

Operationalizing Stewardship

Given the many challenges they face, especially around finances, can universities still afford to be “stewards of place”? Many would argue that they can’t afford not to. And there may be no better time for universities to hone the ways they operationalize their approach to stewardship.

By Stephen G. Pelletier

The principles of stewardship are well known among AASCU universities. They hinge on the premise that public universities should, can and do add significant value to their communities—through contributions, for example, to regional culture, schools, economic and workforce development, and diversity. Stewardship activities tangibly demonstrate the intrinsic value that public universities provide as anchors of their communities. Stewardship provides the context through which universities help enrich and sustain the vibrancy of their communities.

As universities deliver value through stewardship activities, they also *gain* value. For many institutions, stewardship constitutes a defining component of institutional success. Indeed, a strong case can be made that good practice in stewardship can help an institution distinguish itself in a competitive marketplace.

George L. Mehaffy, AASCU’s vice president for academic leadership and change, goes even a step further. He believes that being an effective steward of place is “both a survival strategy and thriving strategy” for public universities.

Mehaffy suggests that, in tough times, the practice of stewardship can help a university frame a path to success. Stewardship can infuse faculty, students and other stakeholders with energy and enthusiasm that can help an institution thrive. Through collaborations in the community, universities can better understand and help address community needs. Lessons gained

Becoming a Steward of Place: A Guide for Institutional Leaders will be published in early spring and will be available for purchase through www.aascu.org.

through stewardship enrich classroom learning and, often, the university curriculum. Students engaged in stewardship learn to think creatively in real-life situations.

Mehaffy argues that effective practice of stewardship helps define and distinguish strong universities. More broadly, he also suggests that stewardship done well can help improve the public's currently clouded perceptions about higher education.

Similar themes resonate throughout AASCU's latest book on stewardship, *Becoming a Steward of Place: A Guide for Institutional Leaders*. The monograph, a follow-up to AASCU's 2002 effort, *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place*, explores four key areas of stewardship: civic engagement, P-12, economic and workforce development, and internationalization.

As framed by one of the book's contributors, Wim Wiewel, president of Portland State University (Ore.), institutions that position themselves as stewards of place can draw on stewardship to help them succeed. Wiewel writes that the road to success for institutions that are effective stewards of place is through "a strengthening of their role as deeply engaged local partners." But how can such strengthening take place?

after Wiewel was named president of Portland State, the university articulated five strategic themes, the first of which was a goal to "provide civic leadership through partnerships." That theme helps guide PSU's considerable work with its community.

Similarly, Rita Hartung Cheng, the chancellor of Southern Illinois University, reports that SIU has "embedded our community focus inside our new strategic plan."

Observing that SIU is both a major research institution in the region and "a major service institution," Cheng says the university has an imperative to "make a direct connection to all the challenges facing the region where we do our work" and bring its resources to bear in "stepping up to the expectations that our community has for us."

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Honing Stewardship

There is no manual for operationalizing stewardship, or one way of doing it. But through practice and reflection, a number of institutions have come to recognize some fundamental markers that help stewardship work well and succeed.

Intentionally make stewardship an institutional priority. One difference between institutions that practice stewardship and those that excel at it is that the latter group typically makes stewardship a priority in its mission. For example, shortly

Clarify and articulate how the university defines stewardship.

Within the universe of AASCU institutions, universities define their role in the community in different ways—as stewards of place, for example, or as anchor institutions, urban universities, or engines of economic development. The diversity of approaches enriches the practice of stewardship overall.

One common thread, though, is that institutions that are successful in stewardship usually have developed a narrative that defines that work distinctively in the context of that institution's mission and region. In part, such narratives are important tools for getting stakeholders across the university on the same page in understanding



and supporting the university's goals for stewardship. Cheng says that "framing the internal conversation about fulfilling our [stewardship] mission" helps SIU's faculty and staff become more deeply invested as ambassadors in community engagement.

Articulating a vision for stewardship also helps guide that work. "We need to frame the story not in terms of what the university's doing for the community, but about the university's partnership with the community," Cheng says.

Institutions that excel at stewardship often invest energy in defining a common vocabulary for it at a granular level. Citing different interpretations of the terms "civic engagement" and "community engagement," Paul N. Markham, director of community-based learning and research at the University of Washington Bothell, says that "one thing that's important to know about stewardship is that language does really matter." To avoid confusion and help focus stakeholders on common goals, Markham believes it is imperative for campuses to clarify their own lexicon of terms around stewardship.

Visibly demonstrate a genuine commitment to the community.

When it comes to stewardship, it's not enough to just "talk the talk"—true commitment requires continual campus engagement in the work. "We tell our story by living it," Cheng says. "It is very important for members of the university community to be visible off-campus, working in their communities, and engaged in conversations with community leaders."

John D. Welty, who recently retired after some 22 years at the helm of California State University, Fresno, says that the practice of stewardship meant that "as president, I needed to be out in the community and that our senior leadership and faculty needed to be working with people side-by-side in the community. By our talking about the importance of the university using its human capital to engage with the region, people began to see what that meant and see how important it was that the university moved beyond its own walls in order to share its resources."

Fresno State also worked hard to bring the community to campus, urging people to use the university's library, programs and services. Welty says that "the more we opened the doors to the campus, people also saw that we were committed to trying to engage with the region."

Walking the walk in the practice of stewardship is also important for student learning, suggests Earl H. Potter, III, president of St. Cloud State University. He notes, "A university has to be what it teaches. It's difficult to teach people to be engaged if the university itself is not engaged."

Listen closely to the community.

Another key to success in stewardship is to take pains not to impart wisdom from the ivory tower, but rather to listen closely to what the community needs. Getting genuinely involved with the community is "not coming at it as 'we're going to help you,'" Welty says, "but rather coming at it as 'we're going to join hands with you in order to address issues and problems that exist, whether they be economic development, human services, education, or just general quality of life in the community.'"

"Let the community take the lead," Cheng says. "Listen, and find ways to collect information on the needs of the region and align faculty expertise and programming to those needs, so that you become a true partner." Cheng cautions that the often-imposing size and reputation of a university not overshadow community voices in developing partnerships and regional solutions. "We are

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the largest employer in the region, but we are not about to tell the community what it needs,” she says. “We are there because we are members of a larger community who wish to contribute to the vitality and well-being of the community.

Design a strategic infrastructure.

Given that pockets of stewardship activities are typically strewn across campus, a natural instinct might be that coordinating them in one office would strengthen them. But a counterintuitive approach might in fact be more effective.

Citing offices for service-learning, Markham says that universities have a propensity to create centers and programs. He says that creating an umbrella office is often the instinct with stewardship. But one of the dangers in that approach, he suggests, is that “once those places are set up, that becomes their job and what they do. It therefore is *not* the job of the academic units or the president’s office or the provost’s staff. It ends up just being a thing that fits in a box over on the edge of campus. There’s a real danger of it being marginalized.”

At Fresno State, Welty says, “We went through an evolution of thinking and realized very quickly that just an organizational office is not the solution.” The university “started out doing traditional things—creating centers and institutes that provided technical assistance to manufacturing industries, the education community, and other types of businesses,” he recalls. “But we realized that economic development was only one piece of what needed to happen if you’re going to transform a community and a region. That led us to get more involved in services and with the educational system in the region.”

As part of its strategy, Fresno State developed a more organic approach, encouraging faculty to engage in scholarship that was directly relevant to community needs in central California. Over time, Welty says, “We were able to create a campus culture in which people saw that engaging with the region and the community was a responsibility of the entire university.”

Align community needs and opportunities with institutional resources.

Universities that successfully practice stewardship look for good matches between what the community needs and what resources it can offer to best address those needs. For example, Cheng says that through campus work to help a flood-prone small town mitigate its exposure to flooding, SIU is engaged in an “ongoing partnership with the community” while simultaneously meeting the university’s missions in service-learning and research.

Potter says that when it comes to aligning the needs and opportunities in the community with the assets of the university, “for me the first question is, how do we organize a discovery process that will help us understand the needs of the region?” The process starts with conversations with community leaders, he suggests. “Once you have a sense of the needs, begin to ask your faculty, ‘In what ways are we relevant to these needs? Which of our academic programs has insight into these issues? In what ways can we assist the community in building capacity and competence?’

“The alignment is circular,” Potter says. “You discover a need. You identify your assets. You develop a strategy to engage those assets.” After testing those strategies in the community, he says, the next steps are to iterate processes to hone solutions over several generations.

Build stewardship into the curriculum.

As stewardship confirms its place in the fabric of a university, it increasingly is being integrated into the curriculum. At Portland State, for example, stewardship is reflected in a yearlong interdisciplinary inquiry course for freshmen where topics have a direct relationship to the real world in ways that can be studied in a local context. Similarly, a senior capstone course requires work with a team on a partnership project with

a community organization, business or unit of local government.

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Find ways to measure results.

Perhaps the least refined aspect of operationalizing stewardship is measuring its impact. “We probably don’t do as much on that as we might,” Wiewel says. At one time, Portland State inventoried all of its community partnerships, but maintaining the list proved too great a burden on staff resources. For now, student volunteer hours provide one metric of stewardship effectiveness.

Markham notes, “The piece that’s still not been fleshed out well enough yet is determining what universities bring to community development and community improvement”—separating out, for example, the exact extent to which a university’s work in the community helped create jobs. He says there is a project at the national level to build better data-collection and tracking systems to measure stewardship’s impact on things like a community’s overall health and vitality, and what experts call its “social capital” and “social cohesion.”

Leadership for the task

Delivering on the stewardship mission requires both vision and commitment. It also requires leadership—both in institutional terms and, especially, from university leaders.

John Welty says the president’s role is pivotal. “It’s important, first of all, to create a vision for what stewardship means to a university,” he says. That vision needs to be unique to an institution, Welty says, but it’s up to the president to articulate it.

To ensure that a university’s commitment to its community is visible, Welty suggests that campus leaders need to get involved in community leadership positions and listen to community members. “Once you’ve done that,” he says, “you can begin to work with others to articulate how the university can play the most significant role in terms of stewardship.”

Stewardship is “very much an area where there’s a lot of work yet to be done and a lot of things we have yet to discover about how to do it most effectively,” Welty says. “But the important thing is to assume leadership for taking on the task.” **P**

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