A significant number of AASCU institutions are located in cities both large and small. Undoubtedly, in the past decade many of these institutions have been called upon to play a part in revitalizing their “hometowns.” Given the current economic climate, the demand for greater involvement in this endeavor is likely to increase substantially as cities struggle to confront job losses, company closings and property abandonment. Having spent nine years as chancellor at Indiana University Kokomo (home to four Chrysler plants and a significant Delphi presence), and now nearly a year at the University of Michigan-Flint (once home to 80,000 GM employees and now home to less than 8,000), I am in a somewhat unique position to view town-gown revitalization issues.

There are many roles a campus can play in revitalization. First, any campus is, by definition, an economic engine for the area it calls home—as a purchaser of goods and services often with great buying power, as an attraction for visitors, and as a generator of student and employer purchasing as these groups shop, dine and consume local entertainment. Second, many campuses provide economic development expertise through faculty research and service, and offer opportunities to engage businesses with student projects and other means of helping to spark new ideas and generate improved business planning and development. Third, as public institutions, our campuses can (and do) serve as conveners—neutral places where debates over the topics that relate to revitalization can take place, often with assistance from faculty or staff who are experienced facilitators. While revitalization seems to be a topic on which everyone can agree in principle, there are often major issues buried beneath that topic that can spark controversy. For example, the “shrink the city’s footprint” discussion currently taking place in some locales (including Flint) is fraught with controversy (e.g., “it’s a great idea to be able to provide fire and police protection to a smaller footprint, but not if it means that my house gets demolished in the process”). A campus could play a major role in bringing all parties to the table for discussion around this or another issue without taking sides.

As with any campus effort, particularly one that involves partnerships, there are cautionary tales aplenty. First and foremost, it is important to remember that, at the end of the day, we are about educating students. Whenever I am approached by a potential partner about a joint endeavor, I always ask, “How does this relate to the university’s educational mission? Is there an opportunity for student learning? For faculty research? Does it provide an internship opportunity? An advantage for campus life? A better living-learning environment?” The point is that we should never lose sight of our mission to educate students. We can now see many examples of corporations that have strayed from their core mission, diluting their brands and burning up resources in the chase to become “all things to all people.” Our challenge is to stay connected to our core, while extending our expertise, skills and knowledge in a way that advantages both the university and the city in which it lives. We can be major players in the movement to rebuild our cities; we just need to be focused and strategic in how we do it.

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