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A Call to Action:

Translating the Spirit of
Stewardship of Place Into Practice

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Cecilia M. Orphan

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Stewardship of Place Into Practice

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In partnership with the:
Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC)

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Contents

- 03 | **Introduction**
- 05 | **Foundational Framework: Centering Stakeholders and Community Voices**
- 08 | **Actions Connected to Stewardship of Place**
- 20 | **Sustaining Stewards of Place**
- 22 | **Case Studies of Stewardship in Practice**
- 25 | **References**

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Introduction

Frostburg State University (MD)

R*ecommitting to Stewardship of Place: Creating and Sustaining Thriving Communities for the Decades Ahead* (Orphan & McClure, 2022) elaborates on and articulates the philosophy undergirding the mission of regional public universities (RPUs) as engines of upward mobility, economic prosperity, and well-being for the benefit of students, families, and communities. The report celebrates the 20th anniversary of the original guide, *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place: A Guide for Leading Public Engagement at State Colleges and Universities* (AASCU, 2002), which gave rise to the concept of “stewards of place” and describes key principles that constitute stewardship within a new postsecondary context. Since the beginning of AASCU’s work on the mission of public engagement, there has been careful attention to the “how” of stewardship as much as the “what” and “why.” AASCU has long been dedicated to helping member institutions translate public engagement into action.

Building on this legacy, this brief serves as a practice-oriented companion to *Recommitting to Stewardship of Place*. Whereas the philosophical report provides a set of principles that constitute stewardship in a new postsecondary context (see principles on pg. 4), this practitioner guide provides tangible examples of campus actions that bring this mission to life. Our hope is that this guide inspires campus leaders, faculty, staff, students, and many others to consider how stewardship of place fits within their everyday work as teachers, learners, and institution builders.



Western Connecticut State University

Recommitting to Stewardship of Place

Eight principles comprise the philosophical underpinnings of stewardship of place. By recommitting to these principles, RPUs can identify and refine institutional strategy, convey the contributions and importance of RPUs to policymakers and external audiences, and communicate what makes RPUs unique among postsecondary institutional types.

Connection to Place—Forging deep connections to the geographic and cultural sites where institutions are located and where they serve

Reciprocity—Decentering the university and sharing power with the community by collaborating with local leaders 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, as such, seeking to establish two-way relationships that enhance this 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 RPUs and the communities they serve, requiring 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

Consistent with the principles that make up stewardship of place, this guide offers a foundational framework that emphasizes the importance of identifying relevant stakeholders and responding to community voices. Given that many presidents and chancellors have been deeply involved in the practice of stewardship of place, the guide develops a set of actions based on recommendations and experiences of members of the AASCU Stewards of Place Presidential Task Force and leaders of RPUs as they translate the philosophy into practice. Throughout the guide are examples of practices and initiatives from RPUs, many of which won AASCU's annual Excellence & Innovation Awards in various categories. Additionally, the guide concludes with three detailed case studies of stewardship in practice. The goal is not to exhaustively capture how stewardship manifests in practice given the rich diversity of institutions in AASCU's membership, but rather to share possibilities that inspire action and deepen commitment to this mission.



California State University San Marcos

Foundational Framework: Centering Stakeholders and Community Voices

Translating the philosophy of stewardship of place into action requires incorporating community voices and diverse stakeholders. But what does this mean in practice? Campus leaders should continually foster and strengthen relationships, and anyone engaged in the practice of stewardship of place must educate themselves on an ongoing basis about communities, while adapting approaches as needed.

Sharing Power

A vital starting point for campus leaders, faculty members, staff, and students is to **review the principles that underpin stewardship of place**, many of which explicitly call on campuses to share power with communities. This review should include an audit of how their campus currently shares power with communities. In doing so, campus constituents

must balance the interests and needs of communities with their goals and those of their campuses. Accordingly, stewardship of place in practice might build on the momentum created by existing community efforts while also being careful not to co-opt these activities.

Understanding Stakeholders

Stewardship is not just about *what* campus constituents do, but also about *how* they operate as components of a broader regional ecosystem. The work of stewardship of place **should not be relegated to a single person or unit but should involve various individuals and units across campus and communities**. Therefore, it is important for campus leaders, faculty, staff, and students to gain an understanding of who stakeholders are, both on campus and in communities.

Foundational Framework: Centering Stakeholders and Community Voices

Stakeholders are those with a vested interest in the community and can include trustees, students' families, community members, business owners/employers, system officials, nonprofit leaders, and legislators. There may be specific stakeholders to involve in stewardship of place efforts. For example, campus leaders interested in promoting economic and workforce development should partner with industry and business leaders and government agencies focused on supporting regional economic well-being. Campus constituents committed to improving public schools must engage K–12 students, families, administrators, and teachers who have knowledge of the areas of strength and concern within school systems.

Building Reciprocal Relationships

After campus constituents have identified stakeholders, they should **work diligently and with intentionality to build reciprocal relationships**. Relationship building cannot be rushed and often unfolds over time while building trust among stakeholders. Campus leaders, faculty, staff, and students may encounter community mistrust due to prior initiatives in which relationship building was not central. When this happens, building or repairing trust can be painstaking but necessary work. Campus constituents must also avoid the desire to enter communities with preconceived notions about problems and solutions. Community members

often must navigate transitions in campus personnel that cause them to lose their connections to campus resources or support. To address this, campus constituents should be mindful of succession planning so that when someone leaves the campus, any existing relationships with community members are maintained. Finally, having a central office on campus that coordinates stewardship of place activities and that is easy for the community to access is one way campus leaders can ease possible confusions created by transitions between staff members responsible for this work. Campus leaders should also recognize the expertise that exists within communities and facilitate open exchange of community and campus expertise to share power.

Adapting Communication

Effective stewardship of place **maintains multiple communication channels with community members and adapts forms of communication as needed** when the preferences, habits, and languages of community partners change. This means communicating in the languages being spoken within communities and using translators to assist in consequential, community-based conversations. Additionally, some community members may communicate in technologically mediated ways while others prefer face-to-face meetings. Campus leaders, faculty, staff, and students should also consider the vocabulary they use when

engaging in stewardship of place. Phrases such as civic engagement, service learning, or shared governance may be familiar within higher education but have little meaning beyond campus.

Learning and Relearning the Community

Campus constituents seeking to incorporate community voices and diverse stakeholders into stewardship of place should **spend time getting to know the community, which entails learning and relearning as the region changes and adapts**. This might include attending community convenings, participating in town halls, volunteering in nonprofit organizations and schools, and reading local news outlets. To facilitate participation, campus constituents should consider hosting meetings in the community. Community members often have deep knowledge of community issues, strengths, and assets, and are thus vital thought and action partners. Campus constituents might also empower faculty members to engage in rigorous community-based research that incorporates values of reciprocity and symbiosis to continually learn about the community and infuse this knowledge into stewardship of place activities.

Amplifying and Listening to Community Voices

Another step in responding to community voices is **creating opportunities for community members to provide feedback and participate in consequential campus conversations about strategic initiatives**. Community members should be provided with opportunities to provide feedback about their interactions with campus constituents. This can be in the form of anonymous surveys, focus groups, in conversation, or in other venues. Campus leaders might invite community members to participate in strategic planning efforts and sit on advisory boards. Community members should also be given a voice in search committee processes for external-facing campus roles such as the president, vice president for external relations, and director of civic and community engagement centers. Community members can additionally be invited to weigh in on executive evaluation processes and submit evaluations and external reviews. Finally, campus leaders can invite community members to present in front of governance bodies such as the faculty senate, executive leadership team, and community engagement offices. This participation requires investments in time and resources, particularly for K–12 and nonprofit staff, and campus constituents may need to compensate community members for their time.



Actions Connected to Stewardship of Place

Oakland University (MI)

Throughout the conceptualization and writing of *Recommitting to Stewardship of Place*, task force members provided numerous examples of putting the philosophy into practice. This section synthesizes these recommendations, as well as ideas from previous reports, into a set of actions intended to bring the principles of stewardship of place to life, with the goal of helping campus constituents visualize possible actions on their own campuses. This set of actions is not designed to be exhaustive, but rather provide a starting point for campus leaders, faculty, staff, and students at RPUs whose work intersects with public engagement.

Building a Campus Culture

Stewardship of place requires intentional attention by students, faculty members, staff, and leaders to shaping an institutional culture that values expanding opportunity through education. For example, teaching students about the region and ways to become involved in the community could be built into orientation sessions or first-year seminars. Similarly, new faculty orientation could include examples of community-engaged research, as well as a tour of sites in the region where faculty and staff have partnered with the community in pursuit of mutual goals. Onboarding for any new employee could incorporate content on the history of the institution and the region, and the campus's connections

Stewardship of place requires intentional attention by students, faculty members, staff, and leaders to shaping an institutional culture that values expanding opportunity through education.

to the region, and new employees could be pointed toward resources and offices if they want to participate in community engagement efforts. Although it is possible a few offices or units might be the main champions of public engagement, campus leaders can help build a culture around stewardship of place by weaving it into mission and value statements and strategic planning documents. It can become a regular topic of conversation during cabinet meetings and integrated into the vocabulary of the institution. Culture-building is a process whose success depends on time and buy-in. As such, it should

not depend on whoever occupies the president's or chancellor's office. The more that campus leaders can share the philosophy of stewardship of place with students, faculty members, and staff and sponsor sustainable programs, the more likely it will outlive their tenures. It is also important that discussions about stewardship of place not be limited to the board room. Campus marketing and public relations should help tell the story of stewardship both internally and externally. As the original document, *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place*, noted, for stewardship of place to happen, "institutionalization is key!"

Enhancing Culture and Elevating Stewardship of Place at Oakland University (MI)

Reimagining Oakland University (OU) is a presidential initiative that draws on critical feedback and timely proposals from faculty and staff in order to develop campus culture, elevate the university's role as a steward of place, and explore ideas to position OU for the challenges ahead. Over the course of 10 months, a team conducted surveys, interviews, and other research to assess the current state of OU and determine how to transform it into a "University of Choice." The team developed 12 proposals as catalysts of fundamental cultural change to empower students, faculty, and staff. One proposal was a forum that brought together the president, cabinet members and key leadership team members, and staff who advanced through OU's Leadership Academy. The event, OU Leadership Day: Reconnecting to OU's Mission and Values, sought to strengthen the bonds of the campus community and create an opportunity to listen and work together to build a collaborative, dynamic culture.

Actions Connected to Stewardship of Place

Recognizing and Rewarding Stewardship of Place

Examining job descriptions, evaluation systems, and recognitions for alignment with stewardship of place is another means of translating the philosophy into practice. Campus leaders and hiring officials could add community engagement as an explicit job expectation, as appropriate, into positions across campus. Moreover, many faculty members tailor their time allotment and workload in response to tenure and promotion criteria. Faculty governance bodies that oversee tenure and promotion

criteria could consider how they might explicitly recognize and commit to value stewardship of place across teaching, research, and service activities. In the 2014 document *Becoming a Steward of Place: Lessons From AASCU Carnegie Community Engagement Applications* (Saltmarsh et al., 2014), the authors argued that “while AASCU institutions have taken steps to align faculty reward systems with their commitment to community engagement, there is still significant work to do in faculty recruitment, department cultures, criteria used to assess scholarship, and the promotion and tenure review

Recognizing Excellence in Publicly Engaged Scholarship at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)

IUPUI has developed seven ways of recognizing and financially supporting publicly engaged scholarship and civic and community engagement. Recognitions include a faculty award for excellence in civic engagement, as well as a similar award for staff. Another award focused on translating research into practice recognizes outstanding faculty research that is intentionally directed toward positively impacting people’s lives within or beyond the state of Indiana. Two unique programs at IUPUI to support community engagement are The Charles R. Bantz Chancellor’s Community Fellowship and Scholar Awards and the Community Engagement Associates program. The former offers faculty an opportunity to use research to address complex problems by linking academic expertise to community action and includes an expectation that community partners and IUPUI students are involved in planning and achieving this work. The latter is an employment program in which community engaged faculty and staff may receive funding to employ students to provide support for courses, programs, or projects that advance the community engagement mission of IUPUI.

Actions Connected to Stewardship of Place

Performance systems for staff and administrators can likewise recognize efforts to contribute to the community, involve community members in programming and decision-making, or increase students' participation in community engagement.

process” (p. 8). They called on RPUs to take on these policy and culture shifts if they truly want to enact stewardship of place. Because community-engaged teaching, research, and service often require building relationships with the community and are both time and labor intensive, promoting faculty involvement could hinge on providing support in the form of course buyouts and small grants. Moreover, institutions may need to provide additional supports and incentives,

including opportunities for faculty and staff professional development and merit pay. Performance systems for staff and administrators can likewise recognize efforts to contribute to the community, involve community members in programming and decision-making, or increase students' participation in community engagement. Campus leaders could develop a set of awards that recognize outstanding stewardship of place among students, faculty, and staff.



IUPUI

Actions Connected to Stewardship of Place

Creating Curricular and Cocurricular Opportunities

Stockton University Partners With Businesses for Enriching Summer Work Experience

Stockton University in New Jersey surveyed its students and learned that limited funds and housing were the chief deterrents to their engagement in workforce development experiences and internships during the summer. These factors disproportionately affected low-income students, who indicated that they could not afford summer housing because it was not covered under financial aid. To remove these barriers, Stockton partnered with several corporations in the Atlantic City hospitality and health care industries to provide employment opportunities and internships, which also addressed the summer labor shortage in the city. The Atlantic City Summer Experience Live, Work, Learn program provides qualified students with campus housing in the city, four college credits, a paid job or internship, and a discount on additional courses.



Stockton University (NJ)

Given the importance of teaching and student success at RPUs, it is not surprising that students have traditionally factored prominently into discussions around the implementation of stewardship of place. The original guide, *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place*, recommended that courses, curricula, and extracurricular activities could all be designed and implemented with a clear focus on public engagement. Recommendations included creating service-learning opportunities in first-year seminar courses, incorporating public engagement into student leadership development programs, and considering public engagement in course approval

processes. The original guide also suggested including community members in discussions about student learning outcomes. A follow-up practitioner guide, *Operationalizing Stewards of Place: Implementing Regional Engagement and Economic Development Strategies* (Dunfee & Vaidya, 2015), built on these ideas and argued that student participation is fundamental to the success of regional economic development. Undergraduate research, service learning, and other high-impact practices can be strategies to both institutionalize student engagement and support regional economic development. Departments and academic programs can also build partnerships with the community, such as the example in *Operationalizing Stewards of Place* of a partnership between the City of Greensboro's Human Relations Department and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's Peace and Conflict Studies Department. Some institutions have integrated community-based learning and applied learning into general education requirements as another means of translating stewardship of place into action.

Actions Connected to Stewardship of Place

Forging Coalitions and Spaces for Civic Engagement

Elevating Civic Education and Political Engagement at Illinois State University

Illinois State's Center for Civic Engagement (CCE) supports the institution's core value of civic engagement by encouraging students to be engaged and educated citizens in partnership with the community. CCE staff co-founded the Voter Engagement Coalition. This cross-divisional team adopted the pillars of voter registration, education, turnout, and restoration, which offered programs highlighting the histories and resilience of racially minoritized communities who have resisted oppression and worked for voting rights. In 2021, the center conducted 75 dialogues with nearly 700 students, faculty, staff, and community members. The campus had

about 71% voter turnout, with 1,102 students utilizing TurboVote and 1,700 people using campus polling places to vote early.



Illinois State University

RPUs enacting stewardship of place as part of their missions embrace their role as civic hubs in the region, bringing together various community organizations to build coalitions. This could include creating strategic partnerships among regional anchor institutions to pursue projects that benefit local communities. Other anchor in-

stitutions include hospitals, museums, nonprofit organizations, and other educational institutions. Given that civic engagement is embedded in the philosophy of stewardship of place, practices that create space for civic dialogue and fostering democratic processes for campus stakeholders and community members are especially important. This includes hosting local policymakers to participate in events focused on regional needs or relevant policy discussions, as well as candidate forums for campus stakeholders and community members to engage with candidates during election years. Promoting engagement with political processes can be a fraught proposition considering current polarization and conflict. However, now is not the time to disengage. This is precisely the time for RPUs to step up in support of civil dialogue in courses, programs, and campus and community events. Stewardship of place necessitates that RPUs be part of critical conversations shaping the future of the regions they serve and of which they are an integral part.

Actions Connected to Stewardship of Place

Spurring Regional Economic Development and Revitalization

Accelerating Education to Fill Tech Job Shortages at East Tennessee State University (ETSU)

To address labor shortages in the information technology and data science fields, ETSU developed BlueSky Tennessee Institute with BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee (BCBST). Students complete the ABET-accredited Bachelor of Science in computing with a concentration in information systems, and many of the courses take place at the institute's campus at BCBST headquarters in Chattanooga. Students also participate in work-based learning internships as BCBST trainees, supporting business projects. BCBST employees companywide—including the CEO and all members of the president's executive team—mentor BlueSky students.

Stewardship of place entails taking seriously the role of RPUs in spurring regional economic development and, in some cases, community revitalization. An important element of this responsibility is workforce development and being responsive to the needs of the local labor market—matching degree offerings to the needs of regional employers. Although fields such as teaching and health care are often front and center in conversations about responding to regional labor market needs, stewardship of place also means attending to new and emerging industries whose success may depend on a campus partner to provide workforce development. This might entail developing new academic programs, as well as nondegree training and certificate programs in collaboration with companies. These collaborations can be mutually beneficial—a key principle of stewardship—in that they could create internship and cocurricular opportunities for students while helping companies meet their workforce goals. Many RPUs are also heavily



East Tennessee State University

involved in training entrepreneurs and helping incubate and support small businesses. Because of the economic footprint of many RPUs, stewardship of place also means thinking carefully about contracts with vendors and how campus decisions about purchasing and property use affect local businesses. Reiterating a point from *Becoming a Steward of Place*, both campuses and communities are often investing scarce resources in regional economic development, and it is important that these efforts be more visible and transparent in both community and campus planning artifacts.

Actions Connected to Stewardship of Place

Promoting Applied Research and Scholarship of Engagement

Applied Research Thrives at Metro State University (MN)

The GROW-IT Center, located on Metro State University's St. Paul campus, conducts applied research to meet the needs of traditionally underserved partners and local food producers, while contributing to the national discourse on issues related to agriculture, food, and sustainability. Serving as a hub for community-university learning and exchange on urban food production, healthy food access, and environmental restoration, the GROW-IT Center addresses multiple facets of food security and highlights the significance of cultivating and distributing culturally based foods and medicines. By tying research into a collaborative space for community partners, the GROW-IT Center redefines innovation, teaching, and workforce development and can increase education opportunities and strengthen the wider community.



Metro State University (MN)

Faculty members at RPUs dedicate significant time and energy toward teaching and mentoring students; however, many are also involved in research, and the practice of stewardship of place encourages faculty members to pursue questions pertinent to the region and to involve, consult, and share research findings with the community. Research that reflects stewardship of place is often applied in nature, tackling a problem identified in the region or providing a service beneficial to the community. This research also involves community expertise and community leaders in mutually beneficial research

relationships. Examples include economic analyses for local governments, population or demographic studies of the region, and educational research connected to questions of teacher preparation or professional development. Many faculty and leaders at RPUs were profoundly affected by Ernest Boyer's 1990 book *Scholarship Reconsidered*, shifting their cultures and policies to reward faculty who participate in the "scholarship of application" and the "scholarship of teaching." Consequently, for many faculty members, research is intertwined with service and teaching. This means that many faculty are interested in studying new teaching approaches or exploring conditions under which students learn best. Moreover, many faculty deploy their research expertise to respond to the needs of the institution, helping conduct financial analyses, design climate surveys, or study issues of concern to students or staff. The result of this scholarship may be fewer publications in peer-reviewed journals or presentations at national conferences, but it still constitutes research that has a local impact that may improve the lives of people in the region. Revitalizing the tenure and promotion award systems to account for this deeper understanding of applied research may increase research engagement between faculty and the surrounding community.

Actions Connected to Stewardship of Place



Portland State University (OR)

Rewarding Faculty Engagement at Portland State University (OR)

Community engagement is listed as a key part of Portland State's mission, and the university notes that academic, research, and outreach activities are guided by the motto "Let Knowledge Serve the City." In the guidelines for faculty promotion and tenure, Portland State describes four expressions of scholarship based upon Boyer's recommendations in *Scholarship Reconsidered*, and it advises that these expressions can apply equally to research, teaching, and community outreach. Community outreach is listed as a "significant factor in determining a faculty member's advancement," and the guidelines state that "the setting of Portland State University affords faculty many opportunities to make their expertise useful to the community." The guidelines describe characteristics of effective community outreach and offers indicators of quality and significance to evaluate faculty members' contributions.

Partnering With Schools and Community Colleges

Enacting stewardship of place means operating as a close partner with, and ally to, local school systems and community colleges. Rather than being a silo set apart from other educational organizations, RPUs that embrace stewardship of place see themselves as part of an ecosystem that promotes educational access and attainment across the P-20 pipeline. Partnership with local schools happens intentionally among institutions with teacher and principal preparation programs on which schools rely for training and workforce development. There is often a close affinity and long-standing relationship between AASCU schools with strong colleges of education and local school systems. That said, the partnership can grow and become more

expansive by creating pathways for local students to access the institution, inviting school leaders to participate in consequential institutional conversations, and organizing dialogues about local educational issues. In *Becoming a Steward of Place*, the authors urged RPUs to work collaboratively with school systems to develop five- and 10-year benchmarks for meeting educational improvement and access goals. Colleges of education can become sites of professional development for teachers and principals, and school leaders can be tapped to guest speak and teach courses. Similarly, stewardship of place means supporting and building up other postsecondary institutions, particularly community colleges. Thriving community

Actions Connected to Stewardship of Place

Stewardship of place means supporting and building up other postsecondary institutions, particularly community colleges.

colleges that help create access points and prepare students for subsequent study only bolster the mission of RPUs. Many community college students desire to pursue a bachelor's degree, and stewardship of place means facilitating their seamless transfer into RPUs and supporting their success once enrolled. Some RPUs host student transfer offices and others maintain articulation agreements with area community colleges that can ease this process for students.



Colorado State University Pueblo

Creating a College-Bound Culture for Underserved High School Students at Colorado State University (CSU) Pueblo

Conversations with community members and educators revealed to leaders at CSU Pueblo the need to expand and cultivate a college-going culture in Pueblo County, one of the areas it serves, irrespective of where the students would attend college or university. The result was the creation of four University Track Centers (UTCs) in two school districts in Pueblo County to support high school students through application and financial aid processes so they can move on to higher education. These centers largely targeted communities of color in which families and their first-generation students, particularly Latinx people, needed support in understanding the complicated and often intimidating admissions process. UTC coordinators promote post-

secondary educational experiences and opportunities, including field trips to local universities and businesses and mock interviews. In addition, students who utilize the centers are eligible for university scholarships.

Actions Connected to Stewardship of Place

Supporting Sustainability and Stewarding Natural Resources

The Center for Island Sustainability at the University of Guam

Through an executive order, the governor of Guam assigned the University of Guam Center for Island Sustainability to facilitate Guam Green Growth (G3), bringing together 99 working group members representing all sectors of society to create the G3 Action Framework and implement sustainability projects. With grants from the governor's office, the National Science Foundation, and the Guam Economic Development Authority, G3 has sourced more than \$1.5 million to implement sustainable development projects and programs to maximize deliverables, interest, and long-term sustainability. The working group members developed a plan representing 82 organizations and agencies that includes 122 goals, 225 objectives, 414 action items, and 263 metrics to track progress.



University of Guam

Stewardship of place is practiced in a new postsecondary context that is increasingly characterized by natural disasters, including hurricanes and wildfires. To act on the philosophy of stewardship of place means to examine the institution's contributions to carbon emissions and efforts to operate sustainably—and to make necessary changes to mitigate negative environmental impacts. This could include examining the physical plant and energy sources used on campus, as well as the products used in dining and catering operations. RCU leaders could also examine their institutions' investment portfolios to ensure that they are aligned with their values. Stewardship of place

is fundamentally about the special connection between RPUs and their regions—right down to the land they occupy and the attention they give to natural resources on which communities depend. This means protecting land in the institution's care that is of ecological significance and providing opportunities for students to learn about local habitats. Some institutions also develop specific degree programs connected to agriculture and industry tied to natural resources, many of which incorporate courses and applied learning projects in sustainable growth and management. RPUs can also serve as response hubs for natural disasters and other crises, including pandemics.

Actions Connected to Stewardship of Place

Supporting Community Health and Well-Being

Vecinos Farmworker Health Program at Western Carolina University (WCU)

WCU is a community partner with Vecinos, a nonprofit that advocates for and provides medical support to uninsured and underinsured farmworkers and their families in Western North Carolina. WCU provides clinical and office spaces for Vecinos in its Health and Human Sciences Building. One aspect of the partnership is the student-led Mountain Area Pro-Bono Health Services Clinic, which works in tandem with Vecinos to serve farmworkers' physical therapy needs. The clinic, which opened in October 2014, is operated by students in WCU's doctoral program in physical therapy, who take care of all details from ordering supplies and developing policies and procedures to treating patients and tracking individual care.

The 20th anniversary of *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place* arrives in the wake of a global pandemic that has disproportionately harmed rural communities and communities of color. Just as RPUs have a role to play in economic development and revitalization, stewardship of place in practice means contributing to the health care

infrastructure and public health of communities, particularly in the post-pandemic recovery. In some instances, this includes helping fill gaps in health care services due to shortages of providers or spillover effects from the erosion of social services. For example, rural communities where manufacturers closed operations have also experienced hospital closures, causing doctors to leave the region. Some institutions have developed programs specifically to train health care workers who plan to stay in the region and offer instructional clinics where students can practice techniques and the community receives low-cost



Western Carolina University (NC)

care. To be a point of access for high-quality, low-cost training that leads to employment means many RPUs are engines of opportunity. Given the relationship between postsecondary education and health outcomes, the presence of a nearby college can make a substantial difference in quality of life. As a major employer in many communities, RPUs will also be a primary way many people financially support their well-being and receive medical benefits to care for their families. This is a significant responsibility, but one that stewards of place accept as part of the anchor institution mission.



Sustaining Stewards of Place

University of North Carolina Wilmington

Being a steward of place requires that institutional leaders design initiatives, marshal resources, and leverage existing institutional strengths in ways that ensure the sustainability of this important work. Too often, innovative campus programs and initiatives launch with significant fanfare and enthusiasm, but these programs are not always undergirded with the resources and planning that will ensure their long-term sustainability. Institutional intentionality requires that RPUs not only establish new programs and initiatives but connect this work to existing resources and established campus infrastructure. Campus leaders who graft new activities onto existing institutional strengths will be more successful in fostering enduring change that will support the mission of stewardship of place.

Campus leaders interested in advancing a stewardship of place mission should also educate themselves about the challenges they face in doing this work. At times, campus leaders make decisions that support the good of students and other campus constituents, but these decisions may not be well received by community members. For example, a campus that closes a main street in a

section of downtown to create a bounded campus might encounter resistance from community members who want to preserve this public street. Similarly, campuses that engage in eminent domain or build campus buildings in the community may face resistance. Student behaviors in the community may also create tension with community members. These challenges are common and can create community distrust or pushback against a campus's outreach efforts, and campus leaders must understand these challenges and work to find common ground and solutions in reciprocal partnerships with community members. Such work can build good will in the community and willingness to partner on regional stewardship of place initiatives that will enhance their sustainability.

For these reasons, campus leaders need to be mindful about how these challenges—either contemporary or historical—shape community member willingness to partner with the campus. In some cases, campuses might make concessions to the community to address these issues. For example, campuses could create student community conduct rules that address student behavior

Campus leaders who graft new activities onto existing institutional strengths will be more successful in fostering enduring change that will support the mission of stewardship of place.

off campus, involve community leaders in capital development decisions, and provide opportunities for community feedback about campus expansion efforts. Sometimes it is impossible to rectify past wrongs, in which case a formal campus apology to the community might be necessary. These issues point to the importance of building relationships with community members that are reciprocal and nonhierarchical. Campus leaders must also recognize that the timeline they have for particular initiatives may need to be modified in order to secure community buy-in and involvement and to rectify past tensions. To build good will in the community, campus leaders can also share institutional resources with the community, be that in the form of financial resources through grants and contracts, human resources such as knowledge, and physical assets such as buildings or recreational facilities.

In some communities, campuses might be perceived as political spaces. This is particularly true when campuses become ensnared in freedom of speech debates and political disagreements over what and how students should learn. When this happens, RCU leaders should lean into both their educational missions as well as their role as stewards of place by hosting events that can share information and invite dialogue with community members about various political issues.

It is not enough to launch initiatives and assume they are having a positive impact. In the same way that many campuses assess contributions to

regional economic impact, campus leaders should assess campus contributions as stewards of place beyond the financial impacts. An important first step in assessment efforts is cataloging existing activities that can be assessed. Campus leaders can partner with community leaders to identify appropriate assessment metrics, and then incorporate these metrics into ongoing campus activities. By partnering with community members to design assessment tools, campus leaders are demonstrating their commitment to reciprocity. Campus leaders can then use data they collect to refine and improve their stewards of place efforts.

Finally, it is imperative that campus leaders be strategic about how they communicate their stewards of place mission to important stakeholder groups. Due to resource constraints, many RPUs face challenges with launching marketing and public relations campaigns, yet these are important tools for helping community members both understand the campus's contributions as a steward of place and begin to view the campus as a resource. Campus leaders might share data from regional economic impact studies and stewards of place assessments. Campus leaders should also foster dialogue and debate on campus with faculty, staff, and students about the principles of stewards of place so that the campus community understands this mission and can invoke it when they talk about the institution. Given ongoing debates of the value of higher education, it is imperative that RPUs find ways to convey their value and contributions as stewards of place.

Case Studies of Stewardship in Practice

Case 1: The Community Engaged Learning Program at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

In September 2021, the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (UWL) introduced the Community Engaged Learning Program. The program creates a process to review and award courses with a Community Engaged Learning (CEL) designation. In CEL courses, students are provided an opportunity to engage in a high-impact practice with a community partner through a mutually beneficial relationship. The courses also connect to one of eight competencies that national employers have highlighted as being critical to success in the workforce.

The primary intent of the program is to give students real-world experience to help them grow their skills and make them more marketable to future employers, while at the same time provide a community service or meet a community need. During the inaugural year of the program, 19 course sections received CEL designations. A total of 316 students assisted with about 36 businesses, nonprofits, or civic organizations. About 85% of those partnerships were within La Crosse County.

“The program gives students real opportunities to apply their learning that also meets the needs of our wonderful community,” explained Lisa Klein, UWL’s community engagement coordinator. “Through these experiences, UWL instructors work to help students recognize the job skills they are developing and how to market those skills to their future employers.”

Lindsay Steiner, an associate professor in the English Department, structured her grant

writing class to take part in the program in fall 2021. The class partnered with Downtown Mainstreet Inc. to assist with funding public art and downtown beautification. Students worked in teams to research community and client needs, identify grant opportunities, and write grant proposals and inquiry letters. At the end of the semester, students shared the projects with the partner.

Steiner says the experience provided students with an authentic context, audience, and purpose for grant writing. The students, she noted, learned to manage a complex, multi-week project that had the potential to directly impact the La Crosse community.

“Through this project, students developed skills such as collaborative writing, adaptability, critical thinking, and problem solving,” said Steiner. “At the end of the semester, students left the class with a set of marketable skills, project examples that they could show employers as they go on the job market, and a renewed sense of community engagement beyond the physical boundaries of UWL’s campus.”

Additional hands-on learning experiences through community engagement partnerships have included conducting and analyzing surveys for La Crosse’s Women’s Fund to better understand the most pressing economic, social, and health needs of area residents. UWL students have also helped YMCA mental health advocates correspond with Spanish speakers needing services, along with assisting Downtown Mainstreet with acquiring grants for art initiatives.

Case Studies of Stewardship in Practice

Case 2: *The University of Washington Bothell Advances Sustainability*

The University of Washington Bothell (UW Bothell) has fostered an institutional commitment to sustainability. UW Bothell offers seven bachelor's degrees and two minors related to sustainability and over 150 courses in topics ranging from geographic and information systems to policy and ecological restoration. Describing this work as important to training students to be “stewards of the Earth,” Chancellor Kristin G. Esterberg stated that “we recognize that sustainability is more than implementing best practices that minimize harm to the environment,” and that faculty must serve as “good role models” for students.

UW Bothell faculty members push beyond traditional modes of promoting sustainability by considering the human dimensions of sustainability. Jennifer Atkinson, an associate teaching professor in the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences (IAS), researches and teaches about the emotional and mental health impacts of climate disruption and ecological loss and is currently writing a book about the topic. She states, “In tackling the intersecting crises of racial injustice, climate change, pandemics, and ecological degradation, my approach is rooted in the belief that the challenge is to ensure that students don’t just have the content they need to address these issues—but that they also have the existential tenacity to stay engaged in climate solutions and navigate the long emergency ahead.”

UW Bothell fosters undergraduate involvement in research about sustainability. Students are involved in the Cascadia College and UW Bothell CCUWBee Native Bee Research Initiative led by Amy Lambert, associate teaching professor in the School of IAS. This initiative supports pollinator populations on campus and in the broader community. In describing the project, Lambert stated, “Our goal is to provide

the campus community with detailed knowledge on local bee populations and how, as an environmentally conscious school, we can improve native habitats. We aim to inspire students and faculty with a citizen-science approach to research and innovative thinking to ensure the best future for the pollinators who call our campus their home.” The initiative leaders collaborate with campus grounds workers to plant native flora and allow the plants to grow unencumbered. Tyson Kemper, UW Bothell’s grounds supervisor stated that by doing so, the campus “letting a landscape develop naturally is great not just for pollinators but for the ecosystem as a whole.” Not only is this good for the pollinator populations, but it also allows mammals to flourish including rodents, coyotes, eagles, and racoons.

To support food sustainability in the community, UW Bothell uses organic practices to manage unwanted plants and animals. The campus established five safe edible spaces on campus for campus and community members to enjoy including an apple orchard, medicinal garden, food forest, campus farm, and herb walk. Kemper shared that “the Campus Farm alone produces hundreds of pounds of food each year that gets donated to people in need.”

UW Bothell has garnered national attention for its sustainability work. In addition to the Bee Campus USA Certification, UW Bothell is certified by the National Wildlife Federation as a Wildlife Habitat and Salmon Safe’s certification. It was awarded the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) Campus Sustainability award and APPA’s Sustainability Award in Facilities Management. UW Bothell also holds the STARS (GOLD) sustainability ranking, which is the highest ranking given by AASHE.

Case Studies of Stewardship in Practice

Case 3: The University of West Alabama Promotes Regional Economic and Workforce Development

The University of West Alabama (UWA) is located in the Black Belt region of the United States, which has a majority population of Black and African Americans. UWA's Division of Economic and Workforce Development is a leader for rural economic and workforce development in its region of Sumter County and West Alabama. The division's mission is to support and enhance regional economic vitality and long-term prosperity of the region.

The division encourages new financial investments in its rural area while supporting existing businesses. The division supports the regional business community by providing financial resources and increasing businesses' competitiveness. By serving as a "one-stop shop" for local business and industry, the division assists public and private agencies in fostering workforce development, commercial and distribution development, retention and expansion of existing businesses, and small business development.

The division hosts a variety of workforce development programs and initiatives, including the UWA Integrated Marketing Communications Program, Sumter Renaissance (Economic Development Strategic Plan), the Rural Broadband Plan and Initiative, Leadership Sumter, West Alabama Rural Development Initiative, and the Healthy Places for Healthy People program.

In June 2020, UWA partnered with Betabox to implement a workforce development initiative funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor and the Delta Regional Authority. The initiative, Leveraging Networks for Change and Sustainability (LINCS), was designed to develop a regional workforce that responds to industry-recognized standards, credentials, and needs to strengthen the economy and skill levels in a 10-county west Alabama rural region.

This initiative established 10 learning labs that assist K–12 schools in offering work-related courses to students and supporting recent high school graduates in obtaining ready-to-work certificates. The labs expose students to diverse industries including self-driving cars, drones, robotic cars, and video game design. UWA also hosts the University Charter School, which is a pre-K–12 school, and is recognized nationally as the only rural county charter school on a university campus in America.

Beyond supporting K–12 schools, UWA is the only university in Alabama that offers associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees and a variety of training and certificate programs such as Adult Education/GED, automotive technicians, welding, and an Alabama Career Center System aligned with regional industry needs. UWA and its partners Alabama Pellets and Pinnacle Renewable Energy were recognized by the Alabama Office of Apprenticeship as a sponsor for Registered Apprenticeship programs. Registered Apprenticeships are national programs that meet rigorous federal standards that include business involvement, on-the-job training, related instruction, a progressive wage scale, and industry-recognized credentials.

Allison Brantley, UWA's director of economic development, stated, "Because of the growth and success of our academic programs, workforce development training programs, and economic development initiatives, there are more economic opportunities and a more qualified and ready-to-work workforce. This is evidenced by job creation; an increase in job placement, internships, certifications, and program participation; and the slow but steady decrease in un- and underemployment and population decline. We cannot just think rural, we must live it."



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