THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN TRANSITION

Commonwealth Club

David P. Gardner, President
University of California

San Francisco
October 30, 1987

Members of the Commonwealth Club of California, ladies and gentlemen:

I had the pleasure of addressing members of the Commonwealth Club three and a half years ago, during my first year as President of the University of California. I’m delighted to be back. Thank you for the invitation.

My topic today is the American university and the changes it faces in the coming years. Allow me to begin with the following observation: the American system of higher education is the largest, most diverse, and most complex in the world. It is also the most successful. Professor Henry Rosovsky of Harvard University recently made the point:

In these days when foreign economic rivals seem to be surpassing us in one field after another, it may be reassuring to know that there is one vital industry where America unquestionably dominates the world: higher education. Between two-thirds and three-quarters of the world’s best universities are located in the United States.
One reason for this remarkable success is competition among and between America's colleges and universities. Unlike higher education in every other country in the world, American colleges and universities compete with each other not just in athletics but also for students, faculty, research grants, state and federal funding, private support and, yes, even for university presidents. Our radically decentralized system also has its drawbacks—as Professor Rosovsky points out, we are home to some of the world's worst colleges and universities as well as to some of the best—but by and large the higher learning in America has succeeded remarkably well.

But the American university today is an institution in transition, just as the United States itself is undergoing rapid and pervasive change—economically, demographically, technologically, and educationally.

Economically, our balance of trade, the budget deficit, the financial markets and the rising economic power of several Asian countries, especially Japan, have dominated the headlines. But behind the headlines lies a deeper reality, only dimly perceived by the average citizen and understood almost not at all by most, viz., the increasing interdependence of the world economy. We live in a truly global economy, one in which the production of a car can involve workers in four or five countries before the final product rolls off the assembly line.
It is harder to "buy American" today even if one sets out assertively to do so.

But it is not just the economy that is more global in its workings: the creation and flow of knowledge itself are increasingly international, with students and faculty members of universities throughout the world moving among and between these institutions with a frequency and regularity that rival that of the universities of Europe in the Middle Ages, when Latin was the language of discourse among scholars and students alike and both travelled freely under the protection of the Pope.

But today, thanks to technological advances, we can travel faster, more safely, and more cheaply, communicate across vast distances, and share information around the globe in minutes. Thus, we need to comprehend and influence this flow of people and ideas as we need also to grasp and have some impact on the flow of capital, goods, and services among the nations of the world. We also need to appreciate how the former influences the latter and the significance of this for what is, for America, a rapidly shrinking world.

Demographically, America is undergoing profound changes, partly as a result of differential birthrates among the nation's many ethnic and racial groups, and partly as a function of the mass migration of peoples from the Pacific Rim countries to the
United States. This is a development that, as you know, is reflected dramatically here in California. This state and the nation are experiencing a wave of immigration that rivals that of the turn of the century. Immigration is especially heavy from Pacific Rim countries—Mexico, Central and South America, and Asia. California has been receiving some 30 percent of these newcomers, a figure far out of proportion to its 10 percent of the nation's population. By the year 2000, as you also know, California is expected to become the first mainland state with a population that consists predominantly of members of ethnic and racial minority groups. We are already seeing the effects of this growing diversity in our schools, where minority youngsters make up 49 percent of total K-12 enrollment. By the year 2000, that figure is expected to reach 58 percent.

There are also migration patterns of major consequence occurring with the United States itself, i.e., population shifts from East to West and from North to South, driven by economic, social, age and other variables that, together with other demographic changes, are working a profound influence on our nation and its institutions, including its colleges and universities.

Technologically, the world continues to undergo fundamental and structural changes, driven on the one hand by the fruits of basic science and the forces of modernity and on the other by
the reactions of persons, religions, and governments to those forces, some supportive and others opposed.

Internationally, we are witnessing conflicts and strains among and between nations that are arguably not so much a case of classic geopolitics as a common coming to terms with the forces of modernity as they impinge on a highly heterogeneous world of peoples, religions, cultures, customs, and interests.

Domestically, we experience this conflict in a variety of ways: we both support science—on a vast scale—while sometimes faulting its methods and often condemning its consequences. One example is the simultaneous demands by the same persons for mutually exclusive objectives—such as a demand for more research on AIDS and no research on animals, when we know that the former is dependent on the latter. And I can tell you that these forces are directly influencing the work of our universities and their prospects for further serving our society.

Education has a critical role to play in closing the gap between the reality of our modern age and our individual capacity to live in it.

Educationally, we are in the midst of a major effort to improve our nation’s schools, prompted by a succession of national reports on schooling in America, the best known of which is entitled *A Nation at Risk*, the report of the National
Commission on Excellence in Education. As the Commission said in its opening pages:

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds American prosperity, security, and civility. We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.

With these words, the Commission sought to alert the American people to what it regarded as a pervasively diminished system of schooling in America.
Fortunately, much has occurred since the issuance of this report. For example, according to the Education Commission of the States, by 1986 forty-one states had raised their requirements for graduation from high school, several had lengthened the school day and school year, twenty-four states had started career ladder programs for teachers, teacher salaries had been markedly increased and often coupled to various forms of performance-based pay, and the decline in SAT scores had at least been checked, and for minorities had risen slightly. The number of undergraduates choosing teaching as a career has increased dramatically and education is an issue that, in my view, will be high on the domestic agenda for several years to come.

So we are living in a society newly awakened to competition from abroad, influenced by profound demographic shifts, driven by scientific and technological change, and undergoing educational reform. What do these forces have to do with our nation's colleges and universities?

Everything.

They will influence what is taught, who is taught, who teaches, and what is researched. Our colleges and universities will also be impacted differentially both by region and by type of institution. Allow me to discuss the University of California's response to these forces, by way of illustration.
First, the growing internationalization and diversification of our state in commerce and trade, in manufacturing, in finance, in the population, indeed in just about every aspect of life, no longer permit us to feel secure in only knowing about and living within one's own culture. We will need to nurture, and education will need to offer, a global rather than a parochial perspective on such matters. For California, situated strategically on the eastern rim of the Pacific Ocean, a better grasp of the cultures, languages, peoples, and economies of these countries will be necessary. To live in California and to be ignorant of our Pacific neighbors is to misconstrue the present and forfeit the future.

The University of California is responding to this international reality in several ways. We are increasing the opportunities for UC students to study abroad, especially in Pacific Rim countries. Our Education Abroad Program has established exchange programs in the Pacific nations of Australia, the People's Republic of China, Costa Rica, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Mexico, New Zealand, and Peru, and participates in a cooperative program with other universities in Taiwan. In 1988-89, programs will be added in Indonesia, Thailand, and Canada.

We have mounted research on all nine of our campuses focusing on issues of interest to California as a Pacific Rim state. And just last month we admitted our first students to the new
Graduate School of International Relations and Pacific Studies on our San Diego campus, the first of its kind in the country, other schools of international relations being mostly on the East Coast and taking the Atlantic countries as their object of study.

The purpose of this new school is to prepare the professionals in business, government, and education that California and our nation will need to take advantage of its opportunities in what will surely be one of the greatest centers of trade, commerce, migration, and cultural exchange the world has ever known.

Second, our state's increasing diversity means that California will need to be more successful in graduating underrepresented minority students—Blacks, Latinos, Chicanos, and Native Americans—from our high schools and bringing them in larger numbers into our colleges and universities. These young people are an enormous asset for California—but only if we encourage, educate, develop the talent they possess. The University of California has mounted a series of programs to attract more students from these underrepresented minority groups; and, we are beginning to see results in our entering undergraduate classes. Over the past seven years, the proportion of such students has increased by one percent each year, so that they now constitute about 16 percent of the University's freshman class.
I wish to emphasize that this endeavor is not simply a matter for us to study or to contemplate but rather is a living, dynamic social and educational imperative. Our success or failure in this respect, more than almost any other single variable, will define California's future in terms either bleak or bright.

Third, the complex economic and technological changes blowing across the American landscape mean that all of our students need to be prepared for a world of even more rapid change, one that will demand more education and sophisticated training. According to a study recently published about the American workforce by the Department of Labor, "Between now and the year 2000, for the first time in history, a majority of all jobs will require postsecondary education." I am not quite sure that I believe that estimate, but it does tend to engage one's attention.

Recognizing the power of these economic and technological trends, the University is deeply involved in efforts to work with California's elementary and secondary schools to improve the academic preparation of all students. We have several different kinds of programs. Some sponsor research on issues relevant to schooling--the PACE project, a cooperative venture involving Berkeley and Stanford faculty, has done an excellent job here in the Bay Area of conducting research on elementary and secondary education policy issues. Other programs are
aimed at working with teachers to improve teaching; our writing and math projects have been especially successful. Still others work directly with students--the MESA program, for example, encourages young minority students to prepare for the study of science and engineering. And finally, we have a host of campus-based programs, for instance, a UC Berkeley-sponsored program named SUPER that links the campus to schools in San Francisco, Berkeley, Albany, and Richmond to improve teaching and to carry out practical research projects that schools in these cities are especially interested in having done.

Fourth, we are working on ways the University can help society understand the complex problems this era of change brings with it. I have already mentioned the impact of science and technology on our world and the brilliant successes of our country and of our universities in this respect. Our record is less than satisfactory, however, in giving our students and the citizenry generally an understanding of how science and technology are transforming our lives, and the social and ethical implications that flow from this revolution in knowledge. What are the legal and ethical implications of creating new forms of life? How can we use the vast new powers of information storage that computers have given us in ways that also protect individual privacy? What does it mean to live in a world in which science and technology are the engines of ever-increasing cycles of change? How are we to comprehend the consequences
for our lives that will flow from the effort to chart the human genome?

Science alone cannot answer these questions for us. To begin to understand them, and the human questions each of us must confront in our own lives, we need the humanities. Languages, literature, linguistics, history, jurisprudence, philosophy, archaeology, comparative religion, ethics, the history, criticism, and theory of the arts—these and related disciplines constitute the heart of our cultural legacy. The health and vigor of the humanities are essential if we are to offer students the broad liberal education they will need to function in their world.

But the humanities have suffered in recent years. In a 1980 report the National Endowment for the Humanities found much that was disturbing in the condition of the humanities in America: the declining quality of humanities education in the schools, deteriorating support for America's cultural institutions, insufficient funding for humanities research.

In response, the University of California has undertaken a new initiative designed to encourage and better support the humanities. It includes support for individual faculty members to pursue their research and for graduate student fellowships to encourage the very brightest of our nation's young people to enter the field of the humanities as their life's work. It
provides support for each of our campuses to develop programs of research in the humanities. And, as the centerpiece of our efforts, a Universitywide Humanities Research Institute has been established at the University's Irvine campus.

The new institute will bring together distinguished humanists from UC and throughout the world to study, conduct research, learn from each other, and in general advance our understanding of the humanities and their relationship to other disciplines, including science and technology. We are excited about this new initiative and very hopeful about its future.

These, then, are some of the issues that occupy at least some of us at the University of California.

The American university today is grappling with new kinds of students, new kinds of knowledge, new demographic and political and economic realities. From my perspective, as president of a large and lively public university, the opportunities sometimes seem nothing short of overwhelming. It is tempting to think that what we face is unique, unprecedented. That, of course, is not the case.

I was reminded of this by having occasion to read some of the speeches of one of my predecessors, Robert Gordon Sproul, who served as president from 1930-1958—years of transition if ever there were such. Speaking in 1937—50 years ago—he
anticipated much of what I have been discussing today. The University of California, he said, "moves forward irresistibly to great intellectual power and greater moral influence in the civilization of the Pacific, the civilization of tomorrow."

And he went on to say:

The responsibility of a University extends into every branch of knowledge. Its staff members form the shock troops in civilization's endless trek into the unknown and its constant struggle against the forces of ignorance.

Whatever man does requires knowledge. Whatever new he may do in the future will require more knowledge. The primary source of that knowledge, and I do not speak carelessly, will be the universities of the world, whether the matter at issue is a new kind of cement for Boulder Dam, the correct design for a San Francisco Bay Bridge, the means of safeguarding natural resources, or methods of protecting human life.

Sproul recognized that, whatever its flaws and shortcomings, the American university will be even more important to our future than it has been to our past. How right he was.