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Managing Transitions in a Time of Acute Modernity

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A **AMERICAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES** are in transition. Of course, they always are. But today's transition is comparable in both scale and significance to the latter part of the 19th century, when the modern American university first coalesced.

What are today's forces for change? And what are the implications for colleges and universities? These questions are difficult to answer, given the diverse nature of American higher education. Ours is not so much a system as a collection of roughly 3,200 institutions enrolling nearly ten million full-time and five million part-time students.

Managing Transitions IN A TIME OF Acute Modernity

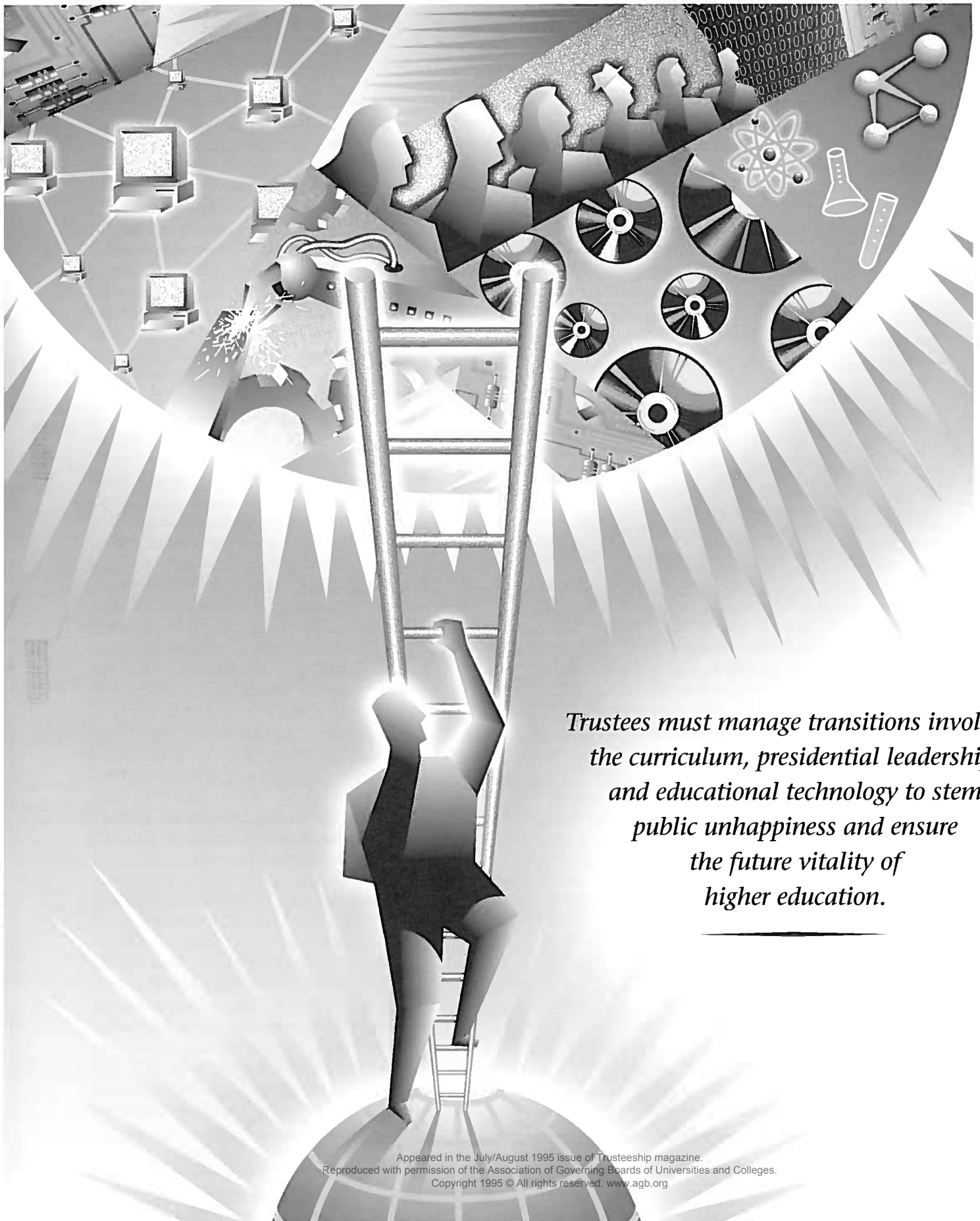
These institutions, founded mostly in response to changing conditions and distinctive local needs, differ greatly in quality, in

character and purpose, in size and complexity, in fiscal stability, in sources of funding, and in the profile of their students and faculties.

From large research universities to small liberal arts colleges, from two-year colleges to professional schools, from church-affiliated institutions to vocational schools, these publicly and privately supported institutions constitute a "nonsystem" that by custom and public expectation is dedicated to the principle of broad student access and to the idea that higher education serves not only the private needs of students but also the larger goals of the nation. And it serves uncommonly well the differing needs of students in our pluralistic, large-scale, highly mobile, decentralized, and geographically dispersed society.

Modernity, Society, and the Academy. We are living in a time of acute modernity: the rise of urbanization, the mass dislocation and migration of peoples, the specialization of knowledge, the industrialization of labor, the technological revolution, and modern science. These and the related forces and pressures they engender carry

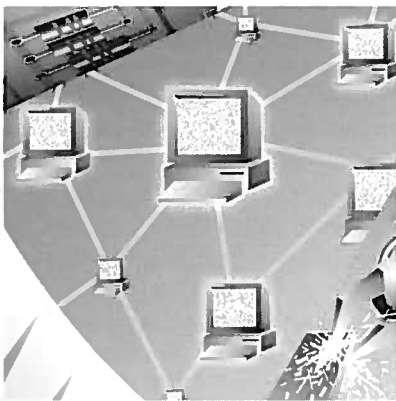
• BY DAVID P. GARDNER •



Trustees must manage transitions involving the curriculum, presidential leadership, and educational technology to stem public unhappiness and ensure the future vitality of higher education.

profound implications for our world and nation. They also affect our colleges and universities in fundamental ways by influencing the curricula, the composition of the student body, the pedagogy, the appointment and advancement of faculty members, and the choice of leaders.

The forces of modernity tend to subordinate the more human aspects of daily life to more mechanistic and bureaucratic ones. They cultivate an especially debilitating form of moral relativism in people's lives and an insidious cultural nihilism in the larger society. They decouple the beliefs and actions of individuals and groups from the consequences such beliefs and actions carry for others, thus shrinking one's sense of compassion, humaneness and personal responsibility. They supplant the more transcendent, spiritual



principles and values with more common and utilitarian ones. They spread a generalized sense of indifference, masquerading as tolerance, toward acts and utterances that fundamentally undermine the self-restraint, goodwill, generosity of means and spirit, and common sense that are vital to civil society.

Does this analysis overstate the problem? I think not. In any event, it does not understate it. Consider the social problems our own nation confronts: the decline of our families; the erosion of the average person's economic well-being; the bureaucratization of our institutions; the centralization of power and authority; the rise of crime and the underclass; the increased use of drugs; the erosion of our schools; the debasement of our art, film, literature, and music; the trivializing of our public life and political discourse; the coarsening of relations between the races; and the mean-spiritedness so often experienced in daily life.

In less developed countries, the effect of modernity is even more pronounced. Political and social instability, environmental degradation, crime, ethnic strife, economic dislocations and the migrations of people are all the

result of the pressures of modernization. In many respects, it seems that the world's great struggle is not so much about nations contending one with another as about their peoples' struggle with the forces of modernity, especially as they affect traditions, religions, ways of life, and intergenerational relationships.

But are these forces of modernity, in and of themselves, the root cause of these problems? Are their effects inexorable and inevitable? Or are they merely objective factors in a changing world—to be engaged or deflected, absorbed or rejected?

It probably is impossible to venture a confident answer to these questions. But these forces are operating in American life, and the consequences are disturbing, disquieting, and unprecedented.

There is widespread belief that our society has lost its grip, that the familiar and steady moorings no longer secure the ship of state, that we are at sea, rudderless, and thus unclear about our destination. We seem confused about our values, unconfident about our priorities, and unsure of ourselves and others.

In this context, it should not be surprising that as one of society's core institutions, higher education—particularly its research universities and comprehensive teaching universities—should be experiencing a rising tide of public unhappiness. Open any newspaper (and a growing number of books) and you'll likely find some new criticism of our colleges and universities. The litany is familiar: misuse or trivialized use of federal research funds, athletic scandals, rising student fees and tuitions, racial preferences in admission policies and faculty appointments and promotions, hate speech and contention over what to do about it, faculty teaching loads, excessive use of teaching assistants, oversized and overpaid administrations, and the enduring debate over political correctness.

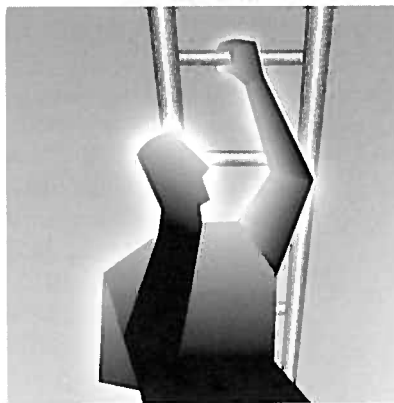
Of course, the criticisms often are exaggerated, overgeneralized, uninformed, and inconsistent. More often than is acknowledged, colleges and universities are finding solutions to these problems. And individual institutions may not face many, or even any, of these issues.

In fact, the critics have missed the real target. It is not that the criticisms lack merit—the issues are real and require corrective action. But this public disquietude about colleges and universities arises less from an objective appraisal of their shortcomings than from a subjective, but mostly unarticulated, apprehension about modern life in general that looks (largely in vain) to institutions of higher learning for explanation and insight.

The Real Challenge. By focusing mistakenly on the issues of the hour, the critics fail to see that the most profound and least apprehended challenge confronting colleges and universities is the need to make better sense of their lower division curricula. Institutions must connect their coursework to authentic and comprehensible educational objectives. They need to clarify the link between their standards for admission and what they expect of their students. And they must take more explicit curricular account of the nature and character of our society, the forces that helped form our present condition, and compare and contrast these with other peoples and cultures for the insight such studies nearly always afford.

Instead, the curriculum for too many lower division students is mainly a less intensive version of the more specialized work undertaken at the upper division and graduate levels. It is molded by disciplinary-based departmental structures. “Breadth and depth” requirements mostly are unexplained compromises among and between academic disciplines and departments. Not surprisingly, their interests too often reflect not so much the needs of students as those of professors, whose careers are much affected by the proportion of time devoted to teaching and research and whose inclinations to further the latter quite naturally subordinate the former. (It is important to distinguish between the curriculum, which should be scrutinized and changed, and the actual quality of classroom teaching, which is much better than the public supposes.)

The specialization of modern life drives the curriculum as it tends to drive so much of our living: ever narrower the focus, ever more specialized the knowledge, ever more limiting of one’s sense of self in the larger society and of one’s sense of place in the work force. Our curriculum is more a parody of modern life than a light to our students and a confused and deeply troubled nation.



Nevertheless, while our colleges and universities have been weakened by external criticism and internal contention, they are stronger than most institutions in our society. They remain best able to help us through the transition from where we have been to wherever we are headed. Colleges and universities will be able to do so, however, only by refocusing programs, reordering priorities, realigning resources, and recommitting themselves to their

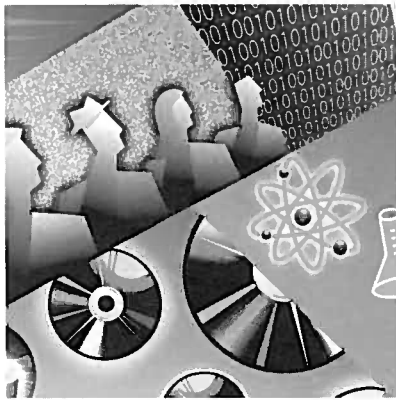
most fundamental of purposes—transmitting the culture from one generation to the next.

They must not limit themselves to offering traditional, disciplinary-based courses, however these might be rearranged as a gesture toward change and innovation. They also must focus on research, tying what we learn to what we teach, fostering cross-disciplinary teaching and interdisciplinary coursework, and taking the needs of our students—rather than the needs of academic disciplines—as the principal point of departure in the construction of our curricula.

Three Transitions: The Curriculum. The lower division curriculum, more than any other single variable, gives expression to the collective sense of what is worth learning during the nonspecialized years of college and university life. Moreover, it is intended, in a rough way, to be the principal means by which the institution seeks to transmit the culture from one generation to the next. It also takes into account who is studying, their readiness to do so, and its relevance to the hopes and aspirations of

the students themselves, the pedagogy, and the connectedness of these first two years of college and university life to K-12 on the one hand and specialized studies on the other.

These are formidable tasks — consequential, complicated, and value laden. They are the arena, and increasingly the battleground, where contending forces—the academic disciplines and departments, various ideologies and academic politics—interact and where critical decisions are made.



Trustees have a crucial role to play here. While the judgment of trustees on academic matters ordinarily should be subordinated to that of the academic profession, the profession is obligated, indeed duty bound, to acknowledge and correct the dysfunctions of the curricula. Trustees need to understand these forces. They need to be privy to the game, to understand its subtleties, and to be prepared to deal with the consequences. They should be involved not as academics but as trustees, doing their duty as the professors and administrators are doing theirs.

This is the arena that sees the convergence of such issues as admission standards, teaching loads, demographic and social changes in society and in the student body, institutional costs, educational policy, pedagogy, and political correctness. Trustees can help lend coherence to the mostly inchoate way these issues tend to be handled. They can help frame the questions and challenge the answers, and they can help blunt the adverse effects of self-interest by those involved. In

short, trustees can play a constructive role without intruding upon the prerogatives of those responsible for making basic academic decisions.

The Leadership Transition. A second transition that should engage the time and attention of trustees occurs when they are called on to identify and select an institution's leader. This is the single most important decision trustees make. AGB's current initiative to study the academic presidency is well timed and much needed as these positions become increasingly difficult to fill. The reasons should not be surprising:

- the growing diffusion of authority within the institution, accompanied by a centralization of accountability;
- a dramatic loss of public regard and respect for these positions;
- the labored nature of institutional decision making;
- the size and complexity of the enterprise;
- the changing nature and character of the student body and professoriate;
- the increasing willingness of elected public officials to take account of these institutions when expressing their political views and when planning their political futures;
- dysfunctional management structures;
- the faculty's diminished sense of institutional citizenship;
- students' shrunken sense of belonging and affinity; and
- the growing intrusiveness of government into the inner workings of these institutions.

Our colleges and universities are not isolated ivory towers inhabited by persons of leisure or affluence, unburdened and unencumbered by the vicissitudes of modern life, as so many choose to believe. On the contrary, they are dynamic, changing, vibrant communities, where the old and the new contend. They are restless places, intellectually unsettling, where values and ideals clash. It is a monumental challenge for any president to bring order and direction to a place as inherently disordered, conservative, and multifaceted.

T*echnology should stimulate us to think more expansively and hopefully about changing our institutions in ways that preserve and enhance their quality and capability in the face of adverse fiscal realities.*

The Fiscal Transition. Finally, trustees will need to contend with a fiscal base that for most colleges and universities will continue to shrink. For independent institutions, tuition levels are increasingly inelastic, except for a handful of the most sought-after and prestigious research universities and leading liberal arts colleges. Yet it is to student tuition and fees that these institutions must look for their basic institutional costs.

As government fails to sustain financial-aid programs intended to help students meet the costs of attending independent colleges and universities, these institutions face a growing concern about their futures. And the federal government's intentions are even less clear and predictable than those of the states.

Moreover, for private research universities, overhead for federally sponsored research will continue to decrease for the foreseeable future. Thus, they will become even more dependent on student tuition and fees to help offset the shortfall.

The financial picture for most public colleges and universities also will be extremely difficult. Rising health and welfare costs, growing numbers of immigrants, the increase in prison construction, and higher K-12 enrollments are among the factors that have combined to shrink the share of state funds for higher education since 1989. The consequence has been steadily rising tuition and fees, less competitive salaries for faculty and staff, program reductions and eliminations, deferred maintenance, crowded classes and labs, and access denied to otherwise qualified students.

Given the nation's economy, tax structure, budgetary priorities, and politics, there is little reason to expect that public funds soon will alleviate the fiscal discomforts of colleges and universities. Thus, the efficiency and productivity of these institutions must improve. This does not mean merely trading off their quality and capability to yield improvements in productivity. Much of what could be done to reduce bureaucracy, to reorganize, to consolidate, and otherwise restructure these institutions already has been done. The hard part now will begin.

In addition to restructuring academic programs, sharing academic and intellectual resources among institutions, and improving systems and procedures, the answer surely will come to depend, in part, on more serious and expansive uses of information technology. And the coming generation of students clearly will be ready. In classrooms and in labs, among and between institutions, in the workplace and at home, technology slowly and over time will have a dramatic effect on where learning takes place, who learns, who teaches, and how teaching is done.

The computer, electronic libraries, the Internet, CD-ROMs, and the array of tools now available to students and scholars hold the most proximate and promising prospects for improving the efficiency and productivity of our teaching, research, and learning. The promise of technology should not be over-generalized or exaggerated, and its limitations should be made clear. But technology should stimulate us to think more expansively and hopefully about changing our institutions in ways that preserve and enhance their quality and capability in the face of adverse fiscal realities.

Changing colleges and universities is never easy. It can be especially difficult for trustees to influence institutional customs and norms. Nevertheless, by governing these transitions, you can help ensure that your institution serves tomorrow's students as effectively as it did your alumni. ♦

David P. Gardner, president of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation in Menlo Park, Calif., is president emeritus of the University of California and the University of Utah. This article is adapted from his speech at the AGB National Conference on Trusteeship last April.