The best of these ecosystems will be cities and towns that combine a university, an educated populace, a dynamic business community and the fastest broadband connections on earth. These will be the job factories of the future. The countries that thrive will be those that build more of these towns that make possible 'high-performance knowledge exchange and generation,' explains Blair Levin, who runs the Aspen Institute’s Gig.U project, a consortium of 37 university communities working to promote private investment in next-generation ecosystems.

Historians have noted that economic clusters always required access to abundant strategic inputs for success, says Levin. In the 1800s, it was access to abundant flowing water and raw materials. In the 1900s, it was access to abundant electricity and transportation. In the 2000s, he said, 'it will be access to abundant bandwidth and abundant human intellectual capital,' — places like Silicon Valley, Austin, Boulder, Cambridge and Ann Arbor.


Becoming a Steward of Place:
Critical Areas of Focus for Institutions Wanting to Operationalize Stewardship

Introduction

Few years go by without some publication predicting the imminent demise of higher education as we know it. In reality, U.S. universities and colleges have shown tremendous resilience and, in spite of accusations to the contrary, great adaptability. Nonetheless, even the most optimistic of observers has to admit that the current array of pressures and challenges is truly daunting. State budget cuts are nothing new, but never before has the prospect for a significant rebound in state funding seemed so dim. The option of offsetting these cuts with tuition increases is severely constrained both because of stagnant family incomes, as well as because of severe anxiety about student debt. While economists and statisticians may point out that the economic returns to a higher education degree are higher than ever, and that the data on student debt are greatly skewed by the dismal performance of for-profit institutions, state legislators and the general public are in no mood to tolerate tuition increases. On top of that, the very value of the education offered at colleges and universities is under severe attack, both in regard to whether students actually learn anything much or simply get credentialed, and in terms of whether the country really needs all these college-educated workers. Isn’t technical and practical
training what’s really needed? And finally, can’t most education be offered in an online format by a few efficient mass providers, using the best presenters and pedagogies, reducing the need for campuses and classrooms?

In this climate, what is a president or chancellor to do? Can anyone really expect colleges and universities to be “stewards of place” anymore? Isn’t it reasonable to argue that we should cut all extraneous activities and stick to a core mission of providing an education to the students, without worrying about the well-being of our locale? When governors call for a $10,000 degree, aren’t partnerships a luxury?

Frankly, some institutions may have no choice. For those without a strong brand or clear niche, and without a somewhat captive, local clientele, it may well be that distance education, cost cutting pressures, and the general climate of distrust will prove fatal, or severely curtail the scope of their activities.

However, those who have a strong brand or niche, or a clear local market, will survive. Obviously, the prestigious schools, both the private ones and most flagship and land-grant institutions, will continue to do well, because there is enough market demand to sustain them. But the other group that should do well are those who have clearly positioned themselves as stewards of place. These are institutions that are deeply connected to specific places or regions and therefore are clearly visible there, have strong connections to employers and communities, and are seen as places that provide support and opportunity for students who may not fare so well in larger, anonymous settings. The road to success for these institutions will not be a withdrawal from local connections, but instead a strengthening of their role as deeply engaged local partners with business, school districts, governmental agencies, social service and community organizations.
This publication therefore seeks to provide further assistance to institutional leadership to expand and deepen their relations with the local or regional community in these perilous times. Since the AASCU report on this topic over ten years ago, much has been learned about being a steward of place, while external conditions have not become any easier. In 2002, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) Task Force on Public Engagement, in a report entitled “Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place,” argued that the regional, comprehensive universities that form the membership of AASCU have a unique role and relationship with their community and region. The Task Force suggested that AASCU institutions, because of their connections and relationships with their local community and region, the makeup of their student body, and their sense of identity and purpose, have a unique role as “Stewards of Place.”

The “Stepping Forward” monograph explicitly built on the work of a previous publication, Returning to our Roots: The Engaged Institution, published by the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges in 1999. The Kellogg Commission report essentially argued that public universities in the United States had failed to connect deeply with their communities, and that they were increasingly out of touch and out of date, failing to address contemporary problems of American life. The Kellogg report created a seven-part test to define engaged institutions, including responsiveness, respect for partners, academic neutrality, accessibility, integration, coordination, and resource partnerships.

In the context of the Kellogg report, the “Stepping Forward” document was seen by its authors as an attempt to create “a practical and strategic guide for state college and university leaders who want to more deeply embed public engagement in the fabric of their institutions at the campus, college, and departmental levels.” Four years before the first voluntary Carnegie
Classification on Community Engagement, the report was prophetic about the growing importance of universities building relationships with their surrounding region. Yet we would suggest, the document did far more. It was clearly an AASCU-focused report. All of the references, the institutions that were surveyed, and the participants on the Task Force, came from AASCU institutions. What made the report notable was the phrase “Stewards of Place,” a phrase not found in the earlier Kellogg report. It was a phrase that for many captured the unique role of AASCU institutions.

The phrase “Stewards of Place” reflects the unique relationship that AASCU institutions have with their communities and regions. AASCU institutions, to a greater extent than traditional research universities, have substantial greater linkages and connections with their communities and region. Part of that linkage is a commonplace focus within AASCU institutions on applied rather than basic research, which by definition often involves local and regional participants. Portland State University, for example, has as its mission statement: “Let knowledge serve the city.” The student body at AASCU institutions is also different than that of research universities. Despite some international students and students from farther away, the vast majority of students attending AASCU institutions come from nearby, usually less than 100 miles away. Finally, AASCU institutions tend to think of themselves differently than traditional research universities. First, they often think of themselves in regional ways. Many, for example, have names that are either local cities (e.g. St. Cloud State, Fort Hays State, etc.) or the name of the state and a compass reference (e.g. Western Kentucky, Northern Illinois, Eastern Connecticut). They also have more of a focus on teaching and service, and less focus on research. And often, their definition of research is broader, allowing a wider array of activities, some of which are local and regional projects, to count as research.
The publication of the monograph “Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place” and the use particularly of the phrase “Stewards of Place” clearly captured the imagination of a wide audience. Individual institutions and universities systems began to use the phrase in every conceivable manner: in annual meetings, in speeches, on webpages, in descriptions of activities, and in new initiatives. The phrase found itself being used in speeches before statewide conferences, in arguments made about giving to the university, in distinguished lecture series, in general education, in entrepreneurship, in a White House conference, and in an array of other settings. The phrase even was used in Europe in an OECD meeting and in a Talloires conference (for a simple list of examples, see the Stewards of Place bibliography at the end of this monograph).

The “Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place” monograph was set in the larger context of a moment in the history of American higher education when many scholars and commentators were talking about public engagement and new ways of thinking about the role of institutions in their relationship to the larger society. By 2006, the Carnegie Foundation created the first voluntary classification on Community Engagement. That was be followed by another round of Engagement classifications in 2008 and 2010, with another planned for 2015. A new organization, the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities, was formed in 2004 to distinguish the role of large urban research universities from land grant institutions, and to advocate for significant federal funding to enhance their role. A few years later the Anchor Institutions Task Force was created with support from private foundations to provide intellectual backing for the increased local involvement of public as well as private institutions. The much older Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities continued through its journal, annual conference, and regional conversations to share best practice in this area. Much of the language of public
engagement, however, made few if any distinctions between the roles of various kinds of institutions. In sorting through the calls for public engagement, the AASCU Task Force, and especially its use of the phrase “Stewards of Place,” particularized the role of AASCU institutions with their communities and regions.

The Task Force report also provided presidents, chancellors, and other senior leaders with a series of very specific suggestions for how to engage in the stewardship of place. The report defined public engagement: “The publicly engaged institution is fully committed to direct, two-way interaction with communities and other external constituencies through the development, exchange, and application of knowledge, information, and expertise for mutual benefit.”

The Task Force report also provided a comprehensive set of rationales for the importance of public engagement. The report argued that embracing public engagement as a core value provides explicit benefits for multiple parties, including the community and regional entities, students, faculty, and the college or university. Equally important, the report provided a number of detailed strategies for how to create an institution as a steward of place. The report detailed a comprehensive approach to thinking about stewardship, including considering professional development activities, courses, extracurricular activities, and organizational structures. Detailed descriptions of strategies to increase the focus on stewardship primarily focused on alignment of institutional strategies, organization, and activities. The report concluded with a comprehensive set of recommendations for public policymakers, for presidents and chancellors, and for AASCU.

Yet despite the enormous strength and critical insights contained in “Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place,” and particularly the unique contribution of a term, Stewards of Place, with singular power to describe AASCU institutions, there was also a notable absence. The report
provided no guidance to presidents or chancellors about critical areas of focus in the stewardship of place. The report was primarily an effort to offer the conceptualization of stewardship for institutions and their leaders, and then provide a series of substantive recommendations about how to engage in stewardship work through institutional alignment and presidential leadership. But one of the key things that has been learned over the past decade is that leadership and commitment from the top are critical if stewardship and engagement are to succeed. Many faculty will undertake partnership projects on their own. But until this becomes part of the organizational core mission, these efforts will remain dispersed and episodic, tied to individuals. For a president or chancellor thinking about stewardship, and wanting his or her institution to become more deeply engaged in stewardship work, a critical need still exists. Given limited time and limited resources, and the need to make a critical impact in the stewardship work that an institution engages in, where are the critical areas of focus that could be important for institutions to address? And given the current economic and political climate that is so challenging to higher education, how does one create a more visible role as steward of place? This new monograph, Becoming a Steward of Place: An Operational Guide for Institutional Leaders, is viewed as a companion document to the original Stewards of Place monograph. This new report augments the original stewardship report by suggesting to institutional leaders four key areas for institutional consideration in the development of a publicly engaged institution, committed to the stewardship of place: civic learning, work with P-12 schools, economic development, and internationalization. Each of these topics represents a very rich and productive area of focus for AASCU institutions committed to making a difference as stewards of place. Each of the areas of focus have been explored and elaborated by both AASCU initiatives and member institutions in the decade since the publication of “Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place.”
For example, in the area of civic engagement, much of the current understanding of civic learning grows out of the work of the American Democracy Project, a civic engagement initiative that AASCU created in 2003 in partnership with The New York Times. That initiative, involving more than 240 AASCU institutions, has experimented with and tested a variety of civic outcomes and areas. In a world where a college education has increasingly become seen as a "private good," and where questions are asked about what is public about public institutions, the focus on preparing our graduates to be informed, engaged citizens provides a clear illustration of the public nature of our work. Given the lamentable state of our democracy, filled with partisan discord and a Congress that seems barely capable of functioning, and the seeming inability of our national leaders to confront and solve major challenges, the imperative to create a new cadre of citizens to protect and strengthen our democracy has never been greater. This monograph will suggest some of the most powerful ways for AASCU institutions to be stewards of civic engagement, drawing lessons from the array of initiatives, programs, and activities of the past 9 years in the American Democracy Project.

Work with P-12 schools has been an ongoing area of focus for AASCU institutions. Many of our schools began as normal schools, and that long and proud history continues to express itself, particularly as a focus on teacher education. Yet increasingly, AASCU institutions see their work not only through the narrow focus of teacher preparation but as collaboration with the P-12 schools. Inevitably, our institutions and the P-12 schools are locked in an inseparable relationship of mutuality. Their outputs are our inputs, and our outputs are their inputs. Many AASCU institutions have grown to realize that working with the P-12 schools is aptly described in the expression "doing well by doing good." These institutions recognize that working with the P-12 schools is in fact self-interest; better P-12 schools produce more college-ready students.
Acting on this understanding, the Office of Teacher Education recently supported a presidential Task Force on College Readiness which explored ways that universities can create partnerships with P-12 schools to help all students succeed and at the same time be college ready. We will draw on insights from the work of this Task Force and its final report to suggest the most effective ways that AASCU institutions can become stewards of the P-12 schools.

Most of the focus on economic development has been created through the work of the Grants Resource Center (GRC), an AASCU-sponsored membership organization that focuses on sponsored research. The Grants Resource Center, surveying the sponsored projects being undertaken by AASCU institutions, coupled with the rapidly-changing focus of the federal government, suggests that there are unique opportunities for AASCU institutions to focus their research locally, often using applied research to address local and regional issues. We will use the work of the Grants Resource Center over the past 10 years to provide some suggestions for the most powerful and productive ways that campuses can be both nationally competitive and locally focused.

Finally, insights in the area of internationalization have come from both the AASCU Office of International Education and from several of our member campuses. AASCU colleges and universities are in a unique position to help their respective communities and regions understand the newly globalizing world, bridging the gap between an economy that is regionally based but globally connected. AASCU institutions can serve as "connectors" between local businesses and international opportunities. They can provide language and culture training, as well as the developers of trade missions and cultural exchanges.

Clearly stewardship can take many forms and address a variety of community and regional issues. Most AASCU institutions are well-equipped to play a stewardship role by a
clearly-defined focus on one or more of the four issues we have identified as both critical to communities and capable of being addressed by institutions. However, there are many other possible areas of focus as well. Depending on institutional strengths and local characteristics, universities and colleges may pursue very productive relationships around such issues as sustainability; community health; affordable housing; public safety; or arts and cultural activities. Indeed, as we become better at creating and sustaining partnerships, and this work becomes a standard part of our teaching and research, opportunities for expansion will naturally occur. At its best, our role as stewards of place will grow and change over time; if all goes well, another report in this series will be appropriate in the future!