



Recommitting to  
**Stewardship**  
of **Place**

Creating and Sustaining Thriving  
Communities for the Decades Ahead

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**Stewardship  
of Place**

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Communities for the Decades Ahead

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In partnership with the:  
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Recommitting to  
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Creating and Sustaining Thriving  
Communities for the Decades Ahead

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# Executive Summary

In 2002, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) defined what it means to be a regional public university (RPU) in its landmark report *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place: A Guide for Leading Public Engagement at State Colleges and Universities*, which articulated an institutional purpose that is at once place-based and oriented toward serving multiple communities whose lives are enhanced by postsecondary education. It is now 2022 and the challenges facing RPUs have not drastically changed in the last two decades—resource disparities, enrollment fluctuations, balancing competing priorities while engaging place, and public skepticism over the value of higher education remain important issues. Nevertheless, some challenges have intensified and the broader economic, social, demographic, and political forces shaping institutions and their communities have evolved. As a result, stewardship of place in 2022 must look different than it did in 2002. *Recommitting to Stewardship of Place: Creating and Sustaining Thriving Communities for the Decades Ahead* provides an updated framing for stewardship of place that acknowledges the new postsecondary landscape while demonstrating why recommitting to being a steward of place is more important now than ever.

The report begins by reviewing and celebrating the earlier iterations of stewardship of place to situate the current report within 20 years of public engagement and thought. The report also contextualizes stewardship of place by describing some of the most important trend lines in postsecondary education, grouped into three broad themes: equity and upward mobility, resources and resilience, and regional prosperity and civic health.

# Executive Summary



Texas Woman's University

The report then articulates the following eight principles of stewardship of place, which can serve as a guide and ballast for AASCU institutions when meeting future challenges and opportunities. These principles comprise the philosophical underpinnings of stewardship of place:

**Connection to Place:** Forging deep connections to the geographic and cultural sites that RPUs serve.

**Reciprocity:** Decentering the university and sharing power with the community by collaborating with local leaders and being responsive to community voices, particularly those voices within communities that have been marginalized.

**Symbiosis and Synergy:** Understanding that what is good for the community is good for the campus, and vice versa, and seeking to establish two-way relationships that enhance mutual beneficence and support synergistic work.

**Adaptability:** Changing in response to evolving community needs, regional demographics, and economic realities by embracing new practices, processes, and languages to establish relationships with stakeholders.

**Diversity of Approaches:** Recognizing the diversity of AASCU institutions and the communities they serve, and leading differentiated approaches to stewardship of place.

**Civic Engagement:** Focusing public engagement efforts to support civic engagement and community well-being in local contexts.

**Upward Mobility and Opportunity:** Fostering economic opportunity within regions and upward mobility for students and families.

**Institutional Intentionality:** Ensuring that stewardship of place is woven throughout the culture, processes, and policies of an institution.

The report concludes by envisioning a future for RPUs that deepens and expands the principles of stewardship of place to ensure institutional and regional sustainability. ■



Rhode Island College

# Foreword

## **Mildred García, President and CEO**

**American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)  
Co-Chair, AASCU Stewards of Place Presidential Task Force**

**“It is time that  
we deepen that  
anchor of being  
the educational,  
economic, and  
social hubs of the  
communities  
we serve.”**

~Mildred García, AASCU  
president and CEO

**T**wenty years ago, in May 2002, the AASCU Presidential Task Force on Public Engagement released the cornerstone publication *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place: A Guide for Leading Public Engagement at State Colleges and Universities*. This publication served to document that engaging within the communities is at the very core of the missions of state colleges and universities. As we look at the history of the creation of AASCU institutions, we can note that these institutions were created to serve the region or state—serving the citizens that came from their neighborhoods. While today these institutions may be recruiting students nationally and internationally, AASCU institutions remain steadfast to their historical roots of being inextricably tied to the communities they serve.

College presidents and their teams utilized *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place* to lead conversations on their campuses and to strengthen their community and public engagement. In 2006, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching found a way to reward, advocate, and publicly designate those institutions that were so committed by creating new voluntary system classification for public engagement. AASCU institutions answered that call and were awarded this designation.

AASCU convenings and publications for presidents and their teams always ensure that there are opportunities to share promising practices from a network of member campuses, help those teams learn and adapt those practices, and provide examples that highlight evidence of success. Thus, stemming from the

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cornerstone publication and the then new Carnegie Foundation classification, AASCU documented the lessons learned from AASCU institutions who applied for Carnegie's Community Engagement designation. This led to the publication of a second document titled [\*Becoming a Steward of Place: Lessons From AASCU Carnegie Community Engagement Applications\*](#) (Saltmarsh et al., 2014). Reviewing the AASCU 2008 and 2010 applications for the Carnegie Classification afforded rich examples from institutions from across the country. This review also served to deliver a publication with goals and recommendations underscoring ways to strengthen stewardship of place for AASCU campuses.

In the conclusion of the 2014 publication, Gene Rice states it best: "The AASCU campuses that have claimed an institutional identity as 'Stewards of Place'—and sought recognition through the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification—have led the way in envisioning a new approach to thinking about academic excellence and the meaning of success in our changing world" (Saltmarsh et al., 2014, pp. 42–43).

As AASCU institutions continued to stake their claim on being stewards of place, working collaboratively with their regions and states, and educating students to be engaged democratic citizens, requests were made by AASCU members for more details and specifics on how to embark upon strengthening institutions to become stewards of place. Because of this need, a new 2015 publication was created: [\*Operationalizing Stewards of Place: Implementing Regional Engagement and Economic Development Strategies\*](#) (Dunfee & Vaidya, 2015).

Yet today, AASCU institutions continue to be stewards of place in a different context. Today we recognize that the country demographics have changed whereby people of color are becoming the new majority of America. Our country has also experienced a worldwide pandemic never experienced in our lifetimes, affecting the way institutions deliver education and the way we live. We have lived through an insurrection hitting the



Austin Peay State University (TN)

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Northeastern State University (OK)

very core of our democracy; we have witnessed racist and sexist attacks on the new majority—African Americans, Latinos, LGBTQIA+, Asian Americans, and women. Gun violence has risen exponentially in our communities, and we are witnessing a country deeply polarized by party lines. And now, we are experiencing inflation, impacting the economic lives of our country's most vulnerable, the low- and middle-income populations; the very individuals AASCU institutions serve.

After 20 years and all that has ensued in the United States, amplifying our member campuses as stewards of place is more critical and urgent than ever. AASCU institutions are serving and educating the new majority of America. They continue to deliver America's promise to all that enter as students and live in the communities we serve. It is time that we deepen that anchor of being the educational, economic, and social hubs of the communities we serve. It is time that we proclaim that AASCU institutions are daring to seize these changes and continue to educate the new leaders of our nation to be those engaged citizens fighting for democracy and living fulfilling economic and productive lives in an equitable and just nation. This new report, *Recommitting to Stewardship of Place: Creating and Sustaining Thriving Communities for the Decades Ahead*, will accentuate how institutions must be bold enough to embrace being stewards of place

in this new reality, despite the many collective challenges it confronts. AASCU presidents and their teams know that it is up to them to ensure the vitality and strength of our nation. Paraphrasing Brené Brown, these leaders are showing the courage to show up and lead their teams when they can't predict the outcome as they are the true servant leaders for their institutions, students, and communities.

Finally, I want to thank all who worked on this publication—the presidents, research team, and AASCU staff. Together they represent the approximately 400 AASCU institutions that serve 3.2 million undergraduate students who are delivering America's promise to the new majority of America. The work being done is imperative for the students; their families; and the cities, state, and the country. These individuals include the AASCU Stewards of Place Presidential Task Force, AASCU staff, and especially my co-chair President Ashish Vaidya who was an editor of the third stewards of place publication *Operationalizing Stewards of Place* (Dunfee & Vaidya, 2015), and a strong champion of being a stewards of place advocate everywhere he works. I would also like to thank the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC) for being our research and thought partners in developing this publication. ■





# Preface

George Mason University (VA)

**Ashish K. Vaidya, President**  
Northern Kentucky University (NKU)  
Co-Chair, AASCU Stewards of Place Presidential Task Force

“The purpose of the first document is to elaborate on and articulate the philosophy that undergirds the public engagement mission of AASCU institutions.”

~Ashish Vaidya, NKU president

In the fall of 2018, just as I was starting my tenure as the sixth president of Northern Kentucky University (NKU), I was asked by a member of the community what the future holds for NKU. As I pondered the question, I was mindful of the rise of online education, new “national” universities, alternative credentials, and a growing restlessness about the value of a college degree.

I was attracted to NKU because of its strong legacy of regional stewardship, its mission of access and affordability, and its agility and innovation in forging partnerships. So I responded that while the higher education landscape was rapidly shifting, NKU will continue to find new and innovative ways to live up to the hopes and aspirations of the region and the commonwealth. After all, NKU had made public engagement a hallmark of its identity with a goal to become an indispensable partner to the region.

The landmark report from 2002, *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place*, chaired by former NKU president James Votruba, had clearly influenced the evolution of NKU in its ability to distinguish itself from other types of colleges and universities, through a commitment to engaging place, balancing institutional self-interest with public self-interest.

The report made clear that “public engagement” is an essential part of the heritage of AASCU institutions that embrace a wide variety of activities—including outreach, applied research, service learning, and more. More importantly, in order to serve as “stewards of place,” institutions need to function

# Preface



University of Northern Iowa

as learners as well as teachers in addressing the opportunities and challenges facing our communities and regions.

It is now 2022 and even the most prescient futurist would not have predicted a global pandemic, serious threats to our democracy at home, Russian invasion in Europe, or the elevation and painful reckoning with racial injustice. While the overarching challenges remain the same since the 2002 report, the context within which our institutions operate is different. The last decade has seen the nation confront legacies of racial and economic injustice, inequality exacerbated by

the pandemic, the erosion of trust and civility in public discourse and civic institutions, and the displacement of truth and science by ideological orthodoxy. These issues have impacted the “places” that our institutions serve.

The idea of taking a fresh look to maintain the relevancy and utility of the landmark original 2002 document was put forward by AASCU President Mildred García. To undertake this “refresh,” she convened a task force of university presidents, AASCU’s Stewards of Place Presidential Task Force, reflecting the rich diversity of the institutions they have the privilege to lead.

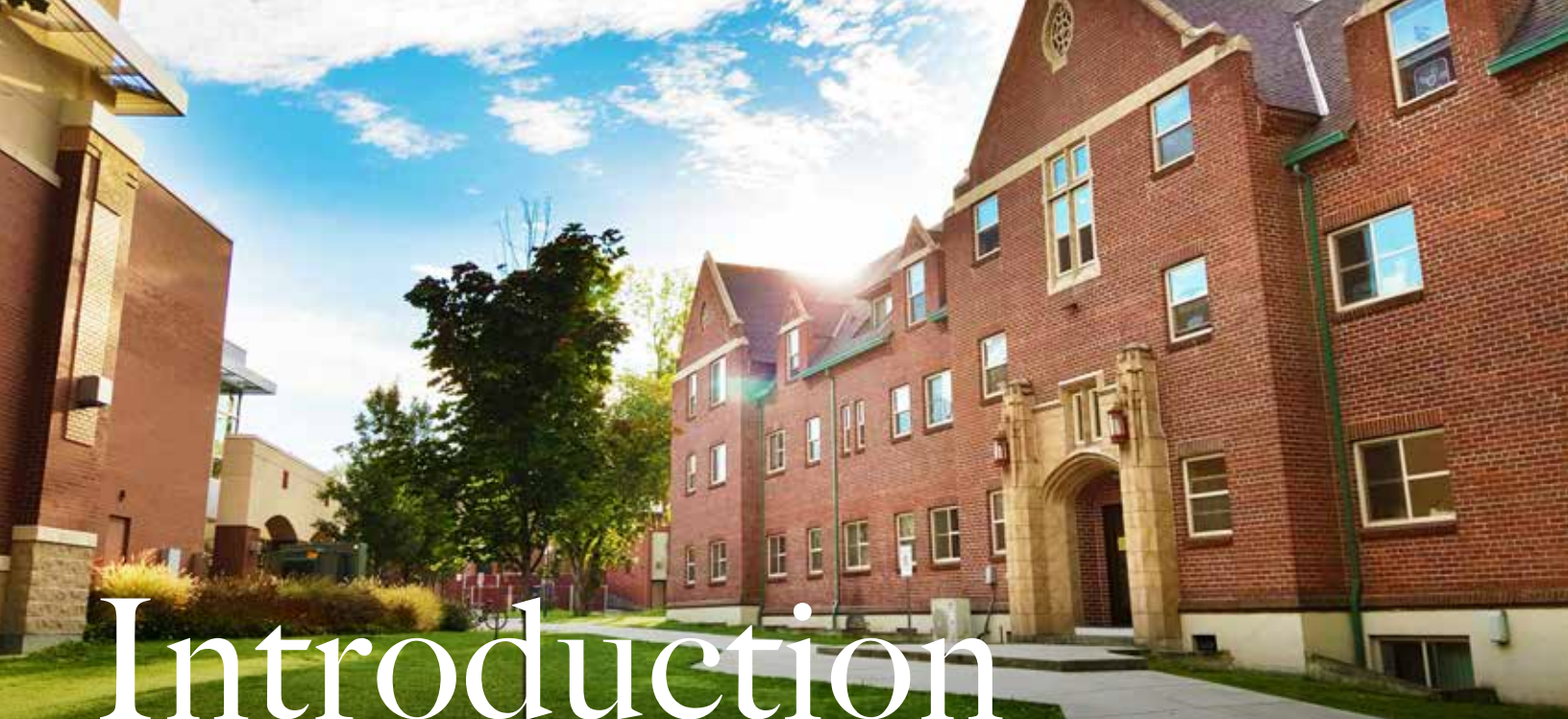
At the AASCU 2021 Annual Meeting, President García announced plans to update the original *Stewards of Place* publication in celebration of its 20th anniversary and she introduced members of the task force. The session spent time discussing the most salient issues of concern for AASCU institutions, the challenges and opportunities of engaging institutions with those issues, and how might we elevate this element of AASCU's mission in today's landscape.

The refreshed project will actually be three documents. The purpose of this first document, *Recommitting to Stewardship of Place*, is to elaborate on and articulate the philosophy that undergirds the public engagement mission of AASCU institutions. In doing so, the principles of stewardship of place are described and offered as a guide and ballast AASCU institutions might draw on when meeting future challenges and opportunities. In particular we outline three major themes related to the “new” postsecondary context—equity and upward mobility,

resources and resiliency, and regional prosperity and civic health.

The second document will be a practitioner guide that will provide tangible examples, case studies, and steps for effective implementation of regional stewardship. Finally, and perhaps most important, the third document, a policy brief, will make the argument for federal and state policies and funding strategies that will support AASCU institutions in enacting their stewardship mission. It has become painfully evident that the work to further institutionalize regional stewardship is greatly impeded by a lack of enacted public policy to provide resources and incentives at the state and federal level.

It is our hope that AASCU institutions will be able to use this report to determine and refine institutional strategy, convey the contributions and importance of AASCU institutions to policymakers, and articulate what makes AASCU member institutions unique among other postsecondary institutional types. ■



# Introduction

Lewis-Clark State College (ID)

In 2002, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) defined what it means to be a regional public university (RPU) in its landmark report, *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place: A Guide for Leading Public Engagement at State Colleges and Universities*. This bold effort called on AASCU presidents and staff to articulate and imagine a mission and identity for RPUs that are AASCU institutions that extended beyond being “caught in the middle” of land-grant universities, private research universities, and community colleges. The resulting report articulates a purpose for AASCU institutions that is at once place-based and oriented toward serving multiple communities whose lives are enhanced by postsecondary education. In identifying public engagement as the organizing principle and values system for RPUs, the report’s authors laid claim to a mission that bucked dominant trends in higher education that restrict postsecondary access and pursue international reputation over local engagement. Indeed, the report describes RPUs as unique and indispensable because their fates are inextricably linked to those of their students and broader communities.

It is now 2022, and while the context of challenges facing higher education institutions may have evolved, the issues keeping campus leaders up at night are largely unchanged over the last two decades—resource allocation disparities, enrollment fluctuations, balancing competing priorities while engaging place, and public skepticism over the value of higher education. Nevertheless, some challenges have intensified. And the broader economic, social, demographic, and political forces shaping institutions and their communities have evolved. For example, the ascendance of the completion agenda for higher education and attendant student success movement

have dramatically altered the trajectory of postsecondary funding and policy. Racial and economic justice movements, climate change and natural disasters, demographic shifts, and increasing political polarization have provided public institutions with new opportunities to demonstrate their value and engage publicly.

Where the earlier report saw the need to name and describe the mission of RPUs as different from other types of colleges and universities, RPUs today have cut a distinct path as national leaders in upward mobility that educate the new majority of postsecondary students. The first report successfully made the case for public engagement, and AASCU institutions have lived into and amplified stewardship of place as a guiding value and aspiration worthy of campus resources and community involvement. These successes are in part owed to the practical framework offered by the original report for how RPUs might engage with their local communities, as well as campus leadership focused on fostering equity and access among groups of students that for too long have been marginalized in higher education, including students of color and low-income students. On the 20th anniversary of *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place*,

AASCU institutions have the opportunity to recommit to this mission while acknowledging the significant changes to the context in which this mission is enacted.

The purpose of this report is to elaborate on and articulate the philosophy that undergirds the mission of RPUs as engines of opportunity, upward mobility, and economic prosperity for students, families, and communities. The report begins by reviewing and celebrating the earlier iterations of stewardship of place to situate the current report within 20 years of public engagement and thought. We describe the new postsecondary context and what it means for stewardship of place, demonstrating why recommitting to this mission remains vital. We describe principles of stewardship of place, which can serve as a guide and ballast for AASCU institutions when meeting future challenges and opportunities. The report concludes by envisioning a future for RPUs that deepens and expands the ideals of stewardship of place. It is our hope that AASCU institutions will use this report to identify and refine institutional strategy, convey the contributions and importance of AASCU institutions to policymakers, and communicate what makes AASCU member institutions unique among other postsecondary institutional types. ■

A photograph of the University of Nebraska at Omaha campus. On the right, a tall, light-colored brick clock tower with a clock face is visible. To the left, there are modern brick and glass buildings. The sky is blue with light clouds. The title "Reviewing and Celebrating Stewards of Place" is overlaid in white serif font on a dark purple background at the bottom of the image.

# Reviewing and Celebrating Stewards of Place

University of Nebraska at Omaha

**T**he original report, *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place*, was designed as a “strategic ‘toolkit’ for state college and university CEOs who want to breathe more life into the concept of public engagement” (AASCU, 2002, p. 10). An underlying premise of the guide is that public engagement is part of the heritage of RPUs and, as such, should direct institutional priorities and serve as a defining characteristic. At the same time that it emphasizes the importance of creating and seizing opportunities to more fully embrace public engagement as a core value, the report identifies several ways in which public policy and institutional shortcomings erect barriers to making public engagement more than rhetoric. Chief among these barriers is the lack of public policy to support engagement and institutions’ tepid commitment. As *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place* notes: “This is not to say that AASCU institutions are not publicly engaged. Most have some form of community interaction, but in the main it is piecemeal, not systemic, and reflects individual interest rather than institutional commitment” (AASCU, 2002, p. 13). In light of these challenges, the 2002 guide offers both a detailed definition to “parse and enrich the language of engagement,” as well as concrete recommendations for creating a culture of public engagement (AASCU, 2002, p. 5).

In the original report, stewardship of place is characterized by reciprocity, mutual benefit, and commitment to place—and these values and ways of operating remain salient to AASCU institutions. *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place* also articulates the value proposition of AASCU institutions that extended beyond strictly economic terms and captured how these campuses contribute to regions and communities across the U.S. The 2002 report’s contribution was visionary as it offered a broad definition for public engagement that captured the diverse ways in which colleges and universities might partner with their communities to address the pressing

“The publicly engaged institution is both a learner and a teacher, pursuing its mission with an understanding of public needs.”

opportunities and challenges of the day and contribute value to society.

Both the definition’s key concepts and many of the guide’s recommendations remain relevant after 20 years. The guide defines the publicly engaged institution as fully committed to direct, two-way interaction with communities and other external constituencies. In this way, the guide conceptualizes public engagement as “place-related,” recognizing that state colleges and universities are inextricably linked with the communities and regions in which they are located. The act of public engagement entails interaction, or a “spirit of give and take” between institutions and their communities—one that results in mutual benefit. The publicly engaged institution is both a learner and a teacher, pursuing its mission with an understanding of public needs. At the same time, communities must be partners that look to institutions as resources and assets, not answers to the challenges they face. The concept that receives the most attention in the 2002 guide is the notion that engagement must be integrated, cutting across all levels of the institution, and built into mission statements, hiring processes, and incentive structures. The main point reiterated throughout the guide is that public engagement does not organically arise, but instead must be cultivated through intentional communication, planning, leadership, and assessment.

Since its publication in 2002, *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place* has been a touchstone for many AASCU

members as they articulate their institution’s mission, value proposition, and strategic priorities. George Me-haffy, a long-time AASCU staff member and advocate for state colleges and universities, shared that “stewards of place” was a new way of thinking about the unique roles and purposes of RPUs and a response to the challenge of crafting a coherent identity for the sector. One of the most important contributions of the guide was the title itself—RCU chancellors and presidents found in “stewards of place” powerful language to convey to both internal and external audiences the distinct, place-based missions of their institutions. The guide positioned AASCU institutions in a national conversation about the vital work of RPUs in advancing democratic citizenship and civic participation. Around the same time that AASCU was encouraging leaders to embrace public engagement, it launched the American Democracy Project, a network of nearly 300 AASCU members focused on preparing the next generation to be informed and engaged in an equitable civil society. Many RPUs demonstrated their commitment to public engagement by voluntarily seeking recognition in the Carnegie Classification on Community Engagement, newly created in 2006.

Alongside the many contributions of the original guide was the recognition that it was simply the first step in the “difficult task of formulating a new vision and translating that vision into practice” (Dunfee & Vaidya, 2015, p. 3). In 2014, AASCU commissioned a

# Reviewing and Celebrating *Stewards of Place*

group of higher education scholars to write a follow-up report, *Becoming a Steward of Place: Lessons From AASCU Carnegie Community Engagement Applications* (Saltmarsh et al., 2014). The sequel draws upon applications from AASCU institutions that achieved the Elective Community Engagement Classification in 2008 and 2010 with the goal of exploring “the nature of the commitments that of some of the most involved AASCU institutions have made” and identifying lessons for other institutions to become more effective stewards of place (Saltmarsh et al., 2014, p. 5). The sequel focused on four specific areas: civic engagement, work with P–12 education, community and economic development, and internationalization. The following year, driven by a desire to provide more specifics, details, and examples, AASCU published *Operationalizing Stewards of Place: Implementing Regional Engagement and Economic Development Strategies*, an edited collection focused on how select state colleges and universities have approached community and economic development (Dunfee & Vaidya, 2015).

The primary goal of the original report and two follow-up publications has been to push state colleges and universities to embrace public engagement and to provide specific recommendations and examples to guide them in this work. Permeating these efforts has been a dedication to iteratively refining the meaning of engagement and showing with increasing

detail what engagement looks like in practice. Yet the work connected to stewardship of place is far from complete. For one thing, by focusing on public engagement, the original guide did not explicitly conceptualize “stewardship” or carefully attend to “place.” Recent scholarship has introduced and developed new concepts related to anchor institutions, community development, and the geography of opportunity that can illuminate and expand the meaning of “stewardship.” The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation launched the Postsecondary Value Commission, which AASCU president Mildred García co-chaired, to explore the value and contributions of higher education to society.

The 20th anniversary of *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place* creates an opportunity to better situate stewardship within the new postsecondary context and, in this way, demonstrate how the “public” and “community” in engagement efforts are particular and shaped by broader economic, social, demographic, and political forces. Case in point, the original guide and two subsequent reports may have underappreciated the importance of public policy in supporting or, conversely, suppressing engagement. This report aims to build upon the strong foundation of the previous reports while attending to the unfinished business of these efforts by bringing stewardship of place into conversation with the new postsecondary context and new conceptualizations linking postsecondary institutions and communities. ■





# The New Postsecondary Context

Georgia Southwestern State University

**S**tewardship of place in 2022 looks different than it did in 2002 because the economic, social, demographic, and political forces shaping institutions and their communities have changed. We refer to this as the new postsecondary context in which stewardship of place occurs. However, few of these forces are entirely new. Rather, some were simmering problems that have reached a boiling point due to major events; some are evergreen goals whose salience has increased due to new policy priorities; some are social ills whose continuation are no longer tolerable. It is almost cliché to enumerate postsecondary education’s challenges in a report like this—to assert that with each passing year, compounding crises make the enactment of postsecondary education harder. Most campus leaders would likely say effectively running a postsecondary institution has always been difficult, and that challenges and crises are ever present.

Although there may be some truth to that assertion, it is equally true that the broader context in which institutions operate and enact stewardship of place has evolved—sometimes in ways few could have predicted 20 years ago. The new postsecondary context offers multiple opportunities that RPUs are uniquely positioned to pursue. Indeed, AASCU institutions have always found a way to serve through hardship and help society while advancing upward mobility for students and economic opportunity in their regions. Most presidents, chancellors, and board members possess deep understanding of these opportunities and challenges, as well as the students they serve, but in an effort to better contextualize stewardship of place, we describe some of the most important trend lines in postsecondary education, grouped into three broad themes: equity and upward mobility, resources and resilience, and regional prosperity and civic health.

“As points of postsecondary access for many communities of color, RPUs will continue to be called upon to foster opportunity for immigrants, their families, and growing communities of color.”

## Equity and Upward Mobility

A defining question of the past 20 years has been postsecondary education *for whom?* The demographic profile of college students continues to more closely reflect the rich diversity of the U.S. population. Around one-third of today’s college students are older than 25, first generation, and at or near the federal poverty level. Additionally, nearly two-thirds of students are working while they are in college, half are financially independent, and almost one-quarter are raising children while studying. Between 1996 and 2020, Black student enrollment grew by 72% and Latinx student enrollment grew by 240% (Higher Learning Advocates, 2021). Over a similar time period, the share of students of color among all undergraduate students increased from 30% to 45%, largely driven by the increase in Latinx student enrollment (Espinosa et al., 2019). RPUs, which make up the bulk of AASCU’s membership, reflect this broad diversity. RPUs enroll 5 million students or 63% of all students at four-year public institutions. On average, 72% of Pell recipients attending four-year public institutions are enrolled at RPUs, as well as 77% who identify as Black or African American, 69% as Latinx, 54% as Asian American, 69% as Native Hawaiian, and 66% as Indigenous or Native American. RPUs are also important postsecondary access points for transfer

students—71% of transfer students attending four-year public institutions are enrolled at RPUs. RPUs award 49% of all associate degrees, 64% of all bachelor’s degrees, 61% of all master’s degrees, 33% of all doctoral research degrees, and 40% of all professional doctoral degrees granted by four-year public institutions (NCES/IPEDs). These numbers demonstrate how vital RPUs are to facilitating educational opportunity.

Some of these students were once considered “nontraditional,” though for many RPUs, providing them with postsecondary pathways has long been part of their missions (Ogren, 2005). Research indicates that AASCU’s experience in serving first-generation, adult, low-income, and other students who have been marginalized in postsecondary education will only grow in importance. By one estimate, only 15% of postsecondary students are between the ages of 17–24, attend a bachelor’s-granting institution, and live on campus (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021). Among AASCU institutions, 30% of students attend part time and are over the age of 25. The new majority of postsecondary students who are low income, first generation, caregivers, working full time, or returning to postsecondary studies after an interruption is poised to grow in the coming decades, especially as many states push to have more residents earn a postsecondary credential

# The New Postsecondary Context

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(Soares et al., 2017). The U.S. Census Bureau predicts that by 2030, immigration will be the top source of population growth in the country. Beyond 2030, population growth will slow and the population will become both older and more racially/ethnically diverse, with the greatest growth in people who identify as multiracial, Asian, and Hispanic. As points of postsecondary access for many communities of color, RPUs will continue to be called upon to foster opportunity for immigrants, their families, and growing communities of color.

A wave of research and advocacy has demonstrated how, despite gains in access, gaps in college completion persist, and colleges and universities are increasingly expected to update practices and policies to support all students' success. For example, adults with at least one college-educated parent are significantly more likely to complete college (70%) compared with adults with less educated parents (20%) (Fry, 2021). Moreover, despite having better grade point averages, college students who are parents leave at a higher rate within six years (52%) compared with nonparents (32%) (Wladis et al., 2018). By one measure of college completion, the six-year graduation rate of first-time, full-time students, just over half of Black and Latinx students completed college compared with nearly 70% of white students. The new postsecondary

context is characterized by unparalleled attention and resources being dedicated to closing these opportunity gaps. Arguing that “the nation’s need for talent has never been more urgent,” Lumina Foundation established a goal of 60% of adults having a college degree, certificate, or other credential of value by 2025. As a reflection of the shift in federal policymaking, President Biden originally proposed \$62 billion to fund completion and retention initiatives like wrap-around services, emergency basic needs grants, and articulation agreements between community colleges and four-year institutions.

Properly supporting students who face the most barriers to completion, as well as the institutions that serve these students, has been a recent focal point of the student success movement. This includes giving greater attention to students of color, whose experiences, opportunities, and outcomes in postsecondary education have been re-emphasized in response to the continuation of racist violence and the disproportionate toll of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities of color. The new postsecondary context has cast light on how Black students and, in particular, Black women are burdened by student loan debt, how for-profit institutions engage in race-based targeting, and how lifting the ban on Pell Grants for individuals impacted by the criminal justice system created new opportunities for the

# The New Postsecondary Context

Black and Latinx communities disproportionately harmed by this system. The importance of minority-serving institutions (MSIs) in advancing racial equity has never been clearer, and federal policy, court cases, and new philanthropic efforts have slowly translated this recognition into resources. Many AASCU institutions are MSIs, and their stewardship of place is historically and inextricably bound to the goal of racial justice. At the 20th anniversary of *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place*, the AASCU membership included 37 historically Black colleges and universities, 64 Hispanic-serving institutions, 26 Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving institutions, nine Native American-serving non-tribal

institutions, six predominantly Black institutions, and four Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian-serving institutions. The number of MSIs in AASCU's membership is projected to continue growing as more students of color access higher education.

Understanding the value of postsecondary education through measures of upward mobility and return on investment is a hallmark of the new postsecondary context. Many of these analyses have demonstrated that RPUs outperform many other institution types when it comes to promoting students' upward mobility. One analysis found that in a sample of 307 RPUs, more than half the students raised in households in the two lowest-income quintiles managed to reach the two highest income quintiles by their 30s (Klor de Alva, 2019). In a ranking of the top institutions based on their economic mobility index score, AASCU institutions predominate, especially institutions in the California State University and City University of New York systems (Iitzkowitz, 2022). The upward mobility that RPUs propel is not just significant for individuals. It helps uplift and create new opportunities for families. Given that AASCU institutions are often educating students from their regions, changing the economic fortunes of students and families can foster positive spillover effects for the economic prosperity of regions.



Washington State University Vancouver

## Resources and Resilience

The new postsecondary context continues to demand that RPUs be resilient in the face of multiple, in some cases intensifying, threats to institutional stability. The places that AASCU institutions are stewarding are increasingly affected by a complex array of challenges. These challenges include extreme weather events, such as powerful hurricanes hitting coastal institutions with greater frequency, as well as wildfires engulfing large swaths of Western states. Whether it is caused by climate, politics, or economic opportunity, the United States is also experiencing demographic changes with implications for RPUs. Some states have seen steady population declines, while others have seen growth or the growth of particular populations (Henderson, 2021). Estimates of high school graduates and college-going students suggest that certain institutions in some states will confront contracting demand for postsecondary education, potentially leading to decreasing enrollments and budget problems (Grawe, 2018). Although these population changes are sometimes cast in terms of a “demographic cliff,” they also represent an opportunity for RPUs to lean into their historic missions of facilitating postsecondary access for students who have often been marginalized.

Enrollment is not the only financial reality that requires resilience on

the part of RPUs. AASCU institutions are navigating a new postsecondary context in which resources for enacting stewardship of place are constrained. Research shows that many state colleges and universities remain reliant on state appropriations—a funding source that has been particularly turbulent in the last 20 years (Koricich et al., 2020; McClure & Fryar, 2020). Although total per-student state funding for higher education has increased for the last eight years, only seven states have recovered from budget cuts from the 2008 recession. Research shows that RPUs tend to receive less state funding per student, less net tuition revenue, and less in endowment assets compared with public research universities. On average, AASCU institutions receive \$10,972 less per student in state appropriations and \$13,895 less per student in federal grants and contracts than flagship and land-grant universities. Nationally, education appropriations remained 8.7% below pre-recession levels in 2008, and states have only recovered about two-thirds (63.5%) of the total decline seen during the Great Recession. Many states have enacted performance funding systems, and the design of some of these systems disadvantage institutions that serve students with the most significant obstacles to success (Ortagus et al., 2022).

“The new postsecondary context not only calls upon AASCU institutions to educate future workers—it also challenges them to step up to support regional civic activity and rebuild the fabric of democracy.”

A common response to state defunding has been to raise tuition, and RPUs have become more reliant on this revenue source (McClure & Fryar, 2020); however, some states have enacted tuition freezes, and many RPUs have tried to avoid raising tuition to support access and student success.

Further complicating matters is the fact that the day-to-day activities and contributions of RPUs have been heavily scrutinized and politicized. Polls indicate that public confidence in higher education is waning. A Pew Research poll in 2017 found that 58% of Republican and Republican-leaning independents viewed higher education as having a negative influence on the country. By comparison, a wide majority of Democrats (currently 72%), including large majorities of college graduates and non-college graduates, continue to view colleges and universities as having a positive effect on the nation. A Gallup poll found that just 51% of adults think a college education is “very important” (Marken, 2019). Waning public confidence has implications for public resources, as well as how AASCU institutions engage with the public. The responsibility of communicating higher education’s value and its role as a site of free speech and civil dialogue has become more salient in the new postsecondary context.

## Regional Prosperity and Civic Health

The new postsecondary context situates many RPUs squarely in regional economic recovery and prosperity through continuing education and workforce development. The United States is not a monolith, and economic opportunity and prosperity vary widely. Recovery after economic recessions has been spatially uneven, with some communities recovering quickly and others experiencing economic distress (Maxim & Muro, 2021). These latter communities have struggled to provide or retain jobs, and many of the available jobs are low wage. These communities also lack necessary infrastructure and social support that make it possible for people to fully participate in an increasingly technology-driven knowledge economy. The pandemic that began in 2020 both revealed and exacerbated these challenges, leading to large numbers of displaced workers needing to reskill or retrain. Recent research has empirically demonstrated the ways in which RPUs can counter out-migration trends in distressed communities and buffer communities from economic downturns and negative effects of the decline of manufacturing (Maxim & Muro, 2021). Ultimately, this work means attending to overall regional health in multiple domains including public health, economic

# The New Postsecondary Context

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vitality, civic well-being, and educational opportunity.

One way that RPUs substantively add to the well-being and prosperity of regions is by preparing students for high-demand jobs in the local labor market. This includes jobs in health care that have been critically important to communities' ability to respond to the pandemic (McClure et al., 2021). RPUs award 69% of health science degrees and 75% of health science bachelor's degrees granted by four-year public institutions, including degrees in nursing, physical therapy, and respiratory health. Because of their historical ties to teacher and principal preparation as state normal schools, many AASCU institutions are also crucial contributors to the K–12 education workforce, improving K–12 curricula, and state policies connected to teachers and schools. RPUs grant 75% of all degrees in education including associate, bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees as well as certificates awarded by four-year public institutions. This responsibility has only become more important as some schools struggle with staffing shortages and colleges of education nationwide work to revitalize the teaching profession post-pandemic. The pace of change in science and technology means that RPUs must also be responsive to local labor market needs and create new

academic programs and credentials. RPUs grant 51% of all STEM degrees and 77% of associate STEM degrees awarded by four-year public institutions. RPUs also grant 65% of bachelor's degrees in business and 58% of all business degrees awarded by four-year public institutions, which support the development of regional business districts. Many students who attend AASCU institutions are from the regions the institutions are located in and stay in the region after college, and investing in their education pays dividends for the regions in which they continue to work and serve.

The new postsecondary context not only calls upon AASCU institutions to educate future workers—it also challenges them to step up to support regional civic activity and rebuild the fabric of democracy. Many AASCU members have strengthened their civic missions by participating in the American Democracy Project. RPUs have also long served as hubs for regional civic life by hosting political candidates, sponsoring civic events, and making it easier for people to vote. As social media facilitates the spread of misinformation, AASCU institutions will increasingly be involved in efforts to teach information literacy and prepare students how to be active participants in a functional democracy. ■



# Recommitting to Stewardship of Place for a New Era

Minnesota State University Moorhead

**A**rticulating stewardship of place as a philosophy is made easier by recent scholarship that has empirically and conceptually described the place-based contributions of RPUs. Research on the sector was rare in 2002, and much of it was dedicated to defining these institutions or analyzing their efforts to cast off regional labels in favor of greater prestige. Even the foreword of *Operationalizing Stewards of Place* noted that many AASCU institutions had struggled to “develop a coherent, comprehensible, and consistent vision of role and mission” that could counter national trends that too often rendered them as invisible (Dunfee & Vaidya, 2015, p. 2). In just the last five years, scholars have utilized asset-based framings to understand the missions of RPUs and rewrite the sector’s narrative in a way that captures its strengths and contributions (McClure, 2018; Orphan, 2018, 2020). Two edited volumes on regional public universities and broad-access institutions have elaborated on these initial efforts, shedding light on how many AASCU institutions remain committed to their missions, prioritize access and opportunity, and produce astounding outcomes despite chronic underfunding and deficit-based perspectives (Crisp et al., 2022; McClure et al., 2020).

When *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place* was written in 2002, the concepts of anchor institutions, community development, and geography of opportunity were not commonly used in research and reporting on post-secondary education. Recommitting to stewardship of place provides an opportunity to draw from these concepts. Anchor institutions are “locally embedded institutions, typically non-governmental public sector, cultural or other civic organizations, that are of significant importance to the economy and wider community” (Goddard et al., 2014, p. 307). Although companies may close or relocate in pursuit of tax breaks or greater profits, anchor



# Recommitting to Stewardship of Place for New Era

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institutions are heavily invested in a place and unlikely to move. They tend to be health care facilities and educational institutions, sometimes referred to using the shorthand “meds and eds” (Fulbright-Anderson et al., 2001; Serang et al., 2013). Researchers note that these organizations are not automatically anointed as anchor institutions—they must cultivate the anchor institution mission and exhibit values of democracy, equity, and social justice as they do so (Harkavy et al., 2009).

Orphan and McClure (2019) argued that RPUs can embrace their role as anchor institutions by investing in community capitals. The community capitals framework posits that all communities have assets, and when these assets receive investment, they become forms of capital that help communities grow and prosper (Flora et al., 2015). Community capitals include cultural capital, such as a performing arts center, and political capital, such as having a special relationship with a state legislator. By contrast, if assets are neglected or allowed to deteriorate, it can lead to periods of decline, or “spiral-downs” (Emery et al., 2006; Emery & Flora, 2006). The community capitals framework was developed explicitly with rural communities in mind, and recent analyses have empirically demonstrated how regional, broad-access colleges and

universities aid in rural community development as anchor institutions (McClure et al., 2021).

The contributions of RPUs in rural communities have been elevated, in part, because of research showing the existence of postsecondary education “deserts.” According to some estimates, two in three undergraduates—including students attending community colleges—pursue postsecondary education within 25 miles of their home (Hillman, 2019). Roughly 36% of AASCU institutions are located in nonmetro areas, which demonstrates their contributions to rural communities. Some observers assume that every person has a college or university in their community, but analyses have demonstrated the existence of places where there are few, if any, accessible college options within a reasonable commuting distance. What this means is that postsecondary opportunity is geographically contingent, and for some students, the existence of an accessible institution near their home is the main consideration influencing their decision to pursue college. Many AASCU institutions play an important role in serving communities where postsecondary options may be scarce and people are unable to travel long distances for college.

As previously noted, there has always been a tight bond between stewardship of place and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement

# Recommitting to Stewardship of Place for New Era



Black Hills State University (SD)

of Teaching's Elective Classification for Community Engagement. The Carnegie definition of community engagement closely resembles how the original guide defined public engagement, calling it "the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial creation and exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" (p. 2). The elective classification is described as a benchmarking tool, and the designation is based largely on descriptive information that institutions submit. Rather than creating a hierarchy, the classification is designed to help institutions share their unique approaches to community engagement and

evaluate various processes against standards of best practice. For many AASCU institutions, seeking the elective classification was a natural response to the charge of stepping forward as stewards of place.

The philosophy of stewardship of place can take inspiration from this powerful new language and evidence that has been applied to understand the role of postsecondary education in strengthening society. These concepts both illuminate stewardship of place, but also suggest ways in which it can be expanded to encapsulate the full range of mutually beneficial contributions and connections tying AASCU institutions and their communities together. █



# Principles of Stewardship of Place

Alcorn State University (MS)

**D**rawing upon new research relevant to AASCU institutions and prior *Stewards of Place* reports and in consultation with the Stewardship of Place task force, we identified the following principles and values to which institutions can recommit in pursuit of stewardship of place for the next two decades and beyond: connection to place, reciprocity, symbiotic and synergistic relationships, adaptability, diversity of approaches, civic engagement, upward mobility and opportunity, and institutional intentionality. Each is discussed in turn.

## Connection to Place

“Connection to place is in the DNA of most RPUs and essential for stewardship of place.”

AASCU institutions recommitting to stewardship of place are deeply connected to place—the geographic and cultural sites where they are located and where they serve. Connection to place is in the DNA of most RPUs and essential for stewardship of place. Most RPUs were founded to serve specific regions and communities and foster localized postsecondary access, which is why they often have a compass direction (e.g., “northern,” “central,” “western,” “eastern”) in their name. Other RPUs were founded to serve specific towns or cities and have that locality’s name in their name. It is because a community needed a college or university that many AASCU institutions came to be, and these origins call on AASCU institutions to be closely connected to their local places.

Because no two communities face the same issues, RCU leaders are also called on to *know* their regions. Research described herein demonstrates, for example, that rural communities have needs that are distinct from those of urban communities (Orphan & McClure, 2019). With this variation also comes variation in the demographics in the regions AASCU institutions serve. This means understanding how quality of life varies for people depending on racial

# Principles of Stewardship of Place

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identity, income level, disability status, sex, and sexuality. In this way, AASCU institutions must understand and enrich the cultures and communities of their local contexts. Doing so requires institutional understanding that these communities are diverse and contain rich cultural assets even as they may face challenges. As RPUs have evolved, they have also become more comprehensive in their offerings, adding degree programs, community-based research agendas, and public engagement efforts in direct response to changing needs in their local communities (Henderson, 2007; Orphan, 2020). By adding new degrees and certificates, AASCU institutions make themselves attractive to diverse students who are able to obtain jobs within their regions after graduation, which enhances their contributions to upward mobility. In these ways, AASCU institutions exemplify their connection to place.

## Reciprocity

Effective stewardship of place decenters the university and shares power with the community. When the community engagement movement began, the argument leaders often made for campuses to engage their communities was that doing so would improve student learning outcomes (Hartley, 2011). While it is factually true that student learning is improved by serving learning opportunities, this argument was one sided and failed to account for

how communities benefited from such engagement. Student-centered campus/community engagement also failed to account for the experiences of racially diverse students who may share identities or neighborhoods with the communities being served (Mitchell, 2008). As a result, campus/community engagement was too often one sided, with community needs, interests, assets, and desires subsumed under that of the campus's desired student learning outcomes.

Progress has been made in infusing reciprocity into campus/community relationships. The first *Stewards of Place* report argued for reciprocal engagement with communities, which is in part why many AASCU institutions have been on the leading edge of this important work. Reciprocity exists when institutional self-interests and public interests are balanced in public engagement work. When local challenges and opportunities arise, stewards of place partner reciprocally with community leaders. This means avoiding the urge to center university expertise in public engagement but instead facilitating the mutual exchange of resources—intellectual, relational, financial, and otherwise. In doing so, AASCU institutions are called on to listen and be responsive to community voice, particularly those voices within communities that have been marginalized.

“Symbiosis is a recognition that the fates of the campus and community are closely connected.”

Of particular importance to developing reciprocal relationships with the local community is acknowledging that the language campus officials use to describe public engagement may be different from the language used by people in the broader community. Campus leaders are invited to develop shared languages with community leaders and learn the languages of community members. Listening to community voices additionally entails maintaining multiple communication channels between the campus and community so that community members can share their thoughts, ideas, and criticisms with the university. By fostering reciprocity, stewards of place may work collaboratively and effectively with community leaders to address pressing regional issues.

## Symbiosis and Synergy

The principle of reciprocity is closely connected to those of symbiosis and synergy. Symbiosis exists when two or more organisms that exist in close proximity to one another support one another’s survival by providing mutual benefit. Where reciprocity is about campuses and communities sharing power, language, and decision-making authority, symbiosis is a recognition that the fates of the campus and community are closely connected. *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place* acknowledged the shared

fates of regions and AASCU institutions, and notions of symbiosis and synergy build on the original report’s assertions.

When symbiosis exists between a campus and its community, synergistic opportunities arise that allow both entities to exponentially build on and improve existing public engagement efforts. Indeed, symbiosis supports deep and effective collaboration across organizational types within regions such that a “spiral up” phenomenon might be fostered and public engagement efforts that were previously separate might be linked and strengthened to generate broader regional health.

AASCU institutions striving to strengthen symbiosis and synergy identify fellow stewards of place in their local contexts with which they might partner and create mutual benefit such as K–12 schools, local businesses, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations. As an example, many AASCU institutions partner with local industries to create internships for students. These opportunities often lead to full-time jobs for students after they graduate. The campus benefits from providing robust professional and educational opportunities to students, and industry leaders benefit by having skilled professionals trained specifically for open jobs. This kind of synergy also contributes

# Principles of Stewardship of Place

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to the regional economic prosperity and upward mobility that RPUs are so vital in promoting. Campus leaders embodying the principle of symbiosis and synergy understand that what is good for the community is good for the campus, and vice versa, and, as such, seek to establish two-way interactions that enhance this mutual beneficence and support synergistic work.

## Adaptability

RPUs have long exhibited adaptability as a tool for survival and a principle guiding the enactment of the stewards of place mission (Henderson, 2007).

One reason for this adaptability is that AASCU institutions have evolved in tandem with their local contexts, adapting their offerings as new needs arose in their region (Orphan, 2018). Adaptability has also been born from necessity—AASCU institutions have long navigated resource-constrained environments due to unequal funding and, as a result, have had to adapt campus operations in order to advance their missions (McClure & Fryar, 2020).

As described throughout this report, student demographics are rapidly changing, with the share of students of color, low-income students, adult learners, and first-generation students growing. Stewards of place must adapt to the changing needs and strengths of their student bodies and become the campuses that these students

need. Likewise, regional demographics, economic realities, and communities change quickly, and stewards of place must adapt to these changes to continue being the postsecondary institutions that their communities need. At times, adapting means learning new languages, processes, and ways of doing things or establishing new relationships with relevant stakeholders. Adaptability is necessary to foster reciprocity, symbiosis, and synergy because these principles call for power sharing and mutual benefit, which are fluid phenomena that change over time.

## Diversity of Approaches

While RPUs generally share the same mission to foster stewardship of place, the sector is highly diverse, and this diversity exists in multiple realms. For example, some AASCU institutions are in densely populated urban areas whereas others are in rural communities with small populations. Beyond differences in rurality and urbanicity, the local contexts that AASCU institutions exist in are all diverse. The students attending AASCU institutions are also diverse, leading some to obtain MSI status.

This diversity requires that stewards of place advance diverse approaches to public engagement and promote economic prosperity and upward mobility. Different opportunities and challenges within the community will

# Principles of Stewardship of Place

require differentiated approaches to stewardship of place. Likewise, different partners and stakeholders may be better suited to partner with the campus to address various issues that arise. Another important factor shaping the need for a diversity of approaches is the unique histories of various communities that will shape how these communities wish to engage with the university. AASCU institutions balance these needs by advancing a diversity of approaches to enacting their stewardship of place mission.

## Civic Engagement

Stewards of place are focused on how their public engagement efforts support civic engagement within their local contexts. As described, the country faces threats to civil

society, and public institutions such as colleges and universities must be stewards of civic life and anchor convenors of consequential political debates for their communities. Stewards of place consider how their public engagement activities strengthen democracy and the broader republic in a variety of ways including protecting free, fair, and transparent elections; fostering robust public debate and dialogue; and encouraging shared governance. Indeed, the vast majority of students attending RPUs come from the local community and will graduate and become its civic leadership. Attending to students' professional and civic development ensures they will be effective leaders of their communities.

## Upward Mobility and Opportunity

It is equally important that stewards of place recognize their role in fostering opportunity or all kinds within their regions. Stewards of place support opportunity by their status as accessible educational institutions (Crisp et al., 2022). AASCU institutions promote upward mobility by being an open door to community members seeking higher learning. Stewards of place promote upward mobility by being connected to place and fostering local postsecondary access.

Stewards of place also attend to the broader opportunity available in their



Indiana State University

# Principles of Stewardship of Place

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local contexts by supporting economic and workforce development. One way in which AASCU institutions promote opportunity in their regions is by supporting intergenerational education and upward mobility. Stewards of place recognize that in many cases, when a student goes to college, their entire family is involved and should be invited to shape their student's educational journey. In doing so, AASCU institutions promote upward mobility and opportunity for individual students and their entire families. AASCU institutions are also called on to identify and address systems of oppression that may exist within their communities.

## **Institutional Intentionality**

Finally, and most significantly, stewards of place must be intentional in how they engage their communities. *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place* and its sequels acknowledged the importance of a coordinated, institutional response that intentionally embodied this mission. Institutional intentionality entails aligning the core operations and culture of a campus with the principles described herein. When institutional intentionality is present, an AASCU institution uses the

principles of stewardship of place as a guide for responding to new opportunities and challenges and communicating with campus representatives and external stakeholders. As described in *Operationalizing Stewardship of Place*, institutional intentionality entails aligning policies, procedures, and programs with the spirit of stewardship of place such that the day-to-day activities of a campus support this mission.

Institutional intentionality also reshapes a campus culture so that the taken-for-granted assumptions and values of the institution embody the principles of stewardship of place. Culture change involves considering how the socialization processes for faculty, staff, administrators, and students convey the values and principles of stewardship of place. In a study of three AASCU institutions working to institutionalize public engagement commitments, Orphan and Hartley (2021) found that those that promoted cultural change were most successful. Thus, institutional intentionality ensures that stewardship of place is woven throughout the culture, processes, and policies of an institution. ■





# Looking to the Future

University of Central Missouri

**A**s we look to the future, it is important to acknowledge both the headwinds that present challenges and tailwinds that support AASCU institutions in achieving a stewardship of place mission. One challenge of paramount importance is the declining funding RPU's have at their disposal with which to enact their stewardship of place missions. Public trust in higher education is waning, which places the onus on postsecondary institutions to demonstrate their value and contributions and advance a stewardship of place mission. American society has long contained forces of anti-intellectualism and political polarization, which threaten the quality and spirit of public debate and action toward civic ends. For their part, some state policymakers are seeking greater influence over areas of campus life such as curricula and hiring decisions and other policymakers are threatening the funding of public institutions should they act in ways contrary to their ideological beliefs. These forces threaten one of the most cherished principles of academic culture—that of shared governance that asserts the right of diverse stakeholders on campuses to weigh in on consequential decisions of the day.

Despite these challenges, societies require strong public institutions that support civic life, upward mobility, and opportunity; and economies need postsecondary institutions aligned with regional needs for workforce and economic development. AASCU institutions are well positioned to foster healthy civic life, facilitate upward mobility, and strengthen regional economies when they act as stewards of place.

Those campuses that foster reciprocal, symbiotic, and synergistic engagement with their communities, and that are adaptable and recognize their responsibility to civic life and fostering upward mobility will be best equipped to navigate these risks. It will be particularly important for AASCU institutions to position themselves as laboratories of civic engagement. By serving as anchor conve-

# Looking to the Future



Western Kentucky University

nors, inculcating civic skills within students, and claiming and leveraging their status as *public* institutions in the democratic sense of the word, AASCU institutions will live into the stewardship of place mission in ways that serve democracy and strengthen local economies. College campuses can also be anchor convenors for balanced public debate or contested spaces of political conflict.

The 20 years since *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place* have demonstrated that while the future is impossible to predict, it is important to prepare for. AASCU institutions will continue to confront crises and challenges that will threaten to pull focus from their crucial work of stewardship of place. Some of the challenges can be anticipated, including enrollment changes, resource-constrained environments, and climate change. Other challenges cannot be predicted even as they must be faced. Given this uncertainty and

risk, the question becomes: How will AASCU institutions strengthen and advance their stewardship of place missions, come what may?

Visionary leaders know that challenges can be opportunities to deepen an institution's commitment to its values and the people and communities it serves. AASCU institutions demonstrate their indispensable value by the students they educate, the upward mobility they foster, the communities they serve, the regional economic prosperity they generate, and the example they provide of what stewardship of place can and should look like. This work is intentional and encourages leaders to choose day in and day out to be the college their students and communities need. These leaders must exercise creativity and nimbleness in responding to challenges and opportunities that arise even as they find innovative ways to center the values and principles undergirding stewardship of place. Doing so will mean using stewardship of place as a framework for responding to challenges as they arise and a lens through which to view and enact their campus's mission. The work of recommitting to stewardship of place will thus never be done nor will it always be easy. But now and into the future, recommitting to stewardship of place will be essential for creating and sustaining thriving communities. ■



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