Higher education is never short of challenges, but those of us leading AASCU institutions are finding ourselves with an interesting array of both new and old issues that challenge us to lead effectively.

In an era of almost across-the-board declines in state support for our publicly-purposed institutions, we are tasked with providing an obtainable, high-quality education that is accessible and affordable for all, while at the same time aligning ourselves with the shifting economic needs and new opportunities in the states that we so proudly serve. These issues with state budgets are occurring at the same time as—and perhaps in part because of—a new level of diminished public opinion on the ROI of a four-year baccalaureate education.

Concurrently, the role state colleges and universities (SCUs) fill in providing these needs are often cloudy or obscured; we are not Research 1 schools, nor are we two-year schools that so often serve as the first step for many college students from populations that have been historically underrepresented in higher education. By our very nature, the excellence that SCUs provide is often obscured or unrecognized.

During the course of this past spring and summer, five institutions—the University of Central Oklahoma, Northern Kentucky University, Henderson State University (Ark.), Morgan State University (Md.), and Western Washington University—have been working with AASCU leadership and Sage Communications on a pilot project to get a better understanding of what we collectively stand for; what common threads unite our institutions; and how we can better create a unified message that rings true with both the policymakers and general public about the invaluable roles our institutions play in the educational, social and economic futures of our states. And just as importantly, are the common threads that bind us as AASCU institutions clear and visible for all members to see, and is our mission as member institutions as self-evident as we think it is?

Thankfully, there is strength in numbers in this regard—there has never been a more important time for your voice to be heard within AASCU as we, together, move forward to meet these challenges (and the opportunities they present) head on, as a group.

The current effort of AASCU, working together with Sage Communications, to redefine our focus and understand our collective brand is therefore of utmost importance. We also hope and believe that the results of this pilot will provide concrete suggestions and ideas for your institutions to turn our findings into practical ways to bolster your message and effectiveness in your community, region and state.

So what have we found, in this summer of intense self-evaluation?

We have started by identifying a unifying theme, “Opportunities for All,” to build our messaging around. This is the foundational structure that
everything else in the pilot program is built upon—the understanding that SCUs are working to fulfill America’s promise of making higher education available to anyone willing to work hard to be successful.

Trickling down from this unifying theme are the three core equities that every SCU shares; these equities will be reflected in our messaging whenever possible:

- **High Quality:** SCUs embrace a student-centered focus that emphasizes learning and teaching as a core institutional belief; these students are taught and mentored by a faculty of scholars and have access to a full range of educational opportunities in smaller class sizes that enhances their educational experience.

- **Accessible:** SCUs provide a viable higher education choice for a diverse cross-section of state residents. This includes serving nontraditional students or groups that are underrepresented in our communities. This accessibility allows us to boost campus diversity, build inclusiveness, and better enable our public/private partnerships to succeed.

- **Responsible:** We create the skilled workforces that support the business needs of our states while advancing community development and economic progress. At a time when many states are pondering further cuts to higher education, it cannot be stressed enough that the economic future of each state is heavily dependent on the graduates that will come from our institutions; digging ourselves out of an economic hole is made possible with the help of our graduates, not in spite of them. And as places of public purpose, we prepare students for a life of leadership and service, increasing their opportunities to attain financial security and life fulfillment while reducing the likelihood of burdensome student debt.

Crucial to this discussion isn’t just that we tout Western as having these core equities; we do that every day already. Rather, we will work to raise awareness of the SCUs as a brand concept, making sure our stakeholders and the state’s general populace know the value not just of Western, but of the unique niche that SCUs fill in each and every state, and for our nation.

Is raising awareness of the roles SCUs fill in our states going to be a challenge? Yes, of course. But what an opportunity to promote our effectiveness at growing the next generations of business leaders, teachers, environmental stewards, engineers, scientists, artists and scholars. The sooner we all begin talking the same language—the hoped-for expectation of AASCU’s pilot messaging project—the sooner we will start seeing results.

AASCU, Sage and the participating universities will work over this academic year to assess the impact of the pilot project, and to use the outcomes and takeaways to refine the “Opportunities for All” marketing campaign for all AASCU members nationally. This is an exciting and important opportunity for those of us who are AASCU members, and I look forward to this pilot project becoming a full-scale national initiative.

Bruce Shepard is president of Western Washington University.