When AASCU was established on February 23, 1961, it had been a month since John F. Kennedy’s inauguration as the 35th president of the United States. Although there was no relationship between the two events, both represented starts in new directions. As Kennedy began by encouraging Americans to do what they could for their country, AASCU began with a mission to enhance the expanding and changing landscape of the nation’s public higher education.

**AASCU’s Beginnings**

AASCU’s roots were in the Association of Teacher Education Institutions (ATEI), organized 10 years earlier as an outgrowth of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE). These organizations represented normal schools, as well as colleges and universities, with the single purpose of preparing teachers.

By 1961, however, ATEI members thought a new organization of public postsecondary institutions was needed with a broader mission, and formed AASCU.

Its founders felt it necessary to recognize a newly developing and expanding form of U.S. postsecondary education after World War II that offered undergraduate and graduate degree programs in teacher education, but also had a base in general, liberal arts education.

Accordingly, the purposes of the new association were to analyze public policy, advocate for member institutions and their students, and enable its members to make their influence felt in connection with national affairs. In addition, the association sought to promote appreciation and support for public education.

From left: Marvalene Hughes, former president of California State University-Stanislaus, former AASCU President James Appleberry and former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley at an AASCU meeting.
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higher education and the distinctive contributions of member colleges and universities effectively to the public and to agencies and individuals that might be able to provide grant funding; conduct studies of educational issues of common interest to its members; and create professional development opportunities for its institutional leaders.

AASCU's underlying purposes were defined further in 1965, when the board of directors and Allan W. Ostar, whom they selected as the association's first full-time executive director, held a retreat in Florida and developed nine specific proposals that have continued to shape the association's mission and projects. They included establishing a special office in Washington to identify sources of federal support; developing a program to help member institutions in fundraising; increasing member involvement in international activities; and initiating a major national project to identify the role of state colleges and universities in American society.

National Office Opens

AASCU's leaders recognized early the importance of developing and maintaining effective relationships with other national higher education associations. In 1962, they opened AASCU's national office in the American Council on Education (ACE)'s building in Washington and, AASCU became a Council member. (Those relationships took another big step in 1998, when AASCU partnered with three other higher education associations to purchase the building where it is now, at 1307 New York Avenue, N.W.)

In 1964, AASCU conducted “Challenge to Change,” the first large study of its member institutions. It also established the Office of Federal Programs, now the Grants Resource Center, and began to make its influence felt in national affairs by playing a role in public policy development in its areas of interest.

Ostar, whose title later changed to president, says he had to “establish an identity for this group of no-name institutions” that had become AASCU members—170 of them by 1965. To do that, he set out to have the public policy interests of the group reflected in federal legislation and regulations.

Ostar moved firmly to position the association as a national advocate for low- and middle-income students seeking higher education access and opportunity. “I had always been an advocate for low tuition. I wanted emphasis on work-study, short-term loans and basic opportunity grants,” which became the Pell Grant Program, he relates.

Promoting international education through public policy became another goal that AASCU pursued, initially under Fred F. Harcleroad, then president of California State University, East Bay, and one of AASCU's founders (Harcleroad also authored A History of America's Comprehensive Colleges and Universities). It was Harcleroad who created the association's International Education Committee.
AASCU Internationally

The international focus picked up steam under Ostar’s leadership. In the mid-70s, invited by the Ministry of Education in the People’s Republic of China, the first official delegation of university presidents traveled there. Other trips followed to countries including Cuba and Egypt.

Ostar spearheaded other significant AASCU programs as well. One was Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC), which AASCU initiated in 1972 in a partnership with the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges. It allowed active duty members of the military who were studying in college programs at different installations to put their credits together to earn a degree. The American Council of Education Transfer Group designated AASCU as the lead association to develop higher education programs for the military, and the SOC concept remains a valuable military recruiting tool today.

During this time, AASCU was also taking steps to strengthen itself internally. Until the early 1970s, only presidents and chancellors of AASCU member institutions attended the association’s Annual Meeting. Then they began bringing their spouses and, in 1979, Ostar asked his wife, Roberta “Bobbie” H. Ostar, to plan programs for them at the meetings. She served for the next 12 years as volunteer coordinator of what became the Spouse/Partner Program.

The initiatives AASCU began during its first three decades continued and expanded when James B. (Jim) Appleberry succeeded Ostar as president in 1991. One was the relationships with other higher education organizations, namely the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC)—now known as the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU)—which also had a new president. “With their support of our agenda, including our special focus—the financial aid sector—we were more powerful in working with Congress and the White House. That was one of the most effective liaisons we put together,” Appleberry states.

In 1990, the association created the New Presidents’ Academy to help new presidents and chancellors of member institutions enhance their leadership capacities. Another move was building more diversity in the leadership of its member institutions, particular the presidency. That led AASCU’s African-American presidents to come together in 1998 to establish the Millennium Leadership Institute, which has become, says Appleberry, “one of the most productive efforts at developing leaders of color and other underrepresented groups in American higher education.”

Remembering Teacher Education

While AASCU was broadening the reach of its activities, it never lost sight of its roots in teacher education. Constantine W. (Deno) Curris, who became AASCU’s president in 1999,
moved to strengthen AASCU’s role as a “major player” in policy-making with particular reference to teacher preparation as well as the teaching environment. “We felt that virtually no one else in Washington was representing the interests of institutions that placed teacher education at the forefront of their responsibilities,” he explains. One step AASCU took was to boost the prominence of the Christa McAuliffe Award for Excellence in Teacher Education, which it had established in 1987. Another was to develop best practices in teacher education to share among its members.

AASCU continued its focus on international education as well, including the relationship with China that it had established earlier. In 2001, with the China Center for International Educational Exchange, it initiated the Sino-American 1+2+1 program, enabling qualified undergraduate and graduate students from each country to study in the other and ultimately receive diplomas from both Chinese and U.S. public universities. Further, AASCU partnered with the Chinese Education Association for International Exchange in 2002 to establish the Leadership Training Project.

A survey of institutional presidents and chancellors ranked AASCU’s public policy and advocacy work as the most important service the organization could provide.
for public university administrators in both countries.

In 2003, AASCU partnered with *The New York Times* to found the American Democracy Project, an initiative of more than 220 institutions to focus on higher education’s role in preparing their graduates to become the next generation of informed citizens actively involved in their communities.

To increase accountability in higher education, and in response to a call by the Spellings Commission, in 2006 AASCU began joint development with NASULGC of a Voluntary System of Accountability for four-year public colleges and universities.

Like his predecessors, Curris made internal improvements as well, including launching *Public Purpose* magazine in 2005. “It wasn’t about giving AASCU a higher profile as it was giving it to our member institutions,” he says. In another move a year earlier, a “Making Place Matter” pilot project established AASCU institutions as “stewards of place,” underscoring the importance of their interaction with the regions they serve.

**Looking Ahead**

In 2009, when Muriel A. Howard became AASCU’s fourth president, and the first African-American and woman to hold the position, the association reaffirmed its purpose and objectives in a new strategic plan adopted the next year. It developed from a survey of institutional presidents and chancellors, who ranked AASCU’s public policy and advocacy work as the most important service the organization could provide. “So, naturally, we’re going to continue to build that,” Howard says.

Under Howard’s leadership, AASCU will continue to have strong international involvement. Noting how import it is for college graduates to “have a global sense of the world,” AASCU will continue to “do as much as we can to help our campuses become more internationally focused,” Howard says. The association is in the process of developing a mini-strategic plan for its international education efforts.

Meanwhile, Howard also is focusing on leadership development, particularly providing support for sitting presidents and chancellors. “We’re a little weak in that area and I think we could do a better job,” she declares.

As she prepares to get AASCU started on its next 50 years, Howard cites its success in meeting its original goals. “I am very pleased with how AASCU has performed over the last 50 years. It is seen as one of the leading associations that support higher education, especially for regional comprehensive universities, and I expect that we will continue to ascend in our prominence and importance,” Howard says.

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