



# Stewardship in an Era of Constraint

*When fiscal realities threaten academic programs and staff slots, how can universities also balance their role as stewards of place?*

**By Stephen G. Pelletier**

Beyond expectations that higher education prepare the future workforce and build knowledge through research, society also looks to public universities to be, in AASCU's parlance, "stewards of place." To that end, one of the central missions for universities is to contribute directly to their communities by developing regional economic competitiveness, improving schools, managing natural resources and helping to chart the future.

When institutional coffers are full, universities can afford to educate students, conduct research, and contribute effectively to their communities and regions as stewards of place. But when times are tough—as they are today—those missions can collide and compete.

Inviting the AASCU community to the association's 2010 annual conference, then board chair James Votruba, the president of Northern Kentucky University, framed the current realities: "Internally, we are working to guide our campuses through a period of enormous uncertainty and realignment," Votruba wrote. "Externally, we are being challenged like never before to be full partners in advancing the progress of our nation, its states and communities. In short, we are being challenged to exercise a new level of stewardship on behalf of America's future."

Given that university priorities include teaching, learning, and research—to say nothing of keeping its lights on—economic uncertainties cast a giant shadow on outreach





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—James Votruba, president, Northern Kentucky University

beyond the campus. When tight budgets threaten things like academic programs and staff slots, how can universities also balance their role as stewards of place?

The semantics of stewardship are complicated. Although some institutions characterize themselves as stewards of place, others might prefer to label their community outreach work as “public engagement.” Cleveland State University President Ronald Berkman says, “We use a phrase, ‘engaged learning,’ that speaks to the connectivity between the city and the academic learning experience at the university.” Another group of institutions, notably public urban universities, refer to themselves as community “anchors.”

The AASCU publication *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place* (2002) clarified the landscape and vocabulary of public engagement, defining it as “direct, two-way interaction with communities and other external constituencies through the development, exchange, and application of knowledge, information, and expertise for mutual benefit.” In this context, a wide range of activities—from assistance for K-12 schools to faculty consulting on technical issues to urban development—fit under the broad umbrella of what, for our purposes here, we call stewardship.

## Budgetary pressures

In the second decade of the 21st century, stewardship is subject to the same budgetary pressures that affect all aspects of university operations. So how do these budget constraints affect public engagement activities?

The experience at Northern Kentucky University perhaps typifies that at many

AASCU institutions. As a defining quality of NKU, regional stewardship “sits at the core, not at the edges, of what we do,” Votruba says. But in part because stewardship work represents cost centers versus revenue centers, he says, “the recession in some respects puts regional stewardship at risk, at least in terms of the breadth of the programming that I believe has been occurring over the last decade.”

Northern Kentucky University faculty engage in numerous community engagement activities in Greater Cincinnati P-12 classrooms each year.







Portland State University graduate students take part in local research initiatives, such as this one with Wolfree, a nonprofit that guides young people in outdoor scientific studies. In this photo, students are testing marsh water quality near Welches, Ore., in search of clues as to why beavers have abandoned this traditional habitat.

“Prior to the recession we had a strategy that could probably best be described as letting 1,000 flowers grow,” Votruba says. “We incorporated regional stewardship into our mission, hiring, faculty and unit evaluation, and the incentive system. We said, go forth and do this work.”

The recession, however, prompted NKU to narrow the focus of its public engagement to “areas where we think we bring significant and measurable value,” Votruba says. Specifically, the university bolstered its already strong institutional commitment to strengthen local P-12 education. To that end, for example, two NKU early-childhood professors devote their time to teaching students to lead early childhood centers and to helping those centers attain accreditation. Another NKU program focuses on

fourth-grade mathematics, which research has shown to be a turning point in school success. This commitment dovetails with the finding from a recent AASCU survey (see page 26) that 96 percent of state colleges and universities are engaged in work to improve local K-12 education.

At the same time, though, NKU has drawn back on some of its regional economic development initiatives. In an era where it simply can’t do all that it might like to do, Votruba says, “The number-one contribution that the university can make to economic development is graduating well-prepared students in areas with skill sets that are necessary for the region’s progress.”

Votruba says the recession brought distinctively positive effects to NKU’s stewardship portfolio. Tight budgets forced NKU to “take a hard look” at

its public engagement efforts, he says. Although some were contributing, others “just didn’t withstand the scrutiny,” he says. “They were nice things to do but ...”

The result is that “we are much more focused now than we were two years ago” and NKU is “much more rigorous in our evaluation of impact,” Votruba says. “And that’s a good thing.”

That experience leads Votruba to emphasize the need to subject regional stewardship work to standards of performance and outcomes measures. “If you believe in this work, then subject it to the kind of rigor and scrutiny” that apply to all university programs, he says. “Let data, as much as possible, speak for the impact.”

The fact that the recession led NKU to sharpen its commitment to support local P-12 education exemplifies one of



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the verities of public engagement in an era of constraint: When times are tough, the value that universities contribute to their communities as stewards of place may be all the more essential.

## Deeply embedded

As an institution that defines itself as an anchor of its urban community, Portland State University (Ore.) models a philosophy in which public engagement is deeply embedded in the fabric of the institution. As part of the curriculum, for example, each PSU senior completes a required capstone project that includes working in a team in partnership with a local business, government department, community agency, or other off-campus organization. These capstone projects, along with research initiatives by graduate students, “have a huge effect locally,” PSU President Wim Wiewel says. “And we know that they are fantastic learning experiences and pedagogically valuable. It’s not about being a do-gooder. It’s about service learning. It also raises the visibility of the institution.”

Public engagement also is embedded in the professoriate at PSU, Wiewel says.

“We draw faculty who want to do this kind of work...who understand that this is part of their academic practice,” he says.

These outreach activities by students and faculty create the ethos of community engagement that helps define PSU. “It’s what our faculty expect,” Wiewel says. “It’s what our cities expect of us [and] it’s what our students are interested in.”

Given that public engagement is fundamentally a part of PSU, Wiewel says it is a part of the university’s mission that “doesn’t go away when times get tough.” What’s more, relationships started in student capstones and similar projects often create or strengthen bonds between the university and community organizations. In addition, they often blossom into larger faculty research

## Jobs training should not displace liberal education, president says

At the intersection of higher education and public policy today, a common mantra is “jobs, jobs, jobs.” In the stewardship arena, that means that workforce development is more likely to be funded today than, say, an arts program. Some presidents warn that **too narrow a focus on job training might undercut the broader value of higher education.**

Dorothy Leland\*, for example, champions a broad-based education from her chair as president of Georgia College & State University, the state’s public liberal arts university. She understands the push to help people prepare for jobs that are available today, but she cautions that **a broader perspective is also necessary.** “In order to prepare people for the creation of the jobs of the future, we need to prepare people who are broadly educated,” she says. “We don’t know what those jobs will be. So, to focus exclusively on narrow technical education is a mistake.”

Leland believes that leaders of public universities have a responsibility to “remind people that **public higher education is less about preparing our students for the jobs of today but for the jobs of the future. And even more so for the creation of those jobs**—the development of new businesses and non-profit-sector enterprises.”

**“We hear time and time again that corporations are looking for people who are broadly educated, have an understanding of the human and natural worlds, have good communication and analytical skills, are flexible and creative, can work across disciplinary boundaries and can work in teams composed of diverse people. Those are the skill sets that we emphasize in our institutions. We also know that people change careers, and that will increase in the future,”**

Leland says. “We have to be aggressive about telling people about the values of public higher education, about why it’s

important to them and the future of our states and our country.”

Even larger questions may also hang in the balance, Leland suggests. “When you think back to the Sputnik era, for example, at that time it was clear to many people that research coming out of higher education would be key to the United States’ competitiveness,” she observes. “Educators are continuing to make that case, but it is not being as well received because the states simply don’t have the money to fund it.”

Leland wonders whether such trends signal long-term shifts in public opinion about higher education—and potentially troubling changes in the fabric of society itself.

“The social compact is about public higher education being linked to the public good, rather than just being perceived as a private good,” she says. “The more we perceive higher education as a private good and not a public good, the more likely we are to say that the funding of it is an individual responsibility, not a public responsibility.”

With such questions on the table, Leland says that university leaders “need to more vigorously make the case for the public value of higher education, both with respect to the economic competitiveness of our nation, but also the health of our democracy.”

\*Editor’s note: Since this interview Leland has left Georgia College to become president of the University of California at Merced.





projects. That points to another emerging trend—that the more universities embed themselves in their communities, the more likely they are to find funding for engagement initiatives in the community itself.

Although some funding for stewardship activities may continue to come from institutional resources or government agencies, especially the federal government, public colleges and universities need to look to other sources of money. That includes school systems, social service organizations, businesses and corporations, Wiewel says.

As Dan Hurley, AACSU's director of state relations and policy analysis, says, "there is an argument to be made that from a fiscal, operational, and mission-sustainability standpoint, institutions need to become even more engaged in their communities and regions, both to bring about healthier communities in all aspects, as well as to provide alternative revenue streams to keep the institution healthy."

## Multiply your impact

An enthusiastic proponent of public engagement done in a big way, Wiewel urges that leaders of public universities "think about how partnership activities can help you perform your core mission of teaching and advancing knowledge. Find ways in which you can deeply embed it in what you're already doing — rather than having it as an ancillary or fringe activity — because indeed, the latter mode is always at risk and vulnerable. You can multiply your impact if you embed it." That tack can both enhance the institution and help make it more resilient in tough times, Wiewel says.

Cleveland State University, another urban institution, also views itself as an anchor within its community. For example, Berkman and his colleagues believe their mission encompasses CSU's immediate neighborhood. The university recently opened 650 new apartment-



A Senior Capstone project at Portland State University has engineering students working with the city of Portland to improve on-time arrivals for the Portland Streetcar line.

style student residences, which in turn attracted new commerce to the area, including a grocery store. The university also opened a public K-12 school on campus. "One of the things you can build a good neighborhood around is a good public school," Berkman says.

CSU has not experienced the degree of retrenchment that has impeded other institutions, Berkman notes. Enrollment has grown, and the university just completed a \$350 million building program. So rather than curtailing public engagement, Berkman believes that the recession "has actually made the [anchor] proposition more important" and created opportunities. He says that maintaining a strong public engagement presence in downtown Cleveland, which itself has felt the effects of the recession, "has provided us connectivity that might have been harder to get if everything was thriving around us."

Wiewel doesn't believe that the recession will be public engagement's coup de grace.

"Even if we assume that other universities don't have it as embedded as

much as PSU, or rely more on soft money or leftover hard money so that they have to lay people off, I think that that is a somewhat temporary [phenomenon]. I think all of this attention to engagement, partnerships and our local role is a national movement that has a kind of traction."

**In the end, the future of public engagement in an age of constraint comes down in many ways to a question of priorities.**

"I think that the current recession is causing universities, like families, to sort out what's most important," Votruba says. "It would be very easy to back off on regional stewardship and send a message that this is no longer important."

"If regional stewardship is important," he says, "that importance ought to be reflected in the way one goes about adjusting budgets in light of state revenue shortfalls." **P**

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