Ranking Contributions to Place
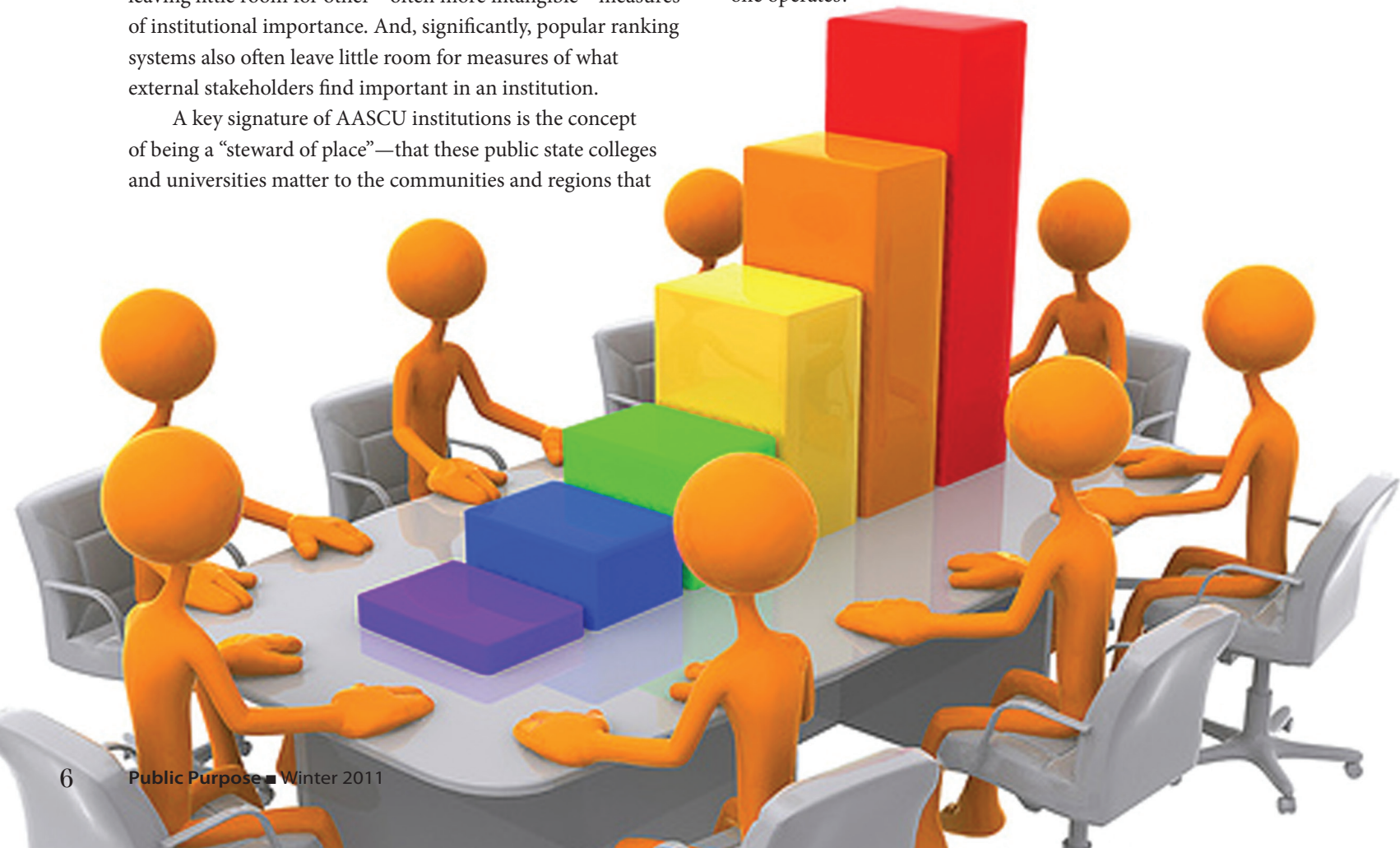
by Matthew Meekins and KerryAnn O'Meara

Developing an Alternative Model for Competition in Higher Education

"How are we to focus on becoming more engaged as a department or college when all our universities want is for us to become more highly ranked in *U.S. News & World Report?*" It is a question often asked by frustrated faculty and administrators at institutions across the country, as ranking systems increasingly seem to determine what is prioritized in higher education. Student selectivity inputs and peer-review survey results rule the day, leaving little room for other—often more intangible—measures of institutional importance. And, significantly, popular ranking systems also often leave little room for measures of what external stakeholders find important in an institution.

A key signature of AASCU institutions is the concept of being a "steward of place"—that these public state colleges and universities matter to the communities and regions that surround them. Stewardship strives for local impact and service to one's immediate neighbors. Is the "positional arms race" (Winston, 2000) of *U.S. News*—a race that rewards national recognition and highly selective admissions—assisting with this stewardship? Or would a new ranking system, developed around criteria intended to reward institutions not for national recognition but instead for local impact, be better suited to emphasize the importance of serving the community in which one operates?

As with all attempts to measure quality in higher education, the actual process of determining those criteria must contend with the realities of differences in resources and local contexts.

Starting from this idea—and drawing upon the concepts developed in AASCU's 2002 Task Force on Engagement report, *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place*—we have sought to identify criteria that could be used to rank institutions' contributions to place. Specifically, we sought criteria that would reward those institutions who "walked the walk," the ones who followed through on the ubiquitous promises in mission statements to contribute to the broader community.

Developing a Ranking System for Contributions to Place

While over the past decade alternative ranking and classification systems have arisen to shed a light on institutions that are becoming truly engaged (such as the Carnegie *Classification for Community Engagement*), there are, to date, no major national or international rankings systems that specifically and solely focus on contributions colleges and universities make to their local communities and regions. Most engagement- and service-learning-related rankings are focused on whether community engagement has become institutionalized in core university cultures and processes, which is critical for long term sustainability. However, the external focus, whether the work is really having an impact in regions, neighborhoods and specific places, has few (if any) spotlights. It is our hope that by highlighting categories often ignored by leading publications, an alternative ranking model would serve to bring attention to something we think is of value, that we want to assess and perhaps even strive toward: rewarding colleges and universities who are collaborative partners with those outside the physical borders of the campus.

After recognizing the importance of the issue at hand, we were faced with a question: What, in fact, constitutes a successful higher education "steward of place?" In an ideal world, criteria would take into account all measures that would reflect the quality and depth of an institution's commitment to the community and region it serves. As with all attempts to measure quality in higher education, however, the actual process of determining those criteria must contend with the realities of differences in resources and local contexts.

The criteria we arrived upon were drawn from issues that seemed dominant in our study of literature, experiences with AASCU institutions and the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement, and consultation with national leaders in the engagement movement. They are intended to be creative, innovative and focus specifically on concrete, measurable contributions made to the 100 miles around an institution.

Criteria to Rank Contributions to Place

1. **Leadership capacity.** A major contribution any university can make for a community and/or region is to prepare its future leaders. We are interested in not only leaders developed and trained by institutions committed to their local area, but also in leaders who stay local. We propose assessing leadership capacity in two ways: first, by the number or percent of educational, nonprofit and civic leaders who attend a particular institution; and second, through evidence of leadership development and continuing education offered through the institution for local constituencies.

2. **Commitment to the underserved.** Acknowledging the importance institutions have afforded to narrowing achievement gaps to effect positive change in their communities, we propose a measure that rewards institutions that have a demonstrated commitment to access. This is designed to incorporate input, as well as process variable; institutions would be judged by a variety of criteria, including percentage of Pell Grant recipients (as a proxy for students from low-income backgrounds); availability of education in the form of flexible opportunities for enrollment; and success at boosting graduation and retention rates of minority students. Another piece of this particular component would measure an institution's commitment to encouraging the full participation of traditionally underserved populations in academic, social and community-based functions. Institutions could be evaluated on whether they can show

they have widened participation over a period of recent years.

3. **Workforce development and training.** Institutions of higher education—and public colleges and universities in particular—are often tasked with preparing a trained, knowledgeable and productive workforce to support specific goals, often of a workforce development or shortage nature. To measure an institution's role in fulfilling the needs of the community in which it operates, we propose calculating the percentage of total graduates awarded degrees in areas determined to be a priority by the local or state governments.

4. **Capital investments.** In contrast to the oft-heard complaint from local communities that universities take over land parcels without regard to other potential uses for the property, many institutions have engaged in fiduciary partnerships with regional and city offices to co-own and run public parks, museums, schools, libraries and other facilities. These partnerships represent the contribution of real cash on behalf of institutions to regional efforts and agencies. We suggest that a component of a ranking system that attempts to shed light on community engagement should include a measure of the percentage of budget allocated to partnership investments and to neighborhood development over a given timeframe.

5. **Sustainability initiatives.** There now exist multiple ranking systems that take into account the degree to which a campus has "gone green." We believe, however, that many institutions go beyond that by actually operating in ways that improve the sustainability of the region via stewardship of additional lands, environmental program outreach, and projects that improve the use of natural resources in the region. Existing initiatives—such as the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education's Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS) and the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment—provide a usable framework for evaluating a campus' green footprint. We propose using previously collected data to acknowledge those institutions that have demonstrated positive environmental stewardship.

6. **Cultural opportunities and outreach.** From speakers to symphonies, colleges and universities can greatly enrich the intellectual and artistic offerings available to a local populace. We propose to acknowledge institutions not only for the breadth of cultural opportunities, but also for the extent to which the community is actively engaged and invited on campus to participate in those events.

7. **Economic development.** As employment concerns become an area of more intense focus, we believe it is all the more important for communities to know and understand the high number of FTE, benefited jobs an institution produces for a region. Additionally, many highly engaged institutions are incubators for small business—a key role in supporting local economic growth. We propose including the job placement rate within a 100-mile radius, salary data and small business support data as criteria in determining an institution's role in an area's economic success.

8. **Spaces for deliberative democracy.** As Harry Boyte has reminded us, another key role that universities can play in society is providing free spaces for civil dialogue and discourse about the pressing issues regions and communities face. Such a contribution could be assessed by the number of times local politicians, citizen groups or community-based organizations were invited on campus for discussions about issues of common concern. Additionally, we propose incorporating the sharing of facilities and resources with the local, external community at a price below the cost of operation.

9. **Shared governance.** Being good community stewards also means being good hosts and inviting community partners to help shape the use of resources, direction of teaching, research and outreach. One way to assess this would be to look at the numbers of centers and programs that have community partners as members of their advisory boards and steering committees. Likewise, what percentage of the

leadership of the organization (board, president, provost, deans, vice presidents) serves on local educational and government boards?

10. **Affordability and residency.** Tuition is a perennial hot-button issue in higher education. Given that low tuition at high quality institutions serves as an incentive to encourage the best and brightest locally to stay local, we think good stewards keep tuition affordable while also showing a commitment to provide substantial discounting to in-state residents in comparison to out-of-state rates.

institutions play in giving the public access to syllabi, a database of university expertise, and the opportunity to be engaged in research as participants and collaborators. Likewise, many institutions are at the cutting edge of technological innovations and make efforts to share innovations with local schools, government and non-profits below market cost. We believe one of the criteria for stewards of place should be the degree to which institutions offer these different accesses to knowledge and new technological innovations.

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11. **University partnerships.** Another critical aspect of being a steward is not being a fair-weather friend, but a long term, invested partner in teaching, research, outreach and service exchanges that benefit communities and institutions. Here we think institutions could be ranked on the number of long-term (five years or more) partnerships between the institution and school districts, senior citizen homes, and community centers where there is a commitment longer than one faculty member or staff member's tenure, made between the institution and the community for long-term impact.

12. **Commitment to the local student body.** A final criterion we suggest in determining effective stewardship is the proportion to which institutions enroll a primarily in-state student body. This component is deemed important because of the prevalence of references in university and system missions to serving the residents of a particular state. Institutions, under our ranking scheme, are thus acknowledged for fidelity to this espoused goal and for having a higher percentage of in-state residents. This is something that, in particular, runs counter to traditional ranking systems that emphasize national prominence and as wide an applicant pool as possible.

13. **Public access to knowledge and technology transfer.** Here we borrow from the work of Hart, Northmore and Gerhardt (2009), to observe the key role higher education

A Significant Commitment to Place

While rankings have been a subject of intense debate, study and attention in the past decade, most prominent ranking systems are leaving a critical stakeholder without a voice: the community beyond the campus borders. This measure of stewardship is unique because it focuses on the outcomes of higher education—specifically, on those that have a significant impact on local communities and places. Measuring these benefits also provides a new lens through which to assess the role of higher education in society, and holds institutions accountable for the goals of their mission statements.

We hope these proposed criteria will help to shed light on some of the true strengths of AASCU institutions and those like them: the ability to make a significant impact on a place. This ranking system is intended to measure real social and economic impacts, and to make more visible the often-intangible benefits truly engaged institutions bring to those around them. **P**

Notes

Hart, A., Northhouse, S. & Gerhardt, C. (2009). *Briefing paper: auditing, benchmarking and evaluating public engagement.* NCCPE Research Synthesis, No 1. University of Bristol, Bristol, England.

Winston, G. C. (2000). *The positional arms race in higher education* (discussion paper no. 54). Williamstown, MA: Williams Project on the Economics of Higher Education.

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