In the poem “Choruses from the Rock” T.S. Eliot poses the following question. When the Stranger says: “What is the meaning of this city?
Do you huddle close together because you love each other?”
What will you answer? “We all dwell together to make money from each other”? or “This is a community”?
In recent decades, cities have increasingly looked to colleges and universities to assist in the work of defining their nature. Frequently, the assistance sought involves making money and fostering economic development.

North Carolina’s three major universities transformed the state’s economy from tobacco, textiles and timbers to a hub of finance and technology. Stanford and Berkeley were integral to the development of the Silicon Valley economy. Across the country, thousands of city leaders are looking to neighboring universities to create similar experiences.

In no way, do I intend to minimize the importance of this work. Indeed, Weber State University is rightfully proud of its efforts in the arena of economic development. The university and city currently have a number of meaningful economic development initiatives underway.

Yet, it is the work of building community that is equally important and, regrettably, sometimes neglected. Nonetheless, across the country a handful of universities have begun to intentionally approach the task of enhancing multiple facets of the communities in which they are located. Weber State University is one of these universities.

To help to build community, Weber State’s Center for Community Engaged Learning follows a tripartite approach focused upon service, community-based research and civic engagement. A few examples will illustrate the center’s efforts in each of these areas.
With funding provided by the Alan E. and Jeanne N. Hall Endowment for Community Outreach, botany professor Barb Wachocki, and her students, created a community garden for Give Me A Chance, a non-profit organization serving Ogden area low income women to help them become self-sufficient.

WSU students and faculty helped secure funding and necessary equipment, prepare the garden, and coach the 15 families growing crops in the garden.

In the area of research, WSU is currently working with the United Way of Northern Utah to conduct a community needs assessment in a 10-census tract of central Ogden with the intent of addressing issues of school dropouts, crime, homelessness, and poverty. Professor Brenda Kowalewski, along with professors Azenett Garza, Pepper Glass, Leah Murray, and Carla Trentelman are overseeing WSU students as they collect, compile and analyze data. The results will be used to support the United Way of Northern Utah’s planned application for Promise Neighborhood Implementation grant worth as much as $35 million.

As one example of WSU’s work in civic engagement, last February, more than 100 WSU students met with former Congressmen Charles Djou of Hawaii and Richard Stallings of Idaho, as part of a national program sponsored by the American Democracy Project. The students drew upon the congressmen’s experience to explored opportunities for public service in their communities and beyond, with the aim of producing graduates who are committed to being active, involved citizens.

The work WSU does with the community is both long-standing and reciprocal. Indeed, without the efforts of the community, Weber State University would not exist. In 1922, it was the community who fought to make Weber a full-fledged college.

Three decades later, when Governor J. Bracken Lee sought to remove Weber College from the list of state-funded programs, it was community leaders who rose up in outrage and killed the idea. In 1991, it was northern Utah community leaders that successfully spearheaded the effort to elevate the Weber State to the status of a university.

Because of the cooperative efforts of WSU and numerous community partners, if a stranger should pose T.S. Eliot’s question to an Ogden resident, the resounding response should be, “This is a community.”