership has the potential to transform society and our education system. According to Bathgate, Colvin and Silva (2011),

"Bringing together a community’s myriad of service providers and getting them to pursue a single, shared vision for how to improve outcomes for youths is not easy. It will not happen naturally, and such networks cannot be assembled and sustained by a school district working on its own."

Through network leadership, organizations can discover common opportunities (Munro 2008). Marx (2008) writes, “All organizations, especially education systems, are of this world, not separate from it. To earn their legitimacy, they need to be connected with the communities, countries, and the world they serve.” Network leadership seeks to do just that.

REFERENCES


MCAN. See Michigan College Access Network.
NCAN. See National College Access Network.
USC. See University of Southern California Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice.

About the Author

CHRISTOPHER W. TREMBLAY is Assistant Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Management at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He previously served as Director of Admissions at UM-Dearborn and Gannon University. Tremblay earned both his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Western Michigan University. He has a post master’s certificate in enrollment management from Capella University, and is a doctoral student at UM-Dearborn studying educational leadership. He has published articles in College & University, the Journal of College Admission, Journal of College Orientation and Transition, and the Journal of Intergroup Relations. He has presented at nearly 40 association conferences for AACRAO (SEM), the College Board, NACAC, MACAC, PACAC, NISTS, MACRAO and NODA.
Active in college access initiatives, Tremblay serves on the advisory board of Project ACE, a Local College Access Network (LCAN) in the State of Michigan.