

# *AITF*

# *Leadership*

# *Guide*

*Second Edition*

**Sustaining a  
Commitment to Community  
Engagement and Social Change:**  
*A Guide for Aspiring, New, and Existing  
Anchor Institution Leaders*

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## Introduction

This second volume of the AITF Leadership Guide emerged from a visible need to capture lessons from leadership in how to forge, advance, and sustain an anchor institution's commitment to being an active participant in its surrounding community. In this volume, the authors build upon the wider concepts discussed in the inaugural Leadership Guide which was initiated from discussions in the Anchor Institutions Task Force's Higher Education Presidential Subgroup. This group of leaders had been discussing strategies to sustain anchor institutions' commitment to their localities and community partners over time. The conversation gradually began taking on a greater urgency as members of this group began to retire.

In this volume of the Leadership Guide, interviews with leaders across higher education, healthcare, and culture in the Anchor Institutions movement discuss how they think about their roles and strategies for engagement. Three leaders represent the cornerstone of AITF's mission to find commonality between all institutions within the anchor institutions movement. Chancellor Nancy Cantor (Rutgers University-Newark) provides perspective from leading a major university. President David Perlstein (SBH Health) discusses how anchor work is embedded in his healthcare institution. Director and CEO Linda Harrison

Additionally, in his piece, President Pribbenow (Augsburg University) contributes key learnings from his career as a university president. Angelo Aramino (Wagner College) provides recommendations for small universities. Chancellor Joanne Li (University of Nebraska Omaha) shares her perspective and integration of anchor values into the heart of an institutions for sustainable impact. Amir Kirkwood (CEO, Locus) discusses the transformative journey of Virginia Community Capital from a traditional financial institution to an aspiring anchor institution, highlighting their strategic shift towards place-based investment, collaborative partnerships, and a steadfast commitment to equity and community impact.

These leaders have contributed their perspectives with the goal of informing and providing resources for the next generation of AITF leaders. Learning from their experiences can help build institutional commitment to place, collaboration, social justice and equity, and democratic practice in their communities. This tool is informed by the wisdom and experience of many leaders throughout the Anchor Institutions Task Force.

## Interviews with AITF Leaders

Nancy Cantor, *Chancellor, Rutgers University-Newark*

*How do you embed a commitment to engage anchor work into the core aspects of your institution?*

I call it an outside-in approach to institutional transformation. At Rutgers-Newark the strategic planning was a very comprehensive democratic, broad, strategic planning, with many working groups and town halls and committees. We focused our strategic planning by asking: What does the public need from us? How can we rise to the task?

To concretize that in anchor work, specifically in our community and with our community, we focused attention in the strategic plan on what publicly engaged scholarship looks like as our faculty, students, and staff engage with our community partners in addressing pressing issues. We asked: What would it mean to be an engine for social mobility? What would it mean to support the new professoriate as they pursue publicly engaged scholarship? What kinds of anchor institution collaboratives could we form with community partners to address racial equity and equitable growth in Newark?

The point there was to widely involve people in thinking that anchor work was core to the mission of the institution, such that the ways in which we looked at ourselves introspectively as an institution would be influenced by the needs and desires and opportunities in our community. More concretely, I think it has to do with following that up by rewarding publicly engaged scholarship and collaborative work in community— creating places where people do this work, both physical infrastructure for collaboration and co-creation in community and research centers on campus that create a two-way street of interaction. Providing scholarly rewards to faculty, but also embedding in the curriculum and engaging staff and students and faculty directly in the work so that it doesn't seem like it's siphoned off into some corner of the institution or some particular people's responsibilities. Key to that is having a senior team that is deeply involved and up to date on anchor work and on the different ways in which the institution can pursue it and reward it. I keep coming back to the notion of reward because I think that's critical.

**“We are training the next generation to see this work as fundamental to the excellence of the institution and to their future careers.”**

One further thing I would say on that is to pay some real attention to hiring faculty who want to do this work and who are committed to seeing the local as having resonance beyond the local. For so many faculty members and for so many disciplinary organizations, the global or the national are much more rewarded than the local. And so how do you get people to see that the work you do as a scholar, through publicly engaged scholarship and anchor collaboration, has resonance beyond, and can really be very fundamental to your career? So that you really get people all across the disciplines who see this as relevant to what they're doing. From a student perspective, I think the more it's embedded in curriculum, the more we are training the next generation to see this work as fundamental to the excellence of the institution and to their future careers, and the more we directly engage the diverse lived experiences of an expansive next generation talent pool in the anchor work, the more this becomes a central asset of the institution, not just a "service" add on to "real scholarship and curriculum."

*How do you think engaged anchor institutions can be best positioned to prepare for leadership transitions and advance effective succession plans and support the next generation of leaders?*

The key is creating a broad set of people across different positions and statuses who support this work – who are engaged, who are knowledgeable about it, who see it as critical to the mission of the institution. Then it isn't just up to the leader to maintain it. That doesn't mean you don't want and need a leader who supports it. You do. But I think the more you have, for example, research centers on campus that do this kind of work, the more likely it is to become embedded in the practices and reward systems of the institution. Similarly, the more you have standard rather than just intermittently offered courses that really support it, the more central people will view this work to the curriculum. And, relatedly, the more you have people from the community who are collaborators with a wide variety of people on campus, the more it becomes vital to the public support of the institution. With all of these commitments in place, then there's a certain stability and sustainability to anchor work (broadly defined) as a core part of the mission of the institution.

So, as you're recruiting new leaders, you think about somebody who wants to do this work. I think that really matters. Yet, I also fully endorse having robust senior teams that follow what the scholars at the University of Southern California and ACE call a [shared equity leadership](#) model. This suggests that equity and all its implications are built into what it means to do work at the institution. I think what is critical is having that collaborative infrastructure both on the inside – administrators, scholars, students, and staff committed across the disciplines and the operational units to engaging in anchor work broadly defined – and on the outside – that is,

anchor teams that are in the community and involve many community partners and other anchor institutions and that team up with your institution. This robust participatory infrastructure, inside and outside of the institution, signals to all that the work is important and should be sustained even in the midst of leadership transitions.

*How can anchor leaders learn from successes and continue to build significant commitments to trusted democratic partnerships in the community as well as internal commitments to AITF's values?*

One of the things that's really important is to watch carefully the way in which our anchor teams have functioned well and the times when they don't, and to really connect that to the trust that's being built across different sectors, across different people and leaders in the community in different ways. We've seen that at Rutgers-Newark. Our anchor teams have evolved tremendously. Our public safety collaborative is probably the best example of that. Initially, it was very much criminal justice scholars producing data and telling people what to do. Now, the Newark Public Safety Collaborative has some 40 community participants at every meeting, including law enforcement and members of the Mayor's Office of Violence Prevention, and community-based organizations living the issues of community safety every day. They explicitly follow what they call a data-informed community engagement model (DICE) -- sitting around the table using the data from analyses of where crime occurs to create their own interventions, but also asking for data based on lived experiences. And so, there's a real back and forth. I think that's where the trust gets built up. The success I think you learn most from is when there is an authenticity to the trusted relationships that transcends position and power -- overcoming what Augsburg University scholar, Harry Boyte would call the 'cult of the expert' that all too often characterizes university-community relationships and those of other large anchor institutions working in communities.

Another aspect of what I would call sustainable and successful anchor work is the importance of flexibility such that we see the work as a process rather than looking for immediate outcomes. I always describe the dynamics of this work as one step forward and twenty steps back at every turn and so we need to remain committed to the collaborative infrastructure, even as we may have specific goals and outcomes to pursue. All too often, I think we zero in on very specific successes, as

**“The success I think you learn most from is when there is an authenticity to the trusted relationships that transcends position and power”**

opposed to thinking about the dynamic evolution of a collaborative and how to sustain the relationships for the long haul.

*What are some important considerations for anchor leaders and building and sustaining strong relationships with other local leaders across sectors, including elected officials?*

Here I use something that Peter Englot and I always talk about which is moving from what Harry Boyte called the 'cult of the expert'—which is a typical academic approach—to what we call a 'community of experts with and without pedigree.' What does it mean to really build communities of experts? What it means is to listen to their expertise, the authenticity of it on the ground, and how it reflects their needs and shapes the work to be done. As a long-time community organizer in the City of Syracuse once said to me: "Nancy, ask us, we lay our heads down here at night." So true.

This is especially true with elected officials. They have very particularized needs that vary over time, and you have to be willing to jump in and be responsive to that and to understand that you can't be a single player in that – you need cross-sector teams with different assets to bring to the table, and so cross-sector collaboration is key in my mind. I believe strongly that anchor institution collaboration has its most sustainable impact, especially in terms of community-wide impact, when it draws in multi-sector partnerships, including many kinds of anchors from the proverbial "eds and meds" to corporations to cultural organizations to community development groups to public officials and agencies.

Moreover, anchor work can't be viewed as just a one and done project. It isn't just that you go and you get a grant, you do some anchor work in the city or in your community. It's that you are creating long-term collaborative cross-sector teams that really work on these projects over a long period of time.

*What do you think are some appropriate strategies for anchor institutions that are seeking to promote a commitment to social justice and equity, including a commitment to racial equity in the face of political opposition and hostility?*

As a caveat, I have worked in mostly Black and Brown cities on this work and in "blue states," with sympathetic political leaders, so my observations may not be entirely generalizable, given the heightened political divisiveness and zero-sum rhetoric characterizing our socio-political landscape today. Nonetheless, my experience is that if you are really digging deep and being forthcoming and building these trusted democratic partnerships on the ground in the local community, the issues that are on the table which have huge implications for racial equity are not



as divisive as one would think if you take national perspective, or even a statewide perspective.

And I think this would even be true in places located in more contentious political environments, such as some “red states.” That is, people care about educational pathways to social mobility; they care about workforce development; they care about environmental justice; they care about the ability to attract equitable growth in the community and the ability for people to have affordable homes and home ownership, or the ability to support local entrepreneurs and local businesspeople. Residents of most communities also care about their voices being heard in a context of civic and civil democracy, and many resonate to the arts as an expression that crosses otherwise contentious boundaries. As such, the kinds of things you can do as anchor institutions which have huge racial equity implications do not always seem as divisive as they would if you just talked about it on a national or even state level. So, I think the local really works to get past some of the opposition and divisiveness. If you focus on critical equitable growth issues on the ground that everybody wants to solve, it provides a kind of imprimatur for the work.

*Given the Supreme Court decision on affirmative action, what do you think institutions of higher education, as well as other local anchor institutions, can do differently or increasingly to enhance opportunities for economic and social mobility for historically underrepresented youth of color?*

As we’ve all been reflecting on the recent Supreme Court decision about race-conscious admissions and their adherence to a “color blind” ideology that simply doesn’t map well onto the experiences of so many of our communities, I have come to see this oddly as a bit of an opportunity to tackle head-on the question of where talent resides for the future of our nation. Who are our students and workforce of the future? They’re the Dreamers. They’re the low income, first generation students. They’re the Black and Brown and Indigenous students. That’s who’s out there in our communities increasingly, if we just look at the demographics; if we look at the actual expansive talent pool in our own backyards.



If higher education institutions create genuine, robust, collaborative infrastructure in our communities – and the community can be defined differently depending on population density and geography -- and team up across the educational ecosystem, then we have a natural way of reaching and cultivating this future-looking and expansive talent pool. We need to take down what civil rights scholar Gary Orfield calls the “walls around opportunity” in our often under-resourced, low income, minoritized school districts and connect the talent to the opportunity of higher education and beyond. If we call to the table what I call stackable institutions – that is, robust pathways from K-12 to community colleges to 4-year institutions and then partner with other anchor institutions, such as local corporations and cultural institutions, and engage local governments to help as well, and do so around the notion of college access and affordability and success and link that to social mobility and equitable growth, then we build local trust which I believe will reverberate positively and protect us from the politics of division.

**“Who are our students and workforce of the future? They’re the dreamers...the low income, first generation students. They’re the Black and Brown and indigenous students.”**

Demographics is not destiny, but it’s pretty close. If you think about the enrollment cliff that everybody talks about, that’s an enrollment cliff for traditional, largely white students in well-resourced communities. That’s not the majority of our students of the future. So, if we have robust K-12 to college to career pathways that really are successful, we’re going to address racial equity, even as we also address the needs of the talented students in many low-income predominantly-white communities. In other words, going back to the Kerner Commission of some 55 years ago, when we all do better, we all do better. And that is not going to be overturned by the courts, as much as they are overturning everything else.

David Perlstein, *President and CEO, SBH Health System*

*How do you embed a commitment to engaged anchor work into the core aspects of your institution?*

Vision and Mission have a big role to play. Collectively defining the terms is also very important. As a healthcare organization our first step was to admit how poorly we do in the anchor space. I believe that “engaged” is a very imprecise term, and to the average individual is has no distinct measurement. At SBH for instance, we are engaged, but we are not as effective as we want to be despite our desire. Our journey to “engagement” began many years ago, when we recognized that as healthcare providers we could treat an acute illness and get someone back “home”, but once home we couldn’t control whether our patients followed instructions as a partner in health. This reality led us to the recognition that many of our patients did not have a stable “home” to which to return; if you don’t have a home, are not sure of your next meal, have significant financial burdens, how are you supposed to follow all of our recommendations?

The literature also supported that reality, identifying that social determinants of health (SDOH) have more influence (in some studies greater than 50%) on health outcomes. This pushed us to pivot towards identifying and preventing the impact of the unmet SDOH amongst our patients and community, driving us to partner to build 314 affordable apartments and in addition a co-located integrative wellness center focused on total body and mind health. It is in that space that we try to address many of the issues which keep our patients from living healthier, happier and more productive lives. We have women’s and childrens’ preventive health programs, including WIC and breast imaging. In addition, and as important, we have a medical model fitness center, teaching kitchens, and a rooftop farm to grow vegetable as well as reserving a significant flexible community space to host local meetings and events. We use much of the roof-top produce in our teaching kitchen but also donate a significant portion to the community. Just by coordinating care with our trainers and our chefs, we have already shown the impact that addressing certain SDOH can have on patients with poorly controlled diabetes and obesity. We continue to expand our programs and have an additional property in the Bronx that we believe can serve as the next housing and integrative wellness center.

**“Most integral is to develop a shared vision, mission, and culture, driven by CEO and senior leadership, supported by the Board of Trustees, and then adopted by all stakeholders.”**

Our community in the Bronx struggles to get ahead; years of structural racism, redlining, generational poverty and underinvestment have been hugely responsible for this. In the past we would have remained silent, focusing on the “medical care”, but now we know that addressing SDOH is as important as the care itself, and it has become a part of our care model.

Collectively, our board, management and employees understand this new reality and are supportive, but we cannot succeed alone.

Delivering uncompensated care to prevent the impacts of SDOH is a challenge for all institutions, but even more so for SBH. We are chronically underfunded for our clinical care, so we cannot depend on profits to fund our SDOH work. I believe we are getting closer to convincing payers that this work improves outcomes, and therefore will decrease the cost of care.

The problem is that there is no quick fix, and due to the structure of our healthcare financing system, most health insurers only cover individuals for an average of 5 years, and change takes time. We hope that addressing SDOH needs becomes universal, so all payers will benefit regardless of the population, and therefore will be willing to fully financially cover the efforts.

*What are your thoughts on how engaged anchor institutions can be best positioned to prepare for leadership transitions, advance effective succession plans and support the next generation of leaders?*

Building a succession plan is part of being a leader. At SBH this is incorporated into the annual evaluation at every management level. Without appropriate mentoring, one risks creating a vacuum during periods of stress that ultimately will interfere with the running of the organization. It is just as important to maintain a talent pipeline, to bring in new ideas and perspectives so that group think doesn't become a burden.

*How can anchor leaders effectively learn from successes and continue to build significant commitments to trusted democratic partnerships in the community as well as internal commitments to AITF's values?*

We have to learn to ask questions but just as important to listen. We need to understand what sort of partnerships lead to adoption and change. We must take care to build equity in the relationship recognizing that community-based power dynamics can undo years of progress.

*What are some important considerations for anchor leaders in building and sustaining strong relationships with other local leaders across sectors, including elected officials?*

As an Anchor institution in a community, we cannot succeed alone without support. Community Leaders and Elected officials must be willing to stand behind the vision and mission and delivery. Democratic Partnerships demand that. So much of the work is in the public domain, and we need to maintain productive and trusting relationships to ensure success. The earlier one can engage those leaders the better chance of success. It also can serve as a magnet for building coalitions especially as that success becomes more transparent.

*What do you think are appropriate strategies for anchor institutions seeking to promote a commitment to social justice and equity, including a commitment to racial equity, in the face of political opposition and hostility?*

Identity politics can definitely get in the way, however it's important to begin the process by coalescing around the "obvious" benefits for all. At SBH and the communities served, we face the challenges of frequent shifts in diversity dominance and often must navigate intrinsic and extrinsic community bias. One example is how different Spanish speaking groups relate to one another and another is how West African recent immigrants relate to the established African American community. We work to find the commonality of challenges and values. Everyone wants opportunity for improvement for themselves and their families. In addition, in our community there is a common thread of poverty which binds much of the community despite the diversity of background and culture. The opposition and hostility must be drowned out by the power of the commitment and determination to deliver on the vision.

*Given the Supreme Court decision on affirmative action, what do you think institutions of higher education as well as other local anchor institutions can do differently (or increasingly) to enhance opportunities for economic and social mobility for historically underrepresented youth of color?*

We are in one of the periods in American World History that hopefully will be described by historians as a watershed moment, when the reality of the interconnectedness of humanity and the impact of climate change forced a dramatic shift towards globalism. Until that time, however, we must jointly work on creating opportunities for all, not just the wealthy. Broad based anchor collaboratives can work to build the infrastructure to ensure more equitable social and economic advancement. Though I believe in the power of liberal education, creating opportunities for broad based training in the Arts and Artisan fields must be as available as opportunities for liberal education. At a time when technology is beginning to play an even larger role in our daily lives, we must support and facilitate training in both the traditional trades and the arts. Even with AI, we will need plumbers, electricians, masons, carpenters and welders, artists and artisans to maintain and create the infrastructure and culture of the future.

As a healthcare system, we are already experiencing shortages of providers (nurses and doctors) and therefore need to engage with local schools to help build a future workforce in healthcare delivery, and not just more doctors and nurses, but community healthcare workers, home care providers, medical assistants, and social workers. We are an aging society, but we are not prepared to manage the increasing age of our populations both in wealthier communities and in poorer communities such as ours in the Bronx. By engaging earlier, we can help build the workforce of tomorrow from our own communities. Programs such as these should be funded by both the private and public sectors. We must continue to work locally while advocating globally for change. We must continue to work to overcome the generational impacts of the racist policies which have marginalized so many.

**“Broad based anchor collaboratives can work to build the infrastructure to ensure more equitable social and economic advancement.”**

Linda Harrison, *Director and CEO, Newark Museum of Art*

*How do you embed a commitment to engaged anchor work into the core aspects of your institution?*

We listen. Every week at our Executive Leadership meeting, we begin by asking the team to acknowledge a staff member or two who excelled at a task or achieved something out of the ordinary. We also conduct an annual employee survey that creates a benchmark for areas of improvement and those where we have shown improvement. Subjects include transparency, how they feel about recommending friends/colleagues to our museum and how they feel they are being managed. Results are shared at all our monthly staff meetings and solutions are designed from the feedback. One example, we learned that one area of improvement is a better understanding of the inner workings of the leadership staff, and we will be offering 360 reviews as a solution.

*What are your thoughts on how engaged anchor institutions can be best positioned to prepare for leadership transitions, advance effective succession plans and support the next generation of leaders?*

Taking the pulse of the employee surveys, we were concerned that the staff didn't see upward mobility as a real possibility here. We had a recent opening at the Deputy Director level and were faced with the challenge—do we conduct a national search, or do we have the talent within? We had a strong internal candidate that has been with us for over 25 years and in previous administrations that kind of tenure might have been perceived as a detriment as opposed to the opportunity. We approached the conversation as a two-way street, engaging external stakeholders, the community, and the candidate to ensure that this was an honest and engaged process. Her ultimate hire resulted in an incredible lift of morale and productivity and has been met with resounding approval from within and with all our anchor partners.

**“Every week at our Executive Leadership meeting, we begin by asking the team to acknowledge a staff member or two who excelled...or achieved something...”**

*How can anchor leaders effectively learn from successes and continue to build significant commitments to trusted democratic partnerships in the community as well as internal commitments to AITF's values?*

At a recent leadership retreat, we took this question and challenged ourselves to commit to a values statement. The museum took great care a few years back in creating a concise and unifying mission statement. We hadn't done a similar exercise around values, and we selected a valued

member of our staff to facilitate our leadership in a process where we agreed upon a values proposition that brought us together.

*What are some important considerations for anchor leaders in building and sustaining strong relationships with other local leaders across sectors, including elected officials?*

Being present. Sharing wins and acknowledging areas that need improvement and being data driven. All of our metrics include the % of people we are hire within the city, the size and scope of partner relationships, the actual amount spent on Newark vendors and providing competitive salaries. We promote and participate in our community partners' events and often make the museum available as a venue. We are very present with all elected officials and this past year held a briefing session for the Mayor and Council that included specific results, by ward, by school district. When I presented before the Council at a recent budget hearing, I brought a valued member of our Learning & Engagement team to testify about our strong relationship with Community and City Legislative partners.

**“The Supreme Court decision will put greater emphasis on the essay, the storytelling side of how institutional racism has held back opportunity”**

*What do you think are appropriate strategies for anchor institutions seeking to promote a commitment to social justice and equity, including a commitment to racial equity, in the face of political opposition and hostility?*

Educate. Inform. Engage. Every monthly staff meeting includes a robust discussion and interaction led by members of our DEAL committee. Topics have included white supremacy and how intuitional racism has affected decision making, collaborations, etc. These are very well received and have led to deeper discussions and understanding. We issue a similar challenge to the Board and are quick to address areas where we are not afraid to address topics that ensure we remain 100% committed to being an anti-racist organization.



*Given the Supreme Court decision on affirmative action, what do you think institutions of higher education as well as other local anchor institutions can do differently (or increasingly) to enhance opportunities for economic and social mobility for historically underrepresented youth of color?*

The decision challenges us to be more vigilant. Our signature program that addresses this head on is our Explorers program, a 3-year paid internship that engages high school students in the arts world and is expanding to include the business and marketing aspects of the museum. Over 300 students have gone through this program, almost 100% attend a college or trade school, over 60 have been employed by the museum at one time. The supreme court decision will put greater emphasis on the essay, the storytelling side of how institutional racism has held back opportunity. We have decided to increase our interns from 36 to 50, to be involved in every aspect of our work and expand our marketing to tell the stories of these remarkable students. As an example, on a recent visit with a prominent NJ Foundation, we serendipitously learned that our Program Officer was a graduate of our Explorers program. He has agreed to be our commencement speaker this year. Great things can be accomplished from within if we take the time to listen, provide the tools and leadership and show that we are authentic in our words and deeds. Be fearless and just do it.

# Paul Pribbenow: Leadership Lessons for the Anchor Institutions Movement

**Paul C. Pribbenow, Ph.D., *President, Augsburg University***

Over the course of my 20-plus year career as a university president, I have come to embrace four key lessons that address the challenges we face in ensuring that our commitments as an anchor institution are durable and sustainable. These lessons also address the concerns that might arise when a leadership transition occurs, when anchor commitments can often be seen as marginal to an institution's mission and strategy.

- (1) Ground this work in mission and strategy:** Find the threads of your institutional saga that inform your community-based work and then ensure that both your mission and strategic plan name this work as central to your identity and daily work. At Augsburg, we have explored the 150-year history of our university and found times when we did not live up to our aspirations and moments when we lived out our commitments to serve our neighbors. This historical exploration has led to accountability for our missteps and appreciation for our successes, and has established a firm foundation for our current strategic focus on our anchor commitments. In Augsburg150, our strategic framework, one of three key objectives is to “Advance the public purposes of an Augsburg education,” and one of two initiatives is “Engaging as an anchor institution, place-making with our neighbors in Cedar-Riverside and at Augsburg sites around the world.” Thus imbedded in our mission and strategy, our work as an anchor institution is at the heart of our daily lives.
- (2) Leadership matters, but so does what happens on the ground:** Presidential leadership and advocacy for this work is important but it is not sufficient if the commitment and work is not integrated across all aspects of the university's work, including curriculum, campus life, business practices, and community engagement. At Augsburg, this grasstops/grassroots approach has led to a robust culture of community engagement and anchor work. Distinguished curricular programs in social work, urban studies, and environmental studies are complemented by graduation requirements for all students that focus on experiences in the communities where Augsburg is located (in the United States and around the world). Our Sabo Center for Democracy and Citizenship is a resource for students, faculty, and staff for the study and practice of civic engagement. Our Augsburg Local efforts support neighborhood businesses and economies. We have refashioned

our purchasing policies to focus on local minority and women-owned businesses. Our community garden and Campus Kitchen engage the Augsburg campus with our neighbors in our commitment to food justice. In all of this – and much more – we have integrated our anchor commitments across all aspects of campus life. As the university president, I am a champion for this work, but I know my support is meaningless unless it is lived out by our entire campus community everyday.

- (3) This work requires a commitment to mutuality with neighbors:** One of the temptations, unfortunately too often endemic to academic institutions, is the tendency to believe we know best how to respond to community challenges. This work only succeeds if it is grounded in mutually beneficial relationships with community partners. Those relationships must be built and sustained over time through consistent, intentional efforts to align our work together around shared interests and values. At Augsburg, we participate in two anchor partnerships – the Cedar Riverside Partnership, which supports our immediate neighborhood; and the Central Corridor Anchor Partnership, a group of “eds and meds” along the light rail line between Minneapolis and Saint Paul. In both of these partnerships, the key value is our mutual interests and aspirations. This work requires humility, a willingness to listen, the art of compromise, and a focus on what we can do together better than alone. One example of how this commitment to mutuality has benefited our Cedar Riverside neighborhood is our common work in the rebuilding of Riverside Avenue, the major thoroughfare in the neighborhood. Left to the whims of our city’s public works department, the street work would have disrupted businesses and would have resulted in a generic streetscape. With the participation of local businesses, non-profits, hospitals, and universities, we were able to work with the public works department to design a new street that enhances property values and that is more pedestrian-friendly, even as we all made compromises during the two-year rebuild that kept disruptions to a minimum, especially for neighborhood residents and businesses. Mutuality equals win-win!
- (4) Finally, this is all about democracy – not as the machinery of government but as a social ethic:** This is about living together with our neighbors, working to create more just, healthy, safe, and compassionate communities. And that only happens when we practice democracy in our words and deeds. I am a student of the settlement house tradition, most famously established by Lillian Wald in New York and Jane Addams in Chicago in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the heart of this tradition was the idea of democracy as a social ethic, the practice of settling alongside neighbors and working with each other to build healthier and

more just communities. I would argue that our anchor institutions are 21st century versions of these settlement houses. At our best, we settle into our neighborhoods and accompany our neighbors in our mutual and common work to ensure that we have each other's backs. That is democracy in action, and it is our most precious and pressing responsibility as we lead our anchor institutions.

## Angelo Araimo: Three Recommendations for Small, Private Colleges in Anchor Work

**Angelo Araimo, *President, Wagner College***  
**Mark Harmon-Vaught, *Chief of Staff***

The responsibility to be a good institutional citizen of, with, and for our local community exists for small colleges just as it does for large universities. Wagner College is proud to be a member of the Anchor Institutions Task Force alongside higher education institutions of all sizes that center this responsibility in their missions. Yet, while our duty is agnostic to our institutional scale, the resources we have to advance it are not. Despite robust and growing enrollment and endowment figures, Wagner College faces the same financial pressures as many small private colleges nationwide. Our campus is wrestling with how to sustain and enhance our anchor work in this challenging post-pandemic operating environment. Our theory of action has been attaining strategic coherence in our goal-setting and collaboration, both among internal units and with community partners. This work, though far from finished, has already yielded three lessons for practitioners at fellow small colleges who share our anchor commitment.

### **1. Embrace convening power to establish shared priorities and spur collective action.**

The inherent educational mission of a college or university grants us a great power of convening. Our campuses are places that draw others together for important and difficult conversations that can disentangle complexities, interrogate conventions, establish common understanding, and spur collective action. We can and do frame difficult discourse as essential to our learning purpose in a way that may not be possible for other types of change-making organizations within our communities, such as non-profits, social service agencies, or economic development authorities. A college does not always need to stake its own claim on a complex or controversial subject. Instead, it can establish itself as the site of and arbiter for vital discourse, creating a space that can generate novel solutions and shared priorities.

As a college of 2,000 students in a borough of 475,000, Wagner has leveraged its convening power to play an outsized role for Staten Island, establishing shared priorities that serve the college's mission and the community's needs alike. For example, Staten Island will soon become the region's largest hub for offshore wind energy and a major solar energy site. Local discourse around this development is complex and sometimes politically fraught. In spring 2023, Wagner partnered with the Staten Island Economic Development Corporation to hold a sustainability forum on campus, drawing together state-wide policymakers, elected leaders, business owners,

students, and other community members for dialogue on the borough's long-term energy future. This forum elevated the need for workforce development, new social support services, and broader public awareness campaigns. It opened the door for new collaborations between the college and the community to meet a mutually identified need.

## **2. Synthesize strategy and pool resources to make anchor efforts more effective.**

What are the college's goals for engagement with the Staten Island community? Posing this question to campus stakeholders in early 2022 yielded many answers: our outreach to the borough has been splintered. The same community partners might work with multiple offices on campus in many different—and sometimes inadvertently competing—ways. Still other partnerships have been sustained solely by the remarkable effort of individual faculty or staff champions. With the best of intentions, we found ourselves in a state of duplicative and diffuse effort and misalignment that hampered progress.

Whereas this siloing might be inevitable at large universities, colleges like Wagner can leverage our small size to drive strategic synthesis in our community outreach and efficiency in the resources supporting that outreach. So, we began asking—and continue to ask—how we can establish common goals for external outreach across campus units and better align our resources, systems, and effort to resource these goals appropriately. We established a "coordinating hub" we have termed our external relations council comprising leaders from our civic engagement, government relations, career services, external programs, athletics, and advancement offices.

This interdivisional council now shapes and recommends strategy and coordinates our approach for aligned outreach to Staten Island and beyond. It has provided for creative solution-seeking among campus units, better information and resource sharing, and improvements to the systems by which we track outreach. This approach also benefits prospective partners. The organizational structure of a college is quite foreign and confounding for individuals outside of the sector. Now, no matter a partner's point-of-entry, our coordinating hub can funnel them to the appropriate interdivisional teams to assess possibilities and drive progress. That Wagner's coordinating hub sits directly within the president's office signals to the campus and to community stakeholders that the work remains a priority of the college.

## **3. Set a "yes, and" agenda to establish common purpose across outreach objectives.**

Civic engagement efforts that redound to the benefit of the local community serve the mission and ethical obligations of our institutions. Even so, under the resource-

scarce operating conditions that many small, private colleges face today, it is increasingly difficult to rationalize allocating substantial dollars in our budgets to support these efforts. It is natural for colleges to treat mission-serving civic engagement efforts and revenue-generating business relations activities as wholly separate bodies of work and even as "competing" motives in external relations. By consequence, colleges often have one kind of conversation about their goals with prospective community partners and another with potential business contacts.

Over the past few years, Wagner has started to have had a single conversation with these varied stakeholders as part of what we have termed our "yes, and" agenda. *Yes*, the college is seeking to generate enrollment and ancillary revenue through local partnerships, *and* we can do so in ways that make the borough better for all Staten Islanders. Or, *yes*, our primary focus is on providing rich and rewarding experiences for our students, *and* we can deploy them into the community in ways that meet unmet needs identified with our surrounding communities. This approach has shaped new tuition discount partnerships formed with the local non-profit association, training programs and internships established with major borough employers, and new college-and-career programs hosted for K-12 students on Wagner's campus. "Yes, and" is more than a semantic reframe: it highlights that the college's long-term sustainability is a critical part of our anchor work and emphasizes that Wagner and Staten Island share a destiny.

As Wagner College lays a course for future anchor efforts, we know that the coherence of our goals, strategy, and tactics will be vital to sustaining and augmenting our work. The emerging blueprint from this evolution of our approach offers small private colleges similar to Wagner a pathway to fulfilling their ethical duties to their communities while ensuring their long-term vitality.



## Joanne Li: Elevating Engagement: Advancing Anchor Institution Leadership in Community Collaboration

**Joanne Li, Ph.D., CFA, *Chancellor*, University of Nebraska at Omaha**

As leaders who seek to initiate, sustain and/or expand our commitment as an anchor institution, we face numerous challenges. Fortunately, we have the resources of AITF and each other. As a relatively new leader of an institution that had long been connected to the anchor network, I learned quickly that as a first step I needed to understand the unique context of my institution in relation to the anchor mission and values. Understanding our current engagement with anchor work, who has been involved, and even the terminology that has been used is critical as we develop strategies to embed anchor work into our institutions, communities, and next generation of leaders.

The University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) has a long-standing and deep commitment to community engagement, particularly academic service learning. UNO has a unique facility, the Weitz Community Engagement Center, in the center of our campuses that is home to community non-profits as well as meeting space that is available for the community, at no cost, as long as the purpose is for the public good. At the same time, there had not been broad-based discussion and understanding of our role as an anchor institution. This context provided a strong foundation for elevating our role as an anchor institution. Each of us must explore the unique context and history of our institution as a foundation for our next steps.

Effective communication and messaging are essential in order to embed the engaged anchor work into the heart of an institution. As leaders, we must publicly and consistently speak and write about the values of an anchor institution and the mutual benefits to internal and external stakeholders. As presidents and chancellors, we have numerous avenues to articulate these messages. In my investiture address, commencement remarks, and op-eds in the local newspaper (as a few examples), I consistently reinforce the themes “all are welcome,” we are an institution of “inclusion not exclusion”, and “collaboration with the community.” What we say and where we say it makes a difference. We need to be bold and clear in declaring our values.

In addition to explicit messages from the leader, we need to expand the campus network that sees themselves supporting the anchor mission. This strategy not only assists with embedding the institutional commitment but also with leadership transitions and succession planning. For example, I created a campus anchor task group under the leadership of Chief Engagement Officer but also including leaders from Business and Finance, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Innovative Learning-

Centric Initiatives (our innovation and workforce development unit), and campus strategic planning. This group is inventorying existing initiatives, identifying opportunities to extend/expand our anchor work, and aligning our role as an anchor institution and the corresponding values with the university strategic plan. From this, we are creating advocates and experts and the campus will have a broader and deeper understanding of what it means to be an anchor institution. This work is not and should not be dependent on any one person.

As leaders, particularly of public universities, our relationships with other political, governmental, corporate, non-profit, and community leaders are critical to the overall success of our institution. As a newcomer not just to the university but to the city and state, I had both opportunities and challenges. The good news is that doors open for a new leader. The challenge is how to ensure that we build authentic relationships. Relationships are built on common interests and common ground. Again, it is important to understand context, listen carefully, and be consistent and clear about the commitment to collaboration, working towards the public and greater societal good, and the value and benefits of inclusion. Of course, relationships take multiple and varied interactions, trust, and time. As leaders, especially ones new to an institution and community, we must align our public voice and personal interactions. In all our interactions, we must be our authentic self. Our partners value knowing the why of our passion for this work and our personal commitment to meaningful partnerships.

How we establish relationships also models mutually beneficial partnerships. One-to-one and small group meetings allow us to get to know each other and understand common values, goals, and opportunities. Our presence and participation in community events and organizations signal our commitment to the community. We also need to provide opportunities for community leaders to inform campus work. For example, I have established the Future of Work Symposium within our Division of Innovative and Learning-Centric Initiatives. The symposium, held each semester, invites conversation on critical topics influencing how, why and where we work. The series brings together leaders from public, private, education, and nonprofit sectors to shed light on big challenges and share thought-provoking insights. With this type of initiative, we foster an environment where campus and community leaders from all sectors collectively address issues and challenges. These events and conversations also assist in creating new relationships and partnerships across campus and community participants.

In the face of political division and, in many instances, hostility to values such as social justice and equity, collaboration, democracy and democratic practice, anchor institutions can and should be the model and the convener for difficult conversations. We must reinforce the themes and values in our public and personal messages. We articulate the moral as well as the social and economic value of our work. UNO has a

history and tradition as a convener for the community. For 35 years, we have hosted the Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium (MOEC) that brings together 12 public school districts, the university, and two community colleges. MOEC is a catalyst for identifying high-priority issues and addressing them through joint task forces and projects. Building on that history, we established the Weitze Community Engagement Center (CEC) in 2014 that is home to campus community engagement units, non-profits, and provides meeting space for all community and campus groups meeting for the public good. Our most recent effort is the establishment of the Samuel Bak Museum: The Learning Center which, featuring the art of holocaust survivor Samuel Bak, engages community and campus in questions and dialogues on human rights, genocide, and the Holocaust but more importantly encourages reflections on the power of hope and the value of freedom. While these are strategies within the context and history of my institution, leaders and institutions must model our values and create venues for thought-provoking conversations.

To address the growing challenges in providing opportunities for underrepresented youth of color, we must clearly articulate the value of social and economic mobility not only for the individual learner but also families and communities. At UNO, we have identified social and economic mobility as a key strategic goal. Our message is consistent. We want to educate all learners. We want to be known for our inclusion and not exclusion. While we do this because it is right, we also demonstrate how this builds a vibrant workforce. We link creating social and economic mobility for students from the lowest economic tiers to the most pressing needs of our corporate, government, and non-profit partners.

Our work as an anchor institution is integrally connected to our mission as a public, urban, research university. By closing connecting the values of anchor institutions with our overall mission and strategic goals, our anchor work becomes a measure of our success as an institution. Each of us as leaders of anchor institutions must create our own unique specific strategies. However, careful attention to context and history, effective communication, authentic relationships, truly mutually beneficial and reciprocal partnerships, and alignment with core institutional values and mission will sustain the anchor work at an institution independent of a specific leader.

## Amir Kirkwood: From Financial Institution to Aspiring Anchor Institution: Reflections on a Journey in Progress

**Amir Kirkwood, CEO, Locus**

In 2006, Virginia Community Capital was formed as a community development financial institution (CDFI) with a goal to leverage a \$15 million state investment and drive more capital to historically underestimated people and places across Virginia. Over the past 17 years, we have converted those state dollars into significant impact in the Commonwealth – addressing food access challenges, financing clean energy, supporting small businesses and job creation, and helping to develop affordable housing. Over time, we evolved as an organization, adding innovative new capacity to help other institutions unlock their capital for the benefit of communities via the [Community Investment Guarantee Pool \(CIGP\)](#) and LOCUS Impact Investing, a strategic consulting firm serving community foundations and health conversion foundations.

The fruit of these efforts has been significant. Locus through its bank and loan fund have financed over 1,500 loans equalling \$970 million in originations. We estimate that this activity has led to \$2.2 billion in economic impact. The CIGP has facilitated guarantees that support over \$250M in investments to over 270 affordable housing projects and 30 small businesses funds in 18 states. But, despite all the creativity and innovation we marshalled as an organization, we were not always leading with impact and showing up as the partner communities needed us to be.

For the past two years, we have been on a journey to understand what it means to be a place-based investor and to go deeper in partnership with communities. We recognized the need to work in new and different ways, prioritizing relationships over transactions. We know we can help communities achieve their vision for a more prosperous, equitable future when we bring a broader set of tools to the table. In many ways, this journey is helping us think and behave like an aspiring anchor institution rather than a financial institution. While we are still a “work in progress,” we have learned some lessons along the way as we have tested our new approach with community partners in the Southside region of Virginia.

One, we are embracing the value of place and community. We choose to work with *community-embedded* organizations and help address the most pressing *community-identified* opportunities. This way of working represents a shift for our organization in many ways. We are less focused on the products we have than we are on the solutions we create together with our community partners, and we are looking for opportunities to get involved earlier in the project development pipeline. One of the tools we bring is

the ability to engage different capital partners – place-based philanthropy, other financial institutions, health systems – and work as a catalyst, unlocking various types of capital to make a high-impact project happen. This tool is especially critical at a time when the cost of capital is often prohibitive for aspiring entrepreneurs or community projects like affordable housing. Working with mission-aligned philanthropic partners, we can provide more catalytic capital to move community projects forward.

Two, we aspire to play a more vital role in communities – to embody the values of collaboration and partnership. We know we have more value to offer than our financial capital alone. We can bring our diverse skills and lived experiences; our partnerships, networks, and connections to field innovators; our values; and our influence as a trusted partner in Virginia and nationally. But to be a better community partner, we need to change as an institution. For us, that began with a DEI journey, which was incorporated into a strategic planning process and resulted in a rebranding of ourselves as a more integrated community development institution. We adopted the Locus name to reaffirm our commitment to place. And we continue to work on ourselves, considering how we bring impact front and center into all that we do – from assessing risk to structuring loans to building targeted funds in support of community priorities. We imagine we will get some things wrong as we forge ahead, but we expect our community partners to hold us accountable as we improve our practice over time. One of the tools we plan to deploy as part of our place-based investment strategy is the creation of a community advisory committee – a group of partner organizations with whom we will build trust, who will hold us accountable, and who will help ensure that we understand community context.

Three, as we set out on this journey, we decided we wanted to work in places where the capital system is not working for all. We wanted to challenge ourselves to find values-aligned partners and, as needed, to push our partners to center equity as they advance community-identified priorities. We turned the mirror on ourselves, working to amend our own lending practices so they do not perpetuate existing inequities in the system. We know that we need to institutionalize these practices – to make them part of the Locus DNA – so that when we get pushback, when we confront challenges in communities, we are steadfast in our commitment to center equity in our work. Changing systems is not for the faint of heart, and it is not the work of a single organization. If we are aiming for transformative change in communities – where all people and places have the capital and ecosystem partners needed to realize prosperous futures, as our vision describes – we need to build values-aligned partnerships focused on tackling the most pressing community challenges.

There is much alignment between the role we aspire to play in place and the values of equity and social justice; democracy and democratic practice; place and community; and collaboration and partnership that ground AITF. Thinking of our organization as a

CDFI serving Virginia and beyond feels constraining given our new vision. Choosing to view ourselves as an aspiring anchor institution partner in communities provides a framing for our work that is more expansive and more aligned with the place-based investment strategy we are working toward. It is also not a short-term effort. It will require intentional and concerted effort to build authentic, trusted relationships in communities, to strengthen existing partnerships and build new ones, and to build the institutional muscle to work as a different partner in place. We are at the beginning of our journey and know there is much to learn from other organizations that have chosen to act as anchor institutions that engage and support their communities. We look forward to sharing our experiences as our place-based investment strategy advances.

## Conclusion

As we conclude this second edition of the AITF Leadership Guide, it is clear that the lessons from the leaders in the anchor institutions field are both diverse and dynamic. Across higher education, healthcare, culture and financial institutions, the narrative is unified by a deep commitment to community engagement and a resilient pursuit of social justice and equity.

In this guide, anchor leaders such as Nancy Cantor, Paul Pribbenow, David Perlstein, Linda Harrison, Angelo Aramio, Joanne Li, and Amir Kirkwood, each from their unique institutional vantage points, have underscored the importance of integrating anchor work into their core mission and strategy. This approach has the power to transform their institutions into pivotal community partners, embedding the values of equity, democracy, and collaboration into their very fabric.

A key theme resonating throughout this guide is the role of leadership in anchoring these values. The contributors have illustrated the necessity of driving institutional change, fostering long-term, authentic partnerships, and nurturing a culture where community engagement is not just an addendum but a central tenet of their institutional identity.

As we look towards the future, the guide encourages a continued evolution in anchor institution strategies. This is not a journey with a definitive end but an ongoing process of learning, adaptation, and partnership, aimed at fostering sustained community development, democratic engagement, and economic equity.

The insights and experiences shared in the AITF Leadership Guide Second Edition serve as lessons to help guide our way forward. They inspire us to deepen our commitments, share our learning, and collectively work towards a society where more institutions can act as conscientious anchors, firmly rooted in and lifting the communities they serve.



**The Anchor Institutions  
Task Force (AITF)**

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