REGIONAL STEWARDSHIP AND THE REDEFINITION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Inspired by the late John Gardner, in May 2000 the *Alliance for Regional Stewardship* (*ARS*) was formed as a "peer-to-peer network of regional leaders working across boundaries to solve tough community problems."[1] According to the *ARS*, regional stewardship is the leadership needed to address the complex problems of our time. Soon after the formation of the *ARS*, the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State Universities and Land Grant colleges published *Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution*, which describes both the challenge of public engagement and the ways in which higher education must mobilize to respond.[2] In May 2002, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (*AASC&U*) published *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place*, a "practical and strategic guide for state colleges and university leaders who want to more deeply embed public engagement in the fabric of their institution at the campus, college and departmental levels."[3] In January 2006, *ARS*, *AASC&U*, and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (*NCHEMS*) published *Making Place Matter: Tools and Insights for Universities Called to Regional Stewardship* "to provide tools and practical insights to regional and campus leaders as they seek to build and deepen their relationship to create more vital and viable places."[4] According to these institutions and agencies, colleges and universities of all kinds across the nation should transform themselves into regional stewards.

Should colleges and universities conceive of themselves as regional stewards and more aggressively and more creatively engage society's most pressing challenges? To address this question, the paper begins by reviewing the contested purpose of higher education in the United States. It then identifies why proponents, such as *Making Place Matter*, believe that regional

[1] *Alliance for Regional Stewardship*, http://www.regionalstewardship.org/about.html.
[2] *Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution*, https://www.nasulgc.org/NetCommunity/Document.Doc?id=183.
[3] *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place* (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2002), 7, http://www.aascu.org/pdf/stewardsofplace_02.pdf.
[4] *Making Place Matter: Tools and Insights for Universities Called to Regional Stewardship* (Alliance for Regional Stewardship, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, and National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2006), 1, http://www.aascu.org/pdf/06_mpmtools.pdf. This citation will be referred to as *MPM* in the remainder of the text.

stewardship is needed, why higher education seems to be an attractive candidate for it and how higher education would be redefined if it adopted regional stewardship as its mission. The paper then argues that the redefinition of higher education in terms of regional stewardship, as defined by the above agencies, would not serve our students or our society well. The paper concludes that the notion of regional stewardship should be expanded and proposes a path for further reflection.

The Contested Purpose of Higher Education

In their classic work *Higher Education in Transition: A History of American Colleges and Universities 1636-1976*, John Brubacher and Willis Rudy draw attention to a developing characteristic of colleges and universities to serve local communities and American society.[5] Since the inception of higher education in the United States, however, the nature and purpose of this service has been vigorously debated. For example, in 1636 English colonists founded Harvard College to advance Puritan Christianity.[6] After the American Revolution, their mandate centered on providing religious and lay leaders for a new nation.

After the Civil War, the societal demands on higher education created new missions for institutions of higher learning. As Carol Gruber in *Mars and Minerva* demonstrates, institutional differentiation occurred during the nineteenth century as state, land-grant and research universities were founded.[7] The desire for practical scientific knowledge led to the founding of land-grant universities after 1862 such as Iowa State and Michigan State. With the rise of applied science, the university's mission shifted toward public problems. The desire for scientific inquiry, particularly espoused by American graduates of German universities since 1810, encouraged early efforts to launch research-oriented institutions of higher learning. With the founding of Johns Hopkins, Clark University, and the reestablishment of the University of Chicago, the university mission became dedicated to research. American scholars advanced the ideals of "knowledge for knowledge's sake," that is, pure research, as they placated demands for its practical application.

By the early 20th century, an alternative conception, not wholly new to the 20th century, formed in opposition to both applied and pure science. Laurence Veysey in *The Emergence of the American University* identifies this conception as "culture" but it is similar to what we term today "liberal"

[5] John S. Brubacher and Rudy, Willis, *Higher Education in Transition: A History of the American Colleges and Universities, 1636-1976*, 3rd, ed., rev. and enl. (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1976).

[6] See Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607-1783* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

[7] Carol Gruber, *Mars and Minerva: World War I and the uses of the higher learning in America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975).

education.[8] As opposed to the sciences, proponents of this view touted the humanities as a way to create a cultured human being. In contrast to learning to "make a living," these proponents proposed learning to "live well." This kind of college is represented today by the small liberal arts colleges such as St. John's College and Grinnell College.

Higher Education in the contemporary period reflects the tremendous influence of both national public policy and economic goals on postsecondary education.[9] The 1947 report of President Harry S. Truman's commission on higher education, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, and the Higher Education Act of 1965 encouraged the education and training of all citizens and the growth of community colleges. By the late twentieth century, a strong link between higher education and economic success began to form.[10] Higher education began to function increasingly as an industry with fluctuating, predominately economic goals and market oriented values. Increasingly, the production of workers is the primary or singular goal of higher education.[11]

The call for regional stewardship as a call to serve society, then, is not entirely new within the history of higher education in United States. What, however, motivates the current interest in service by proponents of regional stewardship? What kind of service exactly are these proponents requiring of higher education in the United States? If regional stewardship is adopted by higher education institutions, then how will it have to change to serve society?

The Stewardship Imperative

According to the *Alliance for Regional Stewardship* (*ARS*), a regional stewardship imperative exists because regions matter today and there is a crisis of leadership in our regions. The *ARS* reports that "[P]lace matters because people matter in the New Economy. Skills and knowledge are the keys to economic progress. Skilled and knowledgeable people tend to locate in communities that have a good quality of life and great social, cultural and natural assets."[12] The problem, according to *ARS*, is that the places we live in "face challenges in workforce, transportation, housing, open space, and social

[8] Laurence Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965).
[9] Martin Trow, "American Higher Education—Past, Present and Future," *Studies in Higher Education* 14, no. 1 (1989): 5-22.
[10] Derek Bok, *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).
[11] Clark Kerr, *Troubled Times in American Higher Education: The 1990s and Beyond* (Albany, NY: State University Press of New York, 1994).
[12] *Alliance for Regional Stewardship*, "Regional Stewardship: A Commitment to Place," Monograph Series 1, (October 2000), 3. Accessed at: http://www.regionalstewardship.org/resources/Monograph1.pdf. This citation will be referred to as *RSCP* in the remainder of the text.

inclusion that cannot adequately be addressed by traditional political boundaries and jurisdictions." These challenges, contends the *ARS*, must be addressed from a new perspective, a *regional* perspective "where economic, environmental, and social concerns all come together" (*RSCP*, 3).

The *ARS* claims that we need regional stewardship *now* because many communities are undergoing a "crisis of leadership" and that regions suffer from "anonymity of leadership" (*RSCP*, 5-6). The *ARS* argues that traditional forms of leadership, such as CEOs of major corporations, neighborhood activists, or ethnic community leaders are not able to resolve the most pressing and most difficult regional issues because the "contemporary challenges facing regions cross multiple boundaries and jurisdictions" (*RSCP*, 7). The "one promising model" of leadership, according to *ARS*, is regional stewardship because regional stewards are "leaders that cross boundaries, take an integrated approach, and build coalitions for action" (*RSCP*, 7).

The remaining challenge, asserts the *ARS*, is to recruit and support regional stewards. According to proponents of regional stewardship, colleges and universities offer tremendous potential as regional stewards because they seem to be in the best position to address the "external forces driving the emerging stewardship imperative" (*MPM*, 2). Chief among the forces, claims *MPM*, is the "idea-driven economy." *MPM* maintains that ideas are the raw material for economic growth and that colleges and universities are well-positioned to create, grow and position these ideas for application in the economy. It also predicts that colleges and universities will become "knowledge factories" so as to be relevant in the unfolding economic and social environment (*MPM*, 9).

A second major force is the "proximity edge." For innovation to occur, knowledge and technical expertise must be in close proximity. *MPM* insists that colleges and universities must act as hubs where knowledge and technical expertise may locate for innovation and competitive success to occur. A third major force is the "talent imperative." Innovation will occur where there are talented people. Colleges and universities, states *MPM*, must play a critical role in developing the talented people essential to the innovative process. A fourth major force is the "Big Regional Sort." According to *MPM*, "the new muscle of the U.S. economy—people who make a living with ideas, creating value with new products, services or just experiences—is converging in a few regions" (*MPM*, 13). In those regions that are losing the people critical to the new economy, *MPM* believes that colleges and universities have emerged as one of the few regional assets capable of attracting "knowledge workers." A fifth major force is a "new definition of success." Following scholars and leading economic development practitioners, *MPM* contends that "the creation of wealth [per capita income growth] should be the goal for companies and communities" (*MPM*, 14). Because a region's overall economic prosperity depends on productivity and innovation, *MPM* assumes that colleges and universities can play a central role in creating the ingredients for success,

such as increasing the stock of postsecondary-educated persons, creating pipelines for entrepreneurs and building research centers.

The sixth and final force is the "importance of place." Because the idea-driven economy relies on talented people, the culture and environment of places must entice talented people to live there. *MPM* declares that colleges and universities will lure knowledge workers by creating "an atmosphere in which arts and creativity flourish, where unique cultural and recreational opportunities abound, and where entrepreneurial behavior is nurtured" (*MPM*, 16). In addition, *MPM* believes that colleges and universities are "deeply imbued with a sense of place, as their names and statutory missions prominently reference specific geographic areas and their students are drawn largely from those areas. Perhaps most importantly, their physical infrastructure commits them to place" (*MPM*, 18). Their physical place, contends *MPM*, makes them "logical anchors" for building key place-based assets. In the end, proponents of regional stewardship believe that colleges and universities are best positioned "to help resolve the complex environmental, social and economic issues facing regions today" (*MPM*, 19).

The Redefinition of Higher Education

Despite the apparent potential for regional stewardship in higher education, proponents are concerned that colleges and universities are not aligned for success. According to *MPM*, in previous ages colleges and universities were positioned to support agricultural and industrial economies. "In an age where the economy is driven by ideas," argues *MPM*, "more is required from colleges and universities than merely creating and disseminating the ideas. Such an economy requires academic institutions to *redefine the university model* so that they are permanently engaged as a full partner in the viability and vitality of the regions to which they are connected" (*MPM*, 19., italics added). The call for regional stewardship by institutions of higher education, then, is in fact a call to *redefine* the nature and role of the university model and its relationship with society.

According to *Making Place Matter*, for decades and especially since the early 1990s, universities have been pressured to run more like businesses. In the late 1990s, *MPM* contended that universities were called to be more "engaged" in "regional and state economic development efforts, producing partnerships between universities and businesses" (*MPM*, 20). For proponents of colleges and universities becoming regional stewards, though, these changes were not radical enough. *MPM* states that

> [E]ven though these efforts sought to change the university, they still remain within the traditional university model, one where the university serves the community/region/state but remains separated from these and other stakeholders in the many crucial respects. It is becoming increasingly clear that

> the time has come for a *new model*, not a tune-up. It is not clear that the traditional university has the mission, the culture, or the might to play the role that it must play today in the regional economy, that of being more attuned to local challenges and more responsible for community success (*MPM*, 6, italics added).

According to *MPM*, regional stewardship requires that universities take the three traditional pillars of the university mission—Teaching, Research and Service—and turn them on their collective heads. In their place *MPM* recommends three new pillars for the university—Learning, Innovation and Shared Leadership. Learning is a "critical pillar because it properly conveys the message that the acquisition, creation, and application of knowledge are increasingly viewed as central to our health, happiness, and prosperity as a society" (*MPM*, 20). Innovation is a critical pillar because it "is key to economic growth and prosperity, and positions colleges and universities 'in-play' as a region's chief source of expertise, diversity and interaction—the three key ingredients of innovation" (*MPM*, 21). Shared leadership is a critical pillar because it recognizes a shift from the traditional university's "one-way" partnership with the community to a new "two-way" model where ideas and resources flow more freely and in both directions between universities and communities.

According to *Making Place Matter*, then, the call to regional stewardship is a radical departure from the traditional university model. The new "governing principle [of the university] must be relevance to the publics' they serve" (*MPM*, 31). In fact, proponents of regional stewardship claim that the "new standard" for colleges and universities in the 21st century is the ability to be relevant and respond to immediate needs of society. Taking this step, argue its proponents, will allow colleges and universities "to gain new respect and cash in on new opportunities" (*MPM*, 24).

A Narrow Definition of Stewardship

Historically, it makes sense to link stewardship and higher education in America. First, since the inception of higher education in America, colleges and universities have viewed themselves as responsible for the education and well-being of the students entrusted to their care.[13] The level of responsibility may have waned since the days of *in loco parentis*, but American colleges and universities remain committed to serving the best interests of their students.[14]

[13] On the relationship between higher education and society, see Adrianna Kezar, "Obtaining Integrity? Reviewing and Examining the Charter between Higher Education and Society, *The Review of Higher Education* 27, no. 4 (Summer 2004): 429-459.

[14] Gavin Henning, "*Is* In Consortio Cum Parentibus *the New* In Loco Parentis*?*," *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* 44, no. 3 (2007): 538-60.

Second, since the inception of higher education in America, colleges and universities have viewed themselves as serving society.[15] The kind and degree of service has varied depending upon the predominant conception of the purpose of higher education, but whether the purpose was to create good human beings, clergymen, good citizens or directly engage social problems, colleges and universities have sought to contribute positively to American society. That higher education in America should care for and serve students and society is not in question here. What is in question is *how* higher education in America should serve students and society; and how it is defined by proponents of regional stewardship is too narrow to serve our students and our society well. It is critical to note that the problem is not with regional stewardship *per se*, but with the way regional stewardship has been defined primarily in economic terms by its leading proponents.

According to proponents of regional stewardship, higher education should serve students and society by preparing "knowledge workers" for the "idea driven economy." This notion of service suffers from a premature vocationalism. Higher education needs to take account of the student's need to earn a living. It should not, however, easily encourage those too young to know themselves to acquire particular abilities for immediate economic reasons. Rather, it should give them the basic skills that are common to all work in a society such as ours.[16] The economic purpose of higher education "is tantamount to consigning the young to subservience and redundancy."[17] The kind of specialized job training outlined by proponents of regional stewardship "is in fact the reverse of something practical and effective in a society that is

[15] This view of higher education is summarized in Lester F. Goodchild and Wechsler, Harold S., *The History of Higher Education*, Second Edition, ASHE Reader Series (Old Tappan, NJ: Pearson Custom Publishing, 1997), xxv-xxxiii.

[16] "[T]he new knowledge-based economy needs the kinds of graduates that liberal education provides – workers who have general skills, who can think outside the box, participate in team efforts, and flourish in interdisciplinary settings," from Anthony Carnevale and Jeff Strohl, "The Demographic Window of Opportunity: Liberal Education in the New Century," *Peer Review* (Winter 2001), http://www.aacu.org/peerreview/pr-wi01/pr-wi01feature1.cfm. "In this project, leaders from the agencies accrediting professional programs were unanimous in declaring that a liberal education is not impractical or an unnecessary luxury; rather, it is essential to professional success in their fields, whether business, education, engineering, or nursing," from *Taking Responsibility for the Baccalaureate Degree: A Report from the Greater Expectations Project on Accreditation and Assessment* (Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2004), iv. In a related way John Dewey supports a non-specific education for vocational success. Opposed to "education *for* occupations," Dewey proposes an "education *through* occupations." See John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916), 309.

[17] Eva T.H. Brann, *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic* (Chicago; The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 27-8.

always changing and progressing."[18] Because economies shift, change and transform, the people trained for a specific economy need to be retrained when they enter their job or soon after.[19]

The notion of service advocated by proponents of regional stewardship also bears a narrow utilitarianism. The strict focus on economic utility causes higher education to ignore the development of a socially conscious and morally responsible person. Thus, higher education here defined may produce a good knowledge-worker, but not necessarily a good person or citizen. The Wall Street crisis should demonstrate the potential impact of ignoring the social and ethical development of the person. That is, Wall Street did not suffer from a lack of persons capable of success in an idea-driven economy; rather it suffered from a lack of just persons. Ironically, then, the success of regional stewardship's focus on economic utility may prove dangerous to the very regions it is intended to serve. This irony would occur because liberal education, which contemplates questions of justice, benevolence and charity and the distinctions between "making a living" and "living well" is identified as irrelevant and replaced by a narrow utilitarianism which is legitimated by its relevance to the immediate needs of society.

The primary problem with regional stewardship as defined is that it requires the jettisoning of a traditional feature of higher education without recognizing its unique service to the region and beyond. There is a tradition of political thought stretching from Plato and Aristotle to Jefferson and Tocqueville that contends that democracies are prone to error "because democracies necessarily have a large proportion of uneducated rulers and because public opinion reigns supreme in them without the counterpoising effect exercised by an aristocratic class which incorporates different principles and to the protection of which dissenters can repair."[20]

Recounting Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Joseph Knippenberg argues persuasively that Tocqueville observed these very same problems in our own democratic republic.[21] According to Knippenberg, Tocqueville recognized that we lack the resources to think for ourselves

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[18] Mortimer J. Adler, *The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto* (New York: Touchstone, 1982), 17-9.

[19] "The pace of [economic] change means that individuals are likely to find their specific work skills becoming obsolete. They must keep up with advances in technology and expect to change their employment often as firms and industries complete globally, adopt new technologies and new forms of work organization, and individuals must be able to engage in 'life-long' learning," W. Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson, "Vocationalism in Higher Education: The Triumph of the Education Gospel," *The Journal of Higher Education* 76, no. 1 (January/February 2005): 1-2.

[20] Allan Bloom, "The Democratization of the University," in *Giants and Dwarfs: Essays 1960-1990*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 366.

[21] Joseph Knippenberg, "Leisure, Busyness, and the Aims of Liberal Education," accessed at http://www.ashbrook.org/publicat/oped/knippenberg/07/leisure.html.

because we work for a living and thus lack the time and inclination to engage in the kind of deep theoretical inquiry needed for enlightened consent. In addition, Knippenberg shows that Tocqueville recognized that public opinion reigns supreme because we are unwilling to criticize the opinions of our fellow citizens on whom we depend. In short, democracy, even our own democratic republic, is prone to error because it fails to produce critical, independent thinking because of its citizens being immersed in the working world and suffering immense pressures to intellectual conformity. The immense pressures from the media and Madison Avenue to act shallowly and irrationally based on immediate desires further exacerbate our situation in ways Tocqueville could not have anticipated.

Given the propensity to err that is inherent to democracies, there is also a tradition of educational thought that contends democracies are in particular need of the enlightening function of higher education. In contrast to our working world, the institution of higher education offers a kind of leisure that only it can provide. As an institution, it is a place where we can suspend the pressures of practicality and engage in inquiry, thought and discussion. The busyness of life will resume soon after higher education, but while in higher education students are afforded a unique and valuable opportunity to think for themselves. In addition, the institution of higher education creates a place for us to examine and debate both the permanent questions and the prevailing views of the day.

If institutions of higher education became regional stewards, however, colleges and universities would be less a preserve for the contemplation of the permanent questions and more a work space for solving the pressing affairs of the day. To the degree that higher education moves from engaging critically the dominant opinions of the day to engaging uncritically those opinions, it hinders rather than helps our democratic republic. If regional stewardship were adopted, our republic would lose an institution that encourages the conviction to stand against the tide of popular opinion and think for oneself. Our democratic republic would be better served by an institution that allows for critical, independent reflection on the dominant view of the needs and interests of the day. We need a place of shelter to challenge popular prejudices and promote thoughtful deliberation on the pressing challenges of our day. By redefining and thus gutting the only institution designed to promote independent thought and critical examination of public opinion, the radical redefinition of higher education according to regional stewardship would not serve our society well.

The notion of regional stewardship needs to be expanded beyond narrow economic terms. Any positive project of regional stewardship in higher education will need to grapple with distance. How much or how little distance should there be between higher education and society? If the ivory tower is too much distance, as suggested by proponents of regional stewardship, knowledge

factories is too little distance. What is the right distance? This is the question we must ask to broaden our notion of regional stewardship.

As we ponder this question, it may be useful to remind ourselves of the story of Socrates and Athens.[22] Socrates was a kind of regional steward. As a lifelong resident of Athens, even refusing to flee to save his life, he was devoted to Athens. Yet, while being a devoted Athenian, he was able to distance himself from Athens to see both its virtues and its flaws. His critical patriotism provided a unique vantage point for the transformation of Athens. For this story to be told, however, we must remain committed to liberal education, which is threatened by proponents of a narrowly defined regional stewardship. Liberal education, for example, aims to prepare students to live an intelligent life and teach them "to become thoughtful about themselves and the world, about their actions and their thoughts, about what they do, what they say, what they want, and what they think."[23] Through a liberal education, students are prepared for living a reflective life, rather than simply making a living and citizens are prepared for a life of responsible citizenship. If higher education could form such individuals, then they would serve as good regional stewards.

Conclusion

Our modern, technological society places a high premium on the values of utility and vocational success. Our students are immersed in the working world and come to higher education with a pragmatic bent. Many of them arrive on campus with a plan to prepare themselves for a life of work. In this regard, they treat higher education, as a trade or professional school. Higher education must resist the prevailing pragmatic obsession and insist "against the pressures of the marketplace, upon the importance of reading, thinking, and conversation, all increasingly threatened in a world that demands that we always be *doing* something."[24] The task before us is to broaden our notion of regional stewardship to include learning to live a good life as well as making a living.

[22] For compelling accounts of this story see J. Peter Euben, *Corrupting Youth: Political Education, Democratic Culture and Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) and James A. Colaiaco, *Socrates against Athens: Philosophy on Trial* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

[23] Jan Blits, "The Search for Ends: Liberal Education and the Modern University," in *The American University: problems, prospects and trends*, edited by Jan H. Blits (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1985), 93.

[24] Knippenberg, "Leisure, Busyness, and the Aims of Liberal Education."