Social learning spaces and the systems convening mindset: Implications for faculty development professionals

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Abstract

Systems convening is a style of leadership developed by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2021) that focuses on crossing social and institutional boundaries to facilitate change. Faculty developers are increasingly called on to cross disciplinary and institutional boundaries in their work supporting teaching and learning. A systems convening mindset includes being able to bring people together across boundaries, wanting to make a difference in educational outcomes, knowing the academic landscape, knowing the people to talk to in each silo, and valuing learning as a part of this leadership style (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2021). In a case study of 19 faculty developers at a multi-campus research university, we document the developers' approaches to their work and evaluate the usefulness of the systems convening mindset in the context of university faculty development. We conclude that approaching faculty development leadership from a systems convening perspective can help developers successfully cultivate the cross-boundary relationships necessary to facilitate communities of change in universities.

Keywords: systems convening, social learning spaces, educational development

American higher education is often described as siloed, with departments and programs having their own goals and purposes (Keeling et al., 2007; Mizuta, 2021; Thompson et al., 2009). Faculty developers, or those charged with providing professional development opportunities to faculty and staff, need to cross these departmental and disciplinary boundaries to support faculty in becoming better educators. This requires a special kind of leadership to work with participants from various backgrounds to achieve better educational experiences for students. Systems convening offers a model for this kind of leadership needed by faculty developers. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2024) define systems convening: "Many challenges today require learning that brings people together across different practices, different institutions, different goals, different cultures, different loyalties. Fostering social learning across social landscapes with such entrenched boundaries requires a certain kind of leadership, which we have called systems convening." A faculty development systems convener can: a) bring people together across boundaries, b) be someone who wants to make a difference in educational outcomes, c) knows the academic landscape, d) knows the people to talk to in each silo, and e) values learning (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2021).

Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs) have become more common in higher education with more faculty development professionals, although resources for these centers varies greatly (Sorcinelli, 2020). The changing higher education landscape includes new emphases on social issues, the role of higher education in the larger society, and new technologies, suggesting that faculty developers need to connect with more varied stakeholders within and outside their institutions. Sorcinelli (2020), in her review of faculty development from 1970 to 2020, concludes that faculty developers need to network with offices across the institution as well as with external scholars and professional organizations. Because faculty development is maturing as a discipline and a practice, assessing the contributions of systems convening to this work is essential to establishing the value of CTLs to their institutions (Beach, 2016; POD Network, 2019). The increasing need to

engage broader networks and diverse stakeholders directly aligns with the expansion of organizational development within the Professional and Organizational Development Network (POD). As our discipline matures and our practices evolve, it is crucial to emphasize our full organizational identity: Professional and Organizational Development. Implementing a systems convening model would benefit this evolution, enabling us to effectively demonstrate the value of CTLs to their institutions (Beach et al., 2016; POD Network, 2019). Adopting the systems convening mindset in the siloed structure of higher education institutions can help faculty developers cross boundaries to improve the effectiveness of their centers.

In higher education, there is a tension between learning in communities of practice, which can be slow and iterative, and top-down management, which focuses on quick, linear solutions (Harper, 2024). The problems facing higher education today are complex, with multiple stakeholders, which would be best solved through a social learning approach. In this context, Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015, p. 9), define social learning as not only acquiring knowledge but becoming a member of a community of practice and learning through relationships, the competency of the community, and key formative events. Often the constraints of a problem require quick solutions and community buy-in, but for lasting changes to take place, more stakeholders and their perspectives need to be part of the conversation. Social learning provides a means for this type of exchange, but it takes time to build rapport and draw upon everyone's knowledge from sometimes divergent epistemologies. Social learning values draw on a variety of experiences, while practical problem-solving values expediency and efficiency.

Given the challenges of faculty development in mediating between supporting faculty, facilitating institutional initiatives, and the requirements of adapting to changing technologies, effective faculty developers might benefit from the systems convener mindset. In this study, we investigate how faculty developers at our institution, spanning three campuses and seventeen colleges, view their work and identities as

faculty developers. We ask what are the unique pressures of academia that faculty developers face in the context of systems convening?

Literature Review

Within complex landscapes, Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) described the people who create connections across boundaries as systems conveners pointing out, "This respect for boundaries takes patience and persistence" (p. 102). Systems conveners do valuable work in bringing different groups together. Duarte, Culver, and Paquette (2021) described this challenge in a case study of a sports league. While the systems conveners sought to prioritize the value of interactions for various stakeholders and supported learning in community through various media, they encountered difficulties engaging members at higher levels of the league hierarchy. This specific context demonstrated how communities of practice engage in boundary crossing. The model of systems convening offers an understanding of how social learning in communities of practice sustains practitioners in crossing these boundaries.

In the early development of conceptualizing communities of practice that led to systems convening, Lave and Wenger (1991) outlined how novices enter the world of experts through the social learning process of participating at the edges of the professional community while slowly moving to full participation. To enter the professional community, novices engage in a community of practice, which provides mentorship and guidance as the novices become established community members. The anchor for this kind of learning is the community of practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) explained, "By this, we mean to draw attention to the point that learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community" (p, 29). In this understanding of social learning, participation in the community and its activity is key to belonging.

The challenge of belonging in communities of practice is addressed in Wenger-Trayner et al. (2015), which starts with two examples of failed communities of practice boundary crossings where the participants were not familiar with each other's practices and thus could not communicate clearly. This "Invitation to a Conversation," concludes with the point that "…exploring different practices in the landscape can be important opportunities for learning" (Hutchinson et al., 2014, p. 9). To be more effective, faculty developers can learn about the different practices across their institutions, among the disciplines, and within the faculty, staff, administrators, and students participating in each domain.

Faculty developers in higher education are part of a de facto community of practice responsible for a wide variety of challenges and opportunities. Chen et al. (2022) described their educational developers' community of practice as a way to support their work of addressing the problems facing their centers. O'Grady (2024) explained how the pandemic led to CTLs being relied upon during the crisis. She argued that too many institutions now "dump" complex initiatives on CTLs without consulting the staff. In fact, solutions may lead to new problems, so they need to be approached from multiple perspectives. Chen et al. (2022) pointed out that a community of practice for educational developers provides "structure, safety, and strength to take on the wicked problems we face in our field" (p. 145). Often CTLs do not have the opportunity to participate in a multi-constituent community of practice to support their work, but when they do, they need to understand the academic landscape in which they operate.

Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) posed important questions to guide this type of landscape exploration such as:

- What does your journey through the landscape look like?
- What were the boundaries that distinguished your hill from neighboring ones?
- How does this add to your knowledgeability of the landscape (p. 26–27).

Crossing these boundaries in the landscape is an intentional act. Within the landscape of academia, departments and disciplines form strong boundaries, sometimes with competing epistemologies (e.g., Mäkinen, 2022; Mavri et al., 2021; Mørk et al., 2008).

Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2021) outlined the benefits of systems convening such as being able to issue a convening call, having the legitimacy for people heed that call, recognizing the boundaries that are being crossed, creating an identity in multiple places in the landscape, exercising agency in the activity of the convening, negotiating with stakeholders in power positions, and supporting stakeholders in creating value that matters to them (pp. 50–51). These benefits are explored in depth in a special issue of *The Journal for Excellence in College Teaching*, edited by Cox and McDonald (2023). In the studies included in this issue, the authors describe several academic communities of practice, outlining how the systems convener mindset developed for them over time. This current study explores these characteristics of systems convening that are realized in a specific academic landscape.

In the studies of academic systems convening documented in Cox and McDonald (2023), there is a common thread of how satisfying and supportive the communities of practice were as they loosened boundaries and fostered transformative identities. However, Owens et al. (2023) noted the challenges of the academic hierarchy, "This narrative also acknowledges challenges encountered by conveners in engaging in identity work where unequal power relations exist and where, in particular, the convener is in an empowered position over community of practice members" (p. 40). Within academic hierarchies, power and legitimacy to make change can be deeply circumscribed. Often a participant may have a great deal of agency within the community of practice but not outside. In this same collection, Shaffer (2023) discussed how the informal relationships of the community of practice, when they connected people in positions of power, did result in institutional change. The personal and reflective relationships

these people made across faculty, staff, and administrator boundaries created opportunities for change that would not have been created in traditional meetings. However, the transformations of these individual boundary crossings remained within the group and may only affect the institution by the group supporting individual members.

In a case study of one systems convener, Kay and Sheppard-LeMoine (2023) identified the convener's qualities that led to a successful community of practice. The convener clearly articulated her vision for the community, so others were strongly motivated to participate. She possessed resilience and perseverance to achieve her goals while also supporting a collaborative environment for participants to share equally. She was a skillful facilitator who was able to bring together colleagues across a transnational community. Nevertheless, Kay, and Sheppard-LeMoine (2023) cautioned against "social learning concepts [being] over-idealized" (p. 76). Even communities with experienced facilitators can become victims of external and internal challenges, so they call for additional research to better understand convener experiences in other contexts.

In all these examples of systems convening, a significant individual is involved. Systems convening is not a group process; rather it is a process where an individual creates a group. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2021) listed the elements of this "systems convening mindset":

- The individual wants to make a difference.
- The individual is aware of the social landscape.
- The individual engages with people across boundaries.
- The individual approaches the endeavor from a social learning perspective. (p. 82)

At our institution, and anecdotally at others, faculty developers in the academic landscape are often siloed in centers dedicated to teaching and learning and firmly ensconced within the academic hierarchy.
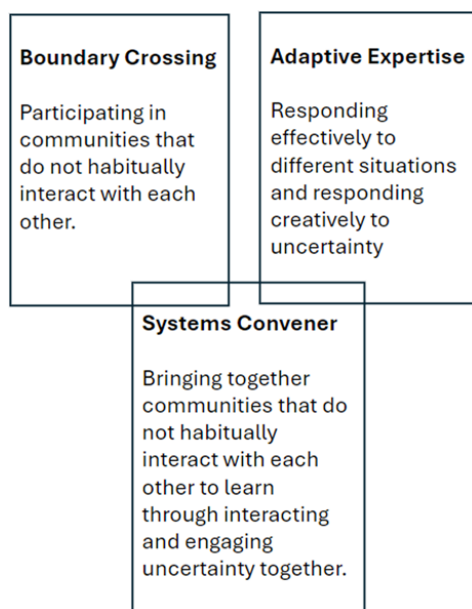
Baker et al. (2018) conducted interviews and field observations with people involved in professional development at their medical school. They concluded that an effective faculty developer adapts within the constraints of the institutional system to construct experiences for faculty of different specialties, negotiate possibilities within organizational parameters, and attune themselves to their varied audiences.

This characterization includes some elements of the systems convener mindset, such as being aware of the landscape and engaging people across boundaries, however, the personal orientation of wanting to make a difference and embracing social learning is absent. In a literature review of faculty development by Phuong, Foster, and Reio (2020), they focused on the effectiveness of learning, programs, faculty engagement, organizational development, and assessment. The current literature on faculty development appeared to be on the effectiveness of the faculty developer in facilitating instructional changes, but the recommendations for practice also focused on the characteristics of a faculty developer, including being knowledgeable, aware of faculty diversity, and creating social learning spaces through longitudinal programs.

In studies from medical faculty development, this focus on individual characteristics is echoed by research in "adaptive expertise" in the medical field. Adaptive expertise is being able to respond effectively to different situations and respond creatively to uncertainty (Mylopoulos et al., 2018). In effect, faculty developers should be able to cross boundaries and deal with new situations. Similarly, Cutrer et al. (2018) defined the personal characteristics of faculty developers who demonstrate adaptive expertise to include, "curiosity, mindset, motivation, and resilience" (p. 795). The systems convener mindset of a desire to make a difference, crossing boundaries, dealing with uncertainty, and being able to persevere through challenges, incorporates elements of adaptive expertise (see Figure 1).

Burdick and Hallman (2021) interviewed faculty developers across the United States, exploring how the work of faculty developers has changed since the 1970s. They documented how the acceleration of

Boundary Crossing

Participating in communities that do not habitually interact with each other.

Adaptive Expertise

Responding effectively to different situations and responding creatively to uncertainty

Systems Convener

Bringing together communities that do not habitually interact with each other to learn through interacting and engaging uncertainty together.

Figure 1. The Functional Overlap of Boundary Crossing, Adaptive Expertise and Systems Convening

technological change in teaching and the role of faculty developers in facilitating institutional initiatives have changed the expectations for what these professionals are expected to do. Faculty developers must support faculty in teaching an increasingly diverse student population, be conversant in varied teaching technologies, and be able to adapt these technologies to different disciplines just in time to meet faculty needs. They must also work with institutional initiatives to assess student learning and faculty performance. The systems convening overlapping characteristics of adaptive expertise and boundary crossing in the face of uncertainty recommend the systems convening mindset for a person who wishes to be an effective faculty developer. We engaged in this exploratory study to understand how the systems convening mindset might show up in the work of faculty developers at our institution in order to offer a framework to help people become more effective faculty developers.

Methods

Participants

In qualitative research, the role of the researcher provides context for the types of data made available during the research process. In full disclosure, the authors are faculty developers who work in this landscape of practice. We bring our experiences and expertise in our role as researchers to this study. We wanted to understand the faculty development landscape at our multi-campus university so we could create a collaborative and supportive environment as each center caters to the specific needs of its local population.

In this Institutional Review Board approved study, we interviewed nineteen people from across our institution. We began by identifying those who work directly in faculty development in the various professional development centers (n = 11), then we identified past developers who have moved to other roles in the institution (n = 5), and finally we interviewed people recommended to us through our interviews (n = 3). There are seven centers at our institution that cater to specific types of faculty development. At the main campus, there are centers for teaching and learning, faculty enrichment, wellness, and online teaching. One of the two regional campuses has a center for technology and teaching and a center for faculty enrichment while the other regional campus has one center that caters to teaching, technology, and wellness. We interviewed representatives from each center.

Research Design

Since we work in this landscape, we determined that structured interviews would work best for participants to share their lived experiences as practitioners in a changing higher education landscape. The participants we interviewed serve multiple colleges and offer various services such as support for wellness, technology, pedagogy, and career development. Because systems convening is a new

concept to apply to faculty development, qualitative interviews are a good way to empower participants to share their perspectives (Cresswell, 2007).

Drawing on the work of Wenger-Traynor and Wenger-Traynor (2021), we used the following five questions for the interviews.

1. Describe the landscape of educational development at the institution.
2. How did you come to your role?
3. How do you think you have built legitimacy in the different contexts in which you work?
4. Here is a quote about what it means to do this kind of work. How do you think this characterizes educational developers?

    Systems conveners are ready to take on difficult challenges, bet on people, face the resulting uncertainty, and recover from setbacks, often without much consideration for the cost to themselves. They are prepared to forge ahead, ignored, dismissed, thwarted, or even scorned by established powers. There is a kind of unspoken courage to what they do. (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2023, p. 180)
5. What keeps you going when things aren't working out the way you thought they might or if a program is unsuccessful?

Participants were asked whether they would prefer an in-person or online interview. In-person interviews were audio recorded and transcripts were recorded using transcription software. Online interviews were conducted over video-conferencing, which allowed for audio recording and a generated transcript. Pseudonyms were assigned for participant confidentiality. In reporting the interview results, we gave each participant a nongender-specific pseudonym and used they/them pronouns.

Data Analysis

We used Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner's (2021) systems convener characteristics to identify the systems convener mindset:

- The individual wants to make a difference
- The individual is aware of the social landscape
- The individual engages with people across boundaries
- The individual approaches the endeavor from a social learning perspective (p. 82).

With these characteristics of the systems convener mindset identified, we each identified them in two of the interview transcripts and then we met to discuss how aligned our analysis was, clarifying any misalignments. Then, we each analyzed two more interviews and met to clarify any misalignments. Our analyses aligned well in this second iteration, and we analyzed the remaining interviews. As we worked on the analysis, we discussed our preliminary findings, which indicated some participants seemed to instinctively use a systems convening approach while others did not.

Themes

Through the interview analysis, we identified participants as exhibiting a role-oriented mindset, an exhausted systems convener mindset, or a systems convener mindset. Five of the participants were identified as role-oriented. Pryor and Barringer (2022) noted, "In higher education, academic structure fundamentally shapes work within and outputs of institutions" (p. 46). Within this context, a role-oriented mindset focuses attention on constraints and relationships created by the academic structure. Given that the participants worked within the administrative structure of the university, it was unsurprising that participants viewed their role in faculty development as a job that aligned with the institution's academic mission and the "nested hierarchy of academic units" (Pryor & Barringer, 2022, p. 46). Their role gave them legitimacy and guided their interactions with others. In this case, the faculty developer did not generally reach across boundaries as much as negotiate the boundaries of different groups according to the rules of the established academic units. A role-oriented mindset focused

on achieving outcomes instead of engaging in prolonged uncertainty needed to explore various approaches to problem-solving. The benefit of the role-oriented mindset was that the interaction process was clear, and outcomes were easily identified. In this study, these participants seemed to work from a role-oriented perspective: Avery, Ren, Dakota, Finley, and Kai.

We identified some participants as exhausted systems conveners. They had cared deeply to make a difference but encountered so much resistance to their efforts that they had to step back from continuing the work. Without good social support, it was more likely that conveners might step away because the setbacks could be too hard. Also, the setbacks might begin to feel personal rather than situational, which made pursuing the goal too stressful. We identified the following participants as exhausted conveners: Riley, Sabi, and Jamie.

Participants with a systems convener mindset focused on how to bring people together to develop themselves. They saw the big picture, not just the institutional roles. They cared to make a difference and could bring others together to work towards making that difference. Participants with a systems convener mindset were willing to be vulnerable to achieve their goals. The systems convener mindset required healthy practices to sustain them during setbacks, and they saw setbacks as new opportunities. A person with this mindset was able to frame the setbacks as part of the process rather than personal attacks. In our study, the following participants exhibited a systems convener mindset: Noe, Rowan, Kendall, Parker, Quinn, Emery, Kiran, Cameron, Blake, Sebene, and Branna.

As can be seen in Table 1, participants expressed the four elements of the systems convener mindset to different degrees. The differences arose in which elements of the mindset they prioritized and how they expressed the elements of the systems convening mindset. The common theme for all these professionals was their dedication to their work and their care for their community. What differed was how they expressed that care in the culture of the academy. Colleagues who had a role-oriented mindset seemed to consider the institution's needs

Table 1. Characteristics of the Systems Convener Mindset in Relation to Role Oriented, Exhausted Systems Conveners, and Systems Convener Participants, N = 19

Characteristics of Systems Convening Mindset	Role-oriented n = 5	Exhausted Systems Conveners n = 3	Systems Conveners n = 11
Wants to make a Difference	5	3	11
Aware of the Social Landscape	0	3	11
Engages with People across Boundaries	5	0	11
Takes a Social Learning Approach	0	3	11

while systems conveners seemed to consider the needs of the individuals who were negotiating their institutional lives. In this analysis, we describe how participants engaged each of the four elements of the systems convening mindset.

The Individual Wants to Make a Difference

In *Systems Convening*, Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2021) define this characteristic as, "a determination that leads them to embrace challenges in their full complexity and requires navigating between opposites" (p. 82). Each of the participants cared to make a difference in their role as faculty developers. Participants with a role-oriented mindset viewed their role within the institution as how they would make a difference. Dakota articulated this viewpoint, "… at least in the university environment, we should theoretically all share a common goal. We should all want student success. We should all want the institution to be successful." In other words, they assumed that all their colleagues had a shared vision and might not critique the system. This structural view of the institution exemplified the role-oriented mindset. Kai pointed out the importance of relationship building at different levels of the institution and valuing people as essential to their work. Finley suggested that from their current position in the institution they could "have more impact here than [they] could in the classroom." Avery wanted to avoid being in a position in the institution of evaluating faculty work. Ren was excited about creating

a center from scratch without restriction from being associated with other administrative entities. In each of these interviews, the participants focused on their role within the institution and how they could support institutional goals.

The difference between respondents here was between those who had become exhausted by their work and those who continued in this work. One participant described the important quality needed for systems convening work when they said, "People who are effective leaders are problem focused as opposed to ego focused. They are willing to dig into hard things. … You got to care the right amount." People who cared too much "hit a brick wall." The three exhausted conveners described having hit a wall. Riley critiqued institutional systems that marginalize people. They said, "I don't care to sit and listen to you tow the party line." They challenged the status quo at the institution and often needed to take breaks to recharge. Sabi pointed out that they were "not well liked because I have standards." They tried to support quality online courses but received so much pushback that they stepped away from their role as an online course designer. Jamie tried to create a center for social justice but received strong pushback and was demoralized by the center's dismissal by administrators. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger Trayner (2023) suggest, "Systems conveners are ready to take on difficult challenges… They are prepared to forge ahead, ignored, dismissed, thwarted, or even scorned by established powers" (p. 108). Sara, Riley, and Sabi all passionately confirmed that they were committed to crossing boundaries and saying what needed to be said, but being ignored, dismissed, and thwarted was, indeed, difficult. Jamie expressed it best when they said, "[Upper levels of the hierarchy were] ignoring [others'] work and their life direction, and I was angry. It got personal." When the challenges became too personal, then the work became exhausting.

Some participants with a systems convening mindset were able to remove the personalization of the challenge from their work. They wanted to support others while also imagining how the institution could lead to a better society. Branna described how they set aside

their personal concerns to respond to each person they interacted with. Similarly, Quinn discussed how they used their yoga practice "to bring a level of peace and sanity wherever I go." Cameron voiced the importance of service to others when they said, "Kind of my mission, so to speak, is how do I help people?" Sebene articulated the importance of helping participants see their potential when they said, "It's about how you can influence people to see their value." Blake pointed out how draining this can be when they said, "This work takes a lot and doesn't always give back in the same quantity. It's not an even flow, like, sometimes you give a lot, and you're getting very little back and other times you get a ton back." As Blake suggested, those with a systems convening mindset can become exhausted when they "get very little back."

Most faculty developers with a systems convening mindset worked to support others in their work. Emery articulated this passion for helping others when they said, "I've been hurt, and I would hate for people to be hurt." This desire to focus on others showed up in the convening mindset of using the institution to create a better society. Parker said, "My big motivation, number one, is justice. I won't get pushy about myself that much, but for somebody else, I'll jump out of my seat. Just the nature of the thing is to take care of others." Rowen expressed a similar idea when they said, "I'm going to do my level best to do the best job I can to promote equity and inclusion at this college. I'm gonna fight like a wildcat with a hangnail against anyone who might try to infringe on people's rights to be their authentic selves." Kendall described this role of faculty developers, "We can help our faculty to do better which will help our students do better which will help them to be better citizens." Those with a systems convening mindset seemed to see the institution's potential to advance larger social goals through a focus on the goals of individuals within the institution rather than the goals of the institution.

The faculty developers with a systems convening mindset wanted resources to be allocated fairly to support teaching and learning. If systems conveners care to make a difference, they will articulate that

vision to others in a way that makes them want to be part of the change. Innovation and change in higher education might be better advanced if the faculty developer adopts a systems convening mindset because sustainable change needs to happen for people across institutional boundaries and transform people's identities to value the transformation required to address challenges. Once conveners have articulated their vision for the difference they care to make, they need to draw upon the resources available in the social landscape to advance their vision and engage people in the process.

The Individual is Aware of Social Landscape Perspective

According to Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2021) a social landscape perspective is "a deep awareness of the social texture of the human world, in terms of systems, practices, and relationships defined at multiple levels of scale" (p. 82). In a university, the landscape is often strictly defined by hierarchical, social, and disciplinary boundaries. This distinction is often referred to in the academic context as being "siloed." Bento, Tagliabue, and Lorenzo (2020) describe these organizational silos as "pockets of interaction and knowledge in organizations" (p. 1). These pockets can impede sharing knowledge across boundaries as well as defining what kind of knowledge is valued. Often, the structure of the university requires specific credentials to be visible from one level to the next, such as a PhD, or specific administrative titles, such as Assistant Dean/Associate Dean/Dean. Faculty developers need to be able to cross these boundaries among faculty and staff to address the complexities in supporting teaching and learning, from course level instructional design to programmatic assessment to university initiatives. At this university, there are three campuses, and each campus has its own centers dedicated to faculty development. Often the success of any one level depends on what happens at another level. In this way, the systems convening mindset that can encompass these multiple levels is essential for successful learning and teaching innovation and support.

All professionals interviewed shared this awareness that successful development requires appealing to multiple constituencies at the university. One of the characteristics that identified a role-oriented mindset was giving incomplete descriptions of the institutional landscape. For instance, Kai did not identify another center that is housed in the same building as their center as part of their landscape. However, the siloed nature of the university was a consistent concern. Another reason a participant was identified as role-oriented is their isolation from other offices. For example, Dakota noted, "I am the only person who does [this specific kind of work] at the university. I'm an island. I am a single point of failure." While taking a wider view of the social landscape helped a person with a systems convening mindset see the possibilities for conversations, the structure of the university could create barriers to communication. Kai commented that taking a landscape view can "foster conversation and collaboration that is across campuses and sometimes we work together beautifully, but sometimes we have no idea what each other are doing so it's a little bit of a shifting landscape." For Dakota and Kai, taking a landscape view of the university's professional development could feel isolating. To deal with this isolation, Dakota, who held the identity of "staff," discussed how important it was to be aware of creating relationships across the administration and faculty boundaries to do their work. Kai, who held an administrative identity, paid attention to their relationship with others in their center, keeping their silo in order, and negotiating with the shifting landscape of professional development as situations required or as the higher levels of the hierarchy required. As an administrator, their position gave them legitimacy to make things happen for those who identified as "faculty" or "staff."

Participants identified as systems conveners were able to articulate a more nuanced description of the landscape. On a smaller campus, Blake, who identified as "staff," paid attention to faculty and staff concerns for their work. With little power in the university structure, Blake's focus was on their silo as well. Likewise, Quinn, who also identified as staff, but also held an administrative title within their center, commented on how they paid attention to the person in front of them who

has come for help. For Ren, Emery, and Branna, who held administrative titles, paying close attention to their place in the university landscape was key. Ren commented on how consulting with their stakeholders within their campus was important, Emery mentioned how it is sometimes hard to figure out who to talk to among all the silos, and Branna expressed how important it was to have a tactical view of the landscape to find the one person who could be a lever for action. Sebene pointed out the importance of considering the landscape in such a spread-out institution, "I think it would be a big loss if we were to ever eliminate [faculty development] or completely centralize it. I know there's been a movement to completely centralized faculty development because even though I've been at the Center, you cannot ignore the fact that issues of distance will still be there. We know the value of some of the face-to-face events. No matter how much virtual we do, there are things that are very pertinent to our local context." This value of local context was important to consider in creating systems and practices that would appropriately support the different stakeholders. Cameron similarly noted how important a social landscape perspective was, "There should be hubs of different stakeholders, whether they're offices tied to positions or tied to specific stakeholders, but it's not siloed in; well, that is definitely still something we're working on, but it's a university wide effort." This landscape view of focusing on multiple hubs within the university was a concerted effort by Cameron's group. Kiran offered the metaphor of kintsugi art, where broken pieces of pottery are mended with lacquer that emphasizes the mends. Kiran saw the system convener as the lacquer that held the various pieces of the university together to make it whole.

The Individual Engages with People across Boundaries

In *Systems Convening*, Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2021) describe how systems conveners engage with boundaries. They note, "The social landscape defines all sorts of boundaries, both formal and informal—including social, cultural, professional, and institutional

boundaries. Systems conveners have a keen awareness of existing boundaries and the enabling and disabling roles these boundaries play. They honor boundaries because boundaries are part of people's identities, but they are also ready to challenge them" (p. 26). In this view of the landscape, the people involved negotiate their identities to see how things could be different. The systems convener needs to be comfortable engaging the uncertainty, reimagining how structures can change and how people's participation in those structures can change.

The role-oriented participants were aware of the boundaries but seemed less willing to challenge them. Kai recognized the uncertainty involved in their work, but from a positional point of view, especially when upper levels control resources and initiatives. Uncertainty caused by imagining how things could be was a distraction rather than an opportunity for growth. Dakota, a "unit of one," consistently confronted uncertainty and approached it through research and testing. The success or failure of their integration of innovation was controlled by other offices, so taking the success or failure personally was lessened. Ren was new in their position and had not built up enough legitimacy and connection to cultivate comfort with the uncertainty of changing structures and challenging boundaries.

Engaging with people across boundaries was another marker for exhausted conveners. They had experienced too many hits to their identities. For instance, Riley noted that, "I do think I burned some bridges in [other campus], so there are some people down there that don't really like to see me walk into the building." They recognized that their insistence on equity issues had caused rifts that would be difficult to bridge. Similarly, Sabi pointed out that the different parts of the institution are "competing against each other," which made it difficult to collaborate across units. Finally, Jamie described the emotional toll it could take to challenge boundaries when they said, "taking hit after hit after hit. It's just not fair. It's not sustainable." These exhausted conveners cared deeply to make a difference, but the pushback they received on challenging boundaries that upheld the status quo became too much. They needed to pull back to regroup.

Participants identified as systems conveners were able to balance when to honor a boundary and when to challenge it. Sebene discussed the need to continually evolve in the face of uncertainty to meet the demands of new situations. From a systems convening point of view, this evolution involved initiating new relationships and drawing new people in. From their administrative point of view, the pressures on them within the university were more negotiable thus allowing them to engage with the uncertainty of change from a more stable position within the university. Blake described the tension of working alone and in a team. They pointed out that their formal staff unit was only them, but they were also part of a larger team. Blake commented, "[Being on a team] was really helpful because it gave us a chance to talk about where we were, what kind of issues we were seeing—it gives a chance, to brainstorm and problem solve and to be able to identify issues." The team helped them to engage constructively with uncertainty. Jamie confronted uncertainty from a position of low status in the university to create substantial change in the system with stern resolve but was unsuccessful in gaining support in the upper levels of the university. Jamie realized, "I thought I could simply be honest about how things are going in the department, how things are going in the college, but I'm not so sure now that was the best path. But not being honest would mean changing who I am as a person." This setback was very hard for them. In contrast, Quinn wholly embraced uncertainty as a manifestation of possibility, but they risked little in this embrace since the changes they made were with individuals and did not challenge the structure of the university. Quinn said, "The parts that really stick out to me are being comfortable with that uncertainty. I think that's a big part of being a convener, like not being product driven but you're convening people to see possibility, and if it doesn't have a result, then it's OK."

Coming from a transformational perspective, Branna and Emery were more willing to engage in uncertainty. Both had director level positions and strong visions for institutional change. However, they did not work in isolation, and their initiatives were through negotiating with

different groups within the university. Through intensive negotiation and networking, Branna has been able to create a new center within a traditionally conservative area of the university. Branna sees the uncertainty of change as an active challenge that needs to be done, commenting, with great energy, "We're going to do it!" However, whether coming from a role-oriented mindset or systems convening mindset, all the professionals we interviewed found dealing with the uncertainty of transformational change stressful and uncomfortable.

The Individual Approaches the Endeavor from a Social Learning Approach

In *Systems Convening*, Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2021) define their social learning approach as, "approaching a challenge or an aspiration by developing the ability of people to learn from and with each other how to make a difference that matters to them" (p. 82). This part of the systems convening mindset describes how important relationships are whether one is negotiating a networking system or a university system. All the professionals commented on how important it was to cultivate relationships across boundaries in their work as faculty developers.

The role-oriented participants valued relationships. Kai mentioned relationships being important to their work as they negotiated across faculty, staff, and administration boundaries in addressing university wide initiatives. Kai pointed out, "I'm even thinking about the POD conference and like there is just this piece that really is about valuing people in relationships and connections. I feel like it's very prevalent in educational development." Dakota, in her unit of one, focused on institutional relationships more than personal relationships because they needed to coordinate up and down the hierarchy. In addition, institutional positions could experience significant turnover so that one was not always working with the same person, even if it was a long-term relationship with the institutional position that person fills.

The participants identified as systems conveners intentionally thought of ways to draw on the abilities of others to address complex problems. Sebene mentioned the necessity of faculty development working with the administration and faculty in planning events. Blake mentioned the overlapping circles of influence and how it sometimes created competition or a feeling of competition among the different units of faculty developers at the university. They also noted that relationships were important to their work because they could use them to connect others to each other or to deepen their relationship with colleagues. Cameron emphasized connection and relationships for open dialog and cultivating a willingness to change. Quinn also emphasized that they were a listener to help people want to join in transformational change. "The more the merrier," they commented.

There was a difference between cultivating personal relationships in contrast to positional relationships. While the personal relationships were sustaining, the positional relationships focused more on results. It was possible to have both types of relationships, but the participants in this project mentioned that they specifically negotiated these personal relationships as they reached across boundaries. Kiran created a new and highly successful program by having robust personal relationships that informed them about which academic positions to convene to create their program. It was significant that there was strong support from the higher levels of the university for the different groups to cooperate. Branna related how their previous social relationships opened doors for them to engage in different levels of the university to convene to create a new center.

Conclusion

So, what does systems convening look like in faculty development? In these interviews, it became clear that it is important to investigate the mindsets of faculty developers because they are crossing complex institutional boundaries to achieve their goals. Within a research

university, a positional title often defines one's identity, and the turn-over of people through a given title challenges the development of personal relationships. Thus, at our institution, we observe that lon-gevity and multiple group memberships is an advantage to a faculty developer in cultivating a systems convening mindset. In the university, a faculty developer gains legitimacy by being aware of the values of each group they interact with, such as degrees, experience, or status. An effective faculty developer needs to cultivate relationships in these areas, recognizing that the convening call may need to come from higher in the hierarchy. Additionally, they convene across academic siloes, which may value different identities. Cultivating these rela-tionships across boundaries can benefit a faculty developer because their power may come from these relationships, not from their own place in the hierarchy. Due to this negotiated power, the faculty devel-oper needs to be flexible in understanding the needs of different stakeholders and how they understand creating value in the context of institutional initiatives.

We suggest that professional developers in a large university context need to balance positional and personal relationships to be effective. Both are necessary and either one in isolation is not enough to foster transformative change in the university context. Jamie had excellent relationships, but no higher-level support: their program was not endorsed. Ren has excellent hierarchical support but is still cultivating relationships as they grow their new center. Kiran and Branna had excellent relationships and excellent hierarchi-cal support: they created new, successful programs. Rowen and Noe have excellent relationships and good hierarchical positioning, but are still subject to institutional limits, so they continue to deal with uncertainty as they push forward to make change in a system that resists change.

To create change in the university system, a systems conven-ing mindset is essential as well as a view to the long game. Most of the professionals we interviewed generally agreed that a faculty

developer needs to cultivate the qualities of a systems convening mindset, that is, not take the setbacks personally and play the long game while cultivating personal relationships up and down the hierarchy. The majority agreed it is key to realize that the benefit of these relationships will come into play as the long game unfolds. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2023) note, "There is a kind of unspoken courage to what they [systems conveners] do" (p. 180). If we are coming at faculty development from a systems convening mindset within the landscape of social learning, we need to talk about how people can bridge those boundaries because university structures do not always benefit all members of the community in the same way. This is the work of faculty developers. Some faculty developers are already bridging boundaries and embracing the systems convening mindset. For these developers, the systems convener mindset is a good way of explaining what they are already doing and reifying their boundary crossing work. For new faculty developers or those looking for new approaches, the systems convening mindset offers a productive and effective approach to the fast-changing landscape of 21st century faculty development.

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Conflicts of Interest Statement

The authors have no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The data reported in this manuscript are available on request by contacting the corresponding author.

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