

# Recommitting to Stewardship of Place

Creating and Sustaining Thriving  
Communities for the Decades Ahead

## Executive Summary

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In 2002, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) defined what it means to be a regional comprehensive university (RCU) in its landmark report *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place: A Guide for Leading Public Engagement at State Colleges and Universities*, which articulated an institutional purpose that is at once place-based and oriented toward serving multiple communities whose lives are enhanced by postsecondary education. It is now 2022 and the challenges facing RCUs have not drastically changed in the last two decades—resource disparities, enrollment fluctuations, balancing competing priorities while engaging place, and public skepticism over the value of higher education remain important issues. Nevertheless, some challenges have intensified and the broader economic, social, demographic, and political forces shaping institutions and their communities have evolved. As a result, stewardship of place in 2022 must look different than it did in 2002. *Recommitting to Stewardship of Place: Creating and Sustaining Thriving Communities for the Decades Ahead* provides an updated framing for stewardship of place that acknowledges the new postsecondary landscape while demonstrating why recommitting to being a steward of place is more important now than ever.

The report begins by reviewing and celebrating the earlier iterations of stewardship of place to situate the current report within 20 years of public

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engagement and thought. The report also contextualizes stewardship of place by describing some of the most important trend lines in postsecondary education, grouped into three broad themes: equity and upward mobility, resources and resilience, and regional prosperity and civic health.

The report then articulates the following eight principles of stewardship of place, which can serve as a guide and ballast for AASCU institutions when meeting future challenges and opportunities. These principles comprise the philosophical underpinnings of stewardship of place:

“It is time that we deepen that anchor of being the educational, economic, and social hubs of the communities we serve.”

~Mildred García, AASCU president and CEO

- > **Connection to Place:** Forging deep connections to the geographic and cultural sites that RCUs serve.
- > **Reciprocity:** Decentering the university and sharing power with the community by collaborating with local leaders and 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, seeking to establish two-way relationships that enhance 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 AASCU institutions and the communities they serve, and leading 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.

The report concludes by envisioning a future for RCUs that deepens and expands the principles of stewardship of place to ensure institutional and regional sustainability.

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