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# Funding Stewardship of Place:

Public Policies to Advance the  
Regional Stewardship Mission

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University of Central Oklahoma

- An estimated 53% of bachelor's-degree-seeking students at public four-year institutions attend one of 517 regional public universities (RPUs).
- RPUs are postsecondary institutions known for keeping student access and success and regional well-being at the heart of their mission. They outperform other types of institutions on measures of upward economic mobility, helping millions achieve the American Dream.
- Since their founding, RPUs have prioritized stewardship of place, or activities to enhance the regions and communities they serve, including supporting economic development; promoting civic engagement; and contributing to the training of nurses, educators, and public safety officers.
- Fully harnessing the potential of RPUs as engines of economic, social, and civic prosperity for students, families, and diverse communities requires public policy support and dedicated funding.
- This policy brief describes four public policy priorities to support and fund stewardship of place, the most important of which is a permanent federal-state matching grant program for regional stewardship.



# Introduction

State University of New York College at Oneonta

**S**tewardship of place refers to the public engagement activities and approaches colleges and universities enact to enhance the regions and communities they serve.

As a philosophy of institutional purpose, stewardship of place includes forging deep ties to the region where colleges and universities are located, being responsive to communities' needs and voices, and fostering economic opportunity by developing the local workforce, and propelling the upward mobility of students and families. As a set of practices, stewardship of place includes supporting regional economic development, promoting civic engagement, and contributing to the training of nurses, educators, counselors, public safety officers, and many other professions.

A group of colleges and universities known as regional public universities (RPUs) has been uniquely committed to stewardship of place throughout their histories. As state-supported institutions, RPUs pursue a mission characterized by fostering postsecondary access, student-centeredness, and regional well-being (Orphan, 2018). There are 517 RPUs in the United States, educating roughly 5 million students, or nearly 57% of baccalaureate-seeking students nationwide. RPUs educate the “new majority” of college students—those who are low-income, the first in their family to attend college, working adults, and/or students of color. Because of their commitment to regional stewardship, RPUs have been described as “anchor institutions” in their communities (Orphan & McClure, 2022). All states but one (Wyoming) have an RPU, providing residents with an affordable,

high-quality postsecondary educational opportunity that is aligned with regional workforce needs.

RPUs are engines of opportunity, upward mobility, and economic prosperity for students, families, and communities. They help deliver the American Dream whose vitality is necessary to maintain the workforce and help communities adapt to new economic realities. RPUs need targeted investment to fully realize their regional contributions. If regional stewardship is to continue as a sustained part of RPUs' mission, it must have strong public policy support and funding at the state and federal level. Public policy support would pay significant

dividends, particularly at the state and regional level, by addressing such vital challenges as strengthening our democracy through civic engagement; increasing the number of nurses, educators, and other professions; and supporting regional economic development, entrepreneurship, and the workforce needed to achieve it.

This policy brief describes four public policy priorities that align with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' (AASCU) 2023 Public Policy Agenda and will help RPUs reinvigorate and sustain stewardship of place for the benefits of students, families, communities, and our nation.



University of Maine at Fort Kent

## Public Policies and Funding to Support Stewardship of Place

1. Establish a federal-state partnering grant program for regional stewardship.
2. Harness RPUs to advance state and regional economic development and workforce programs.
3. Support programs that promote civic engagement and public service.
4. Include RPUs in federal infrastructure funding opportunities.



# A Smart Investment: The Value of RPUs

The University of North Texas at Dallas

**W**hat makes the regional stewardship of RPUs a smart public investment? Millions of Americans and the communities in which they live depend on RPUs. Data show that RPUs provide distinctive value, not just for the students they serve, but also for the communities and people whose lives are made better by their public engagement activities.

## Serving the new majority of college students.

RPUs educate an estimated 63% of Black or African American students, 44% of American Indian or Alaska Native students, 46% of Asian American students, 39% of Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students, 50% of Hispanic or Latino students, and 51% of multiracial students attending four-year public institutions. They also play an important role in educating first-generation college students and students receiving Pell Grants; on average, 37% of RPU students are Pell Grant recipients (Orphan et al., 2022).

## Enhancing regional economic vitality.

Upward of 86% of students attending RPUs come from within 50 miles of campus (Hillman et al., 2021). And graduates of RPUs often stay within these

RPUs tailor the creation of academic programs to the needs of the local workforce and help attract new industries to regions.

regions after graduation and enter in-demand fields. Some of the top majors at RPUs are education, health professions, business, and public safety (McClure et al., 2021). RPUs also tailor the creation of academic programs to the needs of the local workforce and help attract new industries to regions. The presence of an RPU in a community has been found to offset the negative effects of recessions and manufacturing decline (Howard et al., 2022; Maxim & Muro, 2020).

## Contributing to upward mobility.

RPUs perform well on most of the major efforts to measure the contributions of colleges and universities to upward mobility. The top 10 institutions on Third Way's Economic Mobility Index are RPUs (Itzkowitz, 2022). In the American Enterprise Institute's analysis of upward mobility, using 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 (de Alva, 2019). Nearly all of the top 50 institutions in the Opportunity Insights mobility report cards were RPUs (Chetty et al., 2017).

## Doing more with less.

Research indicates that RPUs demonstrate a high level of cost efficiency and can only produce more graduates with additional resources (Titus et al., 2016). They charge lower tuition and fees to students compared with other four-year institutions. At the same time, RPUs receive, on average, over \$1,000 less per student in state funding compared with other four-year public institutions. They also have smaller endowments and receive significantly less federal funding (Orphan et al., 2022).



# Public Policies and Funding to Support Stewards of Place

University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire

**S**tewardship of place is a recognition of the interconnected fortunes of anchor institutions such as RPUs and their communities. As Maxim and Muro (2021) argued, “anchor institutions [such as higher education institutions] can be important assets for supporting local job creation, housing, and other forms of economic and community development” (p. 5). However, the regional stewardship mission does not happen by accident. It takes ongoing, intentional effort. And it requires resources. To this end, we propose four public policy priorities to reinvigorate and sustain RPUs’ contributions to opportunity, economic development, and upward mobility.

## **1** Establish a federal-state partnering grant program for regional stewardship.

We propose the creation of a regional stewardship grant program that leverages federal funding and requires a partnering contribution from states. This investment from the state must not reduce appropriations to participating public colleges and universities for access, enrollment, operations, or financial aid. The partnering grant would incentivize maintenance of state support for regional stewardship, especially during periods of

economic recession, and it would promote state investment in public higher education during periods of economic expansion. We propose RPUs apply for grants based on specific regional stewardship projects. Although we envision this as a competitive grant, we propose a simplified application process and the creation of resources to assist institutions, given their capacity for applying for competitive federal grants.

## **2** Harness RPUs to advance state and regional economic development and workforce programs.

The federal government and states must play an essential role in supporting institutional efforts to advance national and state priorities related to civic engagement and democracy, economic and workforce development, and innovation and entrepreneurship. The nation’s economic competitiveness, security, and prosperity largely depend on how well colleges prepare citizens for a knowledge-based economy. RPUs, as stewards of place, are best positioned to engage their community and their surrounding regions to strengthen and align academic programs and research opportunities for students to meet those priorities. We see promise in creating a special allocation or repurposing funds within federal agencies such as the U.S.



**RPUs serve as hubs for nonpartisan and applied research for student learning and engagement in democracy.**

Department of Agriculture, Department of Defense, the Economic Development Administration, and Department of Energy, as well as existing programs through the National Science Foundation and National Institutes of Health, to specifically support the regional economic development efforts of RPUs. For example, we support appropriations like the Rural Development Grants programs that encourage partnerships between rural RPUs and local entities that lead to greater access to college for rural high school students, increase the number of adults in rural communities with a postsecondary degree or credential, enhance training opportunities, and stimulate technological innovation. We propose augmenting programs that promote the recruitment of traditionally underrepresented students into science, technology, engineering, and mathematics programs and meaningfully engage students in research that meets the nation's need for innovation in health care, energy, and national security.

### **3** Support programs that promote civic engagement and public service.

RPUs seek to embed learning opportunities that prepare students to be the informed, engaged citizens our communities need. As such, RPUs serve as hubs for nonpartisan and applied research for student learning and engagement in democracy. States and institutions should facilitate college students'

ability to vote to foster a lifelong commitment to engaging in the policy process at the local, state, and federal level.

### **4** Include RPUs in federal infrastructure funding opportunities.

RPUs are the product of decades of public investment to serve the American people and our nation. As such, we propose that RPUs be viewed as an indispensable asset that must be protected, maintained, and updated. One avenue for this investment is a joint proposal involving AASCU, the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities to encourage Congress to expand new infrastructure funding to all public four-year colleges and universities. The foundation of the proposal is adapted and modified language from the former Construction, Reconstruction, and Renovation of Academic Facilities title of the 1986 Higher Education Act Reauthorization. The proposal focuses the funding to those institutions who serve high populations of low-income students, as defined by Pell Grant eligibility. This funding could focus on educational facilities, and we again propose a state matching component to ensure that federal funding spurs maintenance of effort on the part of states.



# Conclusion

University of Southern Mississippi

**F**unding the regional stewardship mission of RPU is an investment in America's future. With additional resources dedicated to stewardship of place, RPU can fully leverage and harness their intellectual and infrastructural assets to prepare civically engaged citizens, train workers in response to critical workforce needs, and advance the economic and social vitality and resilience of communities.



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**Unless otherwise noted with a citation, statistics about regional public universities in this policy brief are based on AASCU analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) 2020–21 institutional characteristics, 12-month enrollment, completions, graduation rates, and outcome measures data files.**



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