

Closing Remarks: Connecting the Dots

The challenge of regional stewardship

Many, if not all, of us have memories of working on connect-the-dot exercises as children. These quasi-educational passers of time were usually contained in pulp activities booklets and given to us by our parents. Those of us who are parents most likely engaged our children in the same activity.

The tradition continues. A few weeks ago, as my wife and I were enjoying time with our grandchildren, our grandson announced “That’s Rex” while looking at a totally uncompleted connect-the-dot picture on the children’s menu at a restaurant.

Sometimes the picture is obvious; other times, you can only see dots.

Linking resources

Many of us engaged in the leadership of colleges and universities, and especially those in the comprehensive university category, find ourselves in an institutional connect-the-dot exercise. Sometimes called community or public engagement, it is now often known as regional stewardship.

The concept isn’t new, but it has been growing in importance recently. I am proud that the Commonwealth of Kentucky has shown the vision to challenge its comprehensive universities to be better regional stewards and grateful that it has provided funding specifically for the purpose. In fact, Kentucky’s statewide stewardship program is the first of its kind in the United States. The Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education describes the regional stewardship program as an effort “to link the resources and knowledge of our universities to the needs and challenges of their respective regions.”

Linking resources is like connecting dots. When you draw from dot to dot to complete a picture, a number of things happen. What was a set of separate dots takes on an obvious cohesive purpose, the big picture becomes clear, and the little design elements inside the lines connecting the dots become integral parts of a whole.

Recently I attended a conference on regional stewardship sponsored by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and coordinated by James Votruba, president of Northern Kentucky University. AASCU has a long history of encouraging public engagement among its 300-plus member institutions. Under Votruba’s leadership, NKU has become an institution recognized for its excellence in regional stewardship. I’ll be candid: His institution has connected more dots than mine has. But we’ll catch up.

What I confirmed at that conference was that all institutions have an array of resources appropriate to regional stewardship, such as service learning, applied research, public service, small business development centers, and other institutes. With a little imagination, one can make this list grow and grow.

I also reinforced my understanding that success in regional stewardship requires institutional alignment. We must be clear about what we can do and who we serve. Every element of the organization must be aligned to support intended outcomes, and the effort should be spread across the breadth of the mission.

The most significant difference between the current concept of regional stewardship and some traditional public-service efforts is that regional stewardship is community driven. At Eastern Kentucky University, we seek guidance from a board whose members represent constituent groups from throughout our 22-county service region. In addition, we have conducted 14 “town meeting” type sessions to gauge needs for programs and services.

Connecting more dots

We have already learned that there is more work to be done than we can do. This situation makes it imperative that we pick places where we can succeed and that we do not promise things we cannot deliver.

It also means that we need to connect more dots by collaborating with other institutions. Eastern Kentucky University has already begun discussions with Morehead State University, another Kentucky comprehensive university that serves Appalachian counties demographically similar to ECU’s service region. With the leadership of MSU president Wayne Andrews and Gary Cox, president of the Association of Independent Kentucky Colleges and Universities, we are looking for ways to broaden collaborative efforts throughout the region to involve every public university, community and technical college, and independent institution.

EKU brings a unique concept to the table: the educational extension agent. Perhaps I shouldn’t call it unique, because we blatantly borrowed the idea from the successful county extension agent model of the land grant universities. The difference is that our educational extension agents broker the information age services of a comprehensive university. These individuals will work with the appropriate people and organizations in the counties to which they are assigned. The success of pilot projects implemented this year will guide our future efforts.

Our first full-time educational extension agent has been deployed in our home county. Among the first fruits has been a dramatically strengthened partnership with our local public school system. The recent appointment of our first director of regional stewardship will help ramp up this program in other areas.

Stewardship's role in advancement

While regional stewardship is in the wheelhouse of comprehensive universities, it is a practice that fits throughout the academy. Advancement professionals should become familiar (if they aren’t already) with the regional stewardship efforts of their institutions. The implications are obvious.

Regional stewardship efforts will be enhanced by the friends your institution already has in the area you are seeking to serve. You will find many of these friends in positions of leadership or among the opinion leaders valuable to your work.

Successes and failures are both going to get attention. The institution needs to be careful not to promise a service beyond its capacity and to avoid dropping the ball. If those things happen, advancement professionals are going to have to deal with the fallout. When the positive corollary prevails, it's your job to maximize the public relations value to the institution.

Development folks like to say that success begets success. If an institution does not turn success in the regional stewardship arena into cultivation opportunities for philanthropic support, it will have missed the moment.

If you need to, ask about regional stewardship's status on your campus. You don't want to be an unconnected dot.

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