



The university that cannot transform will not survive.

Two Obligations.

*On Designing Universities That Renew Themselves and the Students
They Must Not Lose*

WISDOM ... RECOVERED · ISSUE 04

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In This Issue

Universities occupy a strange position in the life of any society. They are among the oldest institutions we have preserved, and among the ones we expect, simultaneously, to be the most forward-looking. They are asked to transmit what has been learned across centuries and to prepare people for futures that have not yet fully taken shape.

They are trusted with the education of individuals at their most formative, and yet they are often the last to ask whether the structures they have inherited still serve the purpose they were built for. This issue brings together two books that, from different directions and different decades, press that question with uncommon force.

Burton Clark, writing in 1998, looked at universities from the outside in. He studied institutions that had found ways to transform themselves deliberately, not in response to crisis, but through sustained organizational will. His conclusion was direct: universities that remain in their inherited forms while the world reorganizes around them are not preserving excellence. They are deferring a reckoning.

The five structural commitments he identified, a strengthened steering core, an expanded developmental periphery, a diversified funding base, a stimulated academic heartland, and an integrated entrepreneurial culture, are not a corporate prescription. They are a map for institutions willing to design themselves rather than merely inhabit themselves.

Vincent Tinto, writing eleven years earlier, looked at universities from the inside out. He studied the students who left before completing their degrees and asked a question most institutions were not asking: what did we fail to offer them? His answer, grounded in sociology and in the evidence of tens of thousands of student departures, was that attrition is not a story about individual inadequacy.

It is a story about institutions that admit students without committing to integrate them, that open their gates and then leave newcomers to find their own way into belonging. Retention, Tinto argued, is a measure of institutional commitment, not a metric for enrollment managers.

Read together, these two books describe the full scope of what a university owes. It owes society an institution capable of renewing itself, one honest enough to recognize when inherited structures have become obstacles rather than foundations. And it owes every individual student a genuine investment in their integration into the intellectual and social life of the institution, not as a courtesy, but as the fulfillment of the promise implicit in every letter of admission.

The university that does not hold its students will not have served them. Both failures are, in the end, failures of institutional imagination and will. The scholarship recovered in this issue is nearly three and four decades old. It is also, in every essential respect, as current as the conversations happening in higher education leadership meetings this week.

To those who dare to reimagine.



ARTICLE ONE

Designing Universities for Renewal

Why Burton Clark's Entrepreneurial University Still Matters Today · Christopher Washington, Ph.D.

Large universities often resemble small cities. Some are large enough to operate their own power plants, hospitals, police departments, housing systems, and entertainment venues. Within their boundaries are elaborate governance systems, deeply rooted traditions, and carefully articulated missions that shape the life of the academic community.

For those who spend their careers inside them, it can be easy to assume that the ways universities organize knowledge, authority, and professional life represent the most refined and legitimate arrangements available.

Yet universities are never truly self-contained. They depend on the society around them for the students they educate, the roads and infrastructure that sustain them, the employers who receive their graduates, and the public trust that supports their existence. When institutions become too comfortable within their own structures, and ignore the experiences of those outside them, a subtle distortion can emerge.

The view from inside the university can begin to resemble the perspective from a European medieval castle: life within the walls appears orderly and rational, while the needs, expectations, and realities beyond those walls grow harder to perceive clearly.

“[The entrepreneurial concept] points more powerfully to deliberate local effort, to actions that lead to change in organizational posture ... across a university over a number of years to change, by means of organized initiative, how the institution is structured and orientated” (p. 4).

This tension between institutional self-understanding and societal expectation is not new. In his 1998 book *Creating Entrepreneurial Universities: Organizational Pathways of Transformation*, Burton R. Clark warned that when universities remain in inherited organizational forms while society reorganizes around them, a growing imbalance emerges between societal expectations and institutional capacity.

Some highly resourced institutions, particularly those that reject far more applicants than they admit, may remain buffered from these outside realities and pressures. Their reputations, selectivity, and financial resources allow them to absorb shocks that would force other institutions to adapt. But across the sector, the pressures of adaptation are becoming harder to ignore.

In visiting universities across the United States as a member of peer review teams, and through partnerships with institutions in several countries, I saw firsthand how inherited structures can gradually become institutional risk. Over time, those structures shape an institutional mindset that makes alternative arrangements difficult to imagine. Psychologist Karl Duncker described a related pattern as functional fixedness: the tendency to see systems only in terms of how they have been used before.

In universities, this often appears when degrees are defined narrowly, curriculum authority is treated as exclusively internal, and engagement with external partners is limited. Such habits gradually reduce an institution's adaptive capacity. As learners gain more options, they increasingly seek institutions that better align with their needs, a shift that has already contributed to the closure of a number of smaller colleges.

Clark studied several European universities he regarded as exemplars of entrepreneurial transformation. By entrepreneurial, he did not mean commercialization, but an institutional capacity for deliberate self-renewal under pressure. These institutions were not abandoning their academic mission, they were transforming themselves to sustain it.

“As a halfway house to the outside world the developmental periphery becomes an organizational location within a university for the absorption of whole new modes of thinking” (p. 139).

Not every insight from Clark's European case studies transfers neatly across contexts, given differences in regulation, academic traditions, and demographic and economic conditions. Yet his deeper claim remains highly relevant: universities that design themselves intentionally are better positioned to remain excellent and relevant than those that rely on prestige and tradition alone.

Clark's contribution was not merely diagnostic. From his case studies he identified a set of institutional disciplines that allowed universities to redesign themselves deliberately rather than drift under external pressure. At its core, his work was also a challenge to institutional mindset: to see inherited structures not as permanent arrangements, but as designs that could be reimagined in service of the university's mission.

Clark's Five Design Elements, and Why They Still Matter

Clark identified five structural commitments that enabled universities to evolve while preserving their academic mission. He believed that institutions that cultivate these elements are better able to adapt to changing conditions without sacrificing their core purpose.

1. A Strengthened Steering Core

A strengthened steering core aligns academic and administrative leadership around a coherent institutional direction. Academic excellence emerges not from central control or isolated departments, but from institutional coherence. When academic priorities and resource decisions move in different directions, improvement efforts falter. A strengthened steering core ensures that strategy, academic priorities, and resource allocation move together.

2. An Expanded Developmental Periphery

An expanded developmental periphery extends the university's engagement beyond traditional academic departments through partnerships with industry, professions, and communities. Clark viewed this boundary space as a critical source of renewal. It is where faculty and students encounter emerging problems, test the relevance of their knowledge, and identify new opportunities for learning and research.

3. A Diversified Funding Base

Clark observed that institutions dependent on a single funding source become structurally vulnerable. Entrepreneurial universities cultivated multiple streams of support, including public funding, research activity, partnerships, and new educational programs. Diversification was not simply financial strategy. It helped preserve institutional autonomy and the capacity to invest in emerging priorities while remaining guided by mission.

4. A Stimulated Academic Heartland

A stimulated academic heartland engages the faculty core as active participants in institutional renewal. Clark emphasized that transformation must reach the academic center of the university; without faculty ownership, improvement efforts remain superficial. When faculty participate meaningfully in redesign, innovation becomes embedded in teaching and scholarship rather than imposed from above.

5. An Integrated Entrepreneurial Culture

Clark's final element connects the previous four. Without cultural integration, innovation remains episodic and dependent on individual champions. An entrepreneurial culture encourages initiative, collaboration across institutional boundaries, and a willingness to experiment in service of academic purpose. While structures can be mandated, the confidence and commitment required for sustained renewal must be cultivated over time.

Institutional Design and Relevance

Clark warned that universities organized around inherited structures would struggle to keep pace with expanding societal expectations. The pressures he identified in the 1990s, mass access, accountability demands, and funding uncertainty, have only intensified. Today universities are also expected to serve as lifelong learning partners, compete globally, and adapt curricula to rapidly evolving professions.

“[The entrepreneurial culture starts] as a relatively simple institutional idea about change that later becomes elaborated into a set of beliefs which, if diffused in the heartland, becomes a university wide culture” (p. 7).

In this environment, institutional relevance depends less on isolated innovations than on the capacity for intentional redesign. Clark's work reminds us that the challenge facing universities is not a lack of ideas, but a lack of sustained translation of insight into institutional practice. His design principles describe capacities that many institutions once worked deliberately to build, capacities that deserve renewed attention today.

Clark's real insight was simple: universities must be designed, not merely inherited.

Universities will always possess elements of self-contained communities. Their traditions, intellectual cultures, and governance systems are essential to preserving and advancing knowledge.

But when institutions see their inherited structures as permanent rather than provisional, functional fixedness can quietly take hold.

The challenge Clark identified remains with us: whether universities will continue to operate as castles comfortable within their walls, or whether they will intentionally design themselves to remain connected, responsive, and relevant to the societies that sustain them.

Christopher Washington

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11 March 2026

ABOUT THE BOOK

TITLE	Creating Entrepreneurial Universities: Organizational Pathways of Transformation
AUTHOR	Burton R. Clark (1921–2009)
PUBLISHER	IAU Press / Pergamon (Elsevier Science), Oxford
YEAR	1998
PAGES	xvi + 163
ISBN	978-0-08-043354-7 (paperback); 978-0-08-043342-4 (hardcover)
CORE INSIGHT	Universities that remain in their traditional form face a growing imbalance between societal demands and their capacity to respond, requiring collective transformation through five organizational pathways, not top-down corporate management, to become self-reliant institutions that shape their own futures.

#WisdomForgotten #EntrepreneurialUniversity #UniversityTransformation #AcademicHeartland



ARTICLE TWO

When Students Leave, Institutions Fail

What Vincent Tinto Taught Us About Belonging, Departure, and the Obligations of the University · Prof. Bassem Khafagy

Every student who leaves college without graduating carries with them a story universities rarely tell honestly. Institutions count departures as enrollment losses, record them in attrition statistics, and design retention programs to reduce the numbers. What they rarely ask is the more demanding question: what did we fail to offer?

In 1987, Vincent Tinto asked precisely that question.

Published by the University of Chicago Press, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* arrived at a moment when American higher education was expanding its gates without equally expanding its capacity to welcome those who entered.

Tinto was a sociologist of education at Syracuse University, already known for a landmark 1975 article that had begun to reframe departure from college as a social and interactional phenomenon rather than an individual failure.

The book extended that argument into a comprehensive theory, grounded in decades of empirical research and animated by a moral claim that still challenges us today: students do not leave institutions, institutions fail to hold them.

The Borrowed Framework: Durkheim and Van Gennep

Tinto did not build his theory from scratch. He drew deliberately on two foundational thinkers, Emile Durkheim and Arnold Van Gennep, weaving their insights into a framework designed for the university setting.

From Durkheim's theory of suicide, Tinto borrowed the insight that departure from a community is driven less by individual pathology than by the degree to which a person is socially integrated into that community. From Van Gennep's anthropology of rites of passage, he borrowed the understanding that transitions, particularly the passage into a new institutional life, involve stages of separation, transition, and incorporation.

Students who fail to complete that incorporation, who remain socially and academically peripheral to the institution's ongoing life, are most at risk of departing.

Together, these two sources produced a theory of remarkable explanatory power. Student attrition was not a mystery of individual psychology. It was a predictable outcome of institutional environments that failed to integrate their students.

The Barometer Argument: Departure as Institutional Diagnosis

Tinto's most penetrating theoretical move was to reframe what student departure actually measures. He wrote that student departure may serve as a barometer of the social and intellectual health of college life as much as of the students' experiences at the college.

This single sentence carries enormous implications. If departure is a barometer, then every student who leaves is transmitting information about the institution, not merely about themselves. High attrition is not a sign that unsuitable students were admitted. It is a sign that the institution's social and intellectual environment failed to become a place where those students could belong.

“Student departure may serve as a barometer of the social and intellectual health of college life as much as of the students’ experiences at the college.”

This reframing inverted the usual logic of retention programs. If institutions treated departure as an enrollment management problem to be solved through interventions applied to at-risk students, Tinto suggested instead that the first object of study must be the institution itself, its communities, its classrooms, its informal social structures, and the quality of its human interactions.

The Integration Model: Academic and Social

The theoretical heart of *Leaving College* is Tinto's interactionalist model of student departure, which identifies academic integration and social integration as the two central forces shaping a student's decision to persist or leave.

Academic integration refers to the degree to which a student engages meaningfully with the intellectual life of the institution, through quality of instruction, academic advising, peer study relationships, and a growing sense of intellectual competence and purpose.

“The major cause of student attrition [is] the inability of students to make the transition to college and become incorporated into the institution’s ongoing social and intellectual life.”

Social integration refers to the degree to which a student becomes woven into the informal social fabric of campus life, through friendships, extracurricular connections, and a developing sense of membership in a community that recognizes and values them.

When both forms of integration are strong, students persist. When both are weak, departure is likely. The model also recognized that integration is not a single event at enrollment; it is a continuous process, and the institution bears ongoing responsibility for nurturing it.

The Transition as the Critical Moment

Tinto was particularly attentive to the early stages of the college experience. The fourth chapter of the book identifies the major cause of student attrition as the inability of students to make the transition to college and become incorporated into the institution's ongoing social and intellectual life.

The transition from high school to college, or from working life to the classroom, demands a renegotiation of identity. Students must separate from prior communities and commit to new ones. Institutions that treat enrollment as the end of their obligation rather than the beginning of it, those that assume students will find their own way into belonging, are precisely those that lose the most students.

“Effective retention lies in the institution’s commitment to the students it serves.”

Tinto's message was that the transition must be actively supported, and that the burden of that support belongs to the institution.

The Moral Core: Commitment to the Students Served

Beneath the theoretical architecture of *Leaving College* lies a moral argument. Tinto's central claim is that retention is not fundamentally a management challenge. It is a measure of whether an institution is genuinely committed to the education of every student it admits. A university that admits students it does not then invest in integrating has made a promise it does not intend to keep.

This remains a profoundly uncomfortable argument for institutions accustomed to measuring quality by selectivity rather than by what they actually produce in the students who pass through their doors.

Alexander Astin had made a related argument in *Achieving Educational Excellence* two years earlier, and Tinto's work reinforced it from the sociology of student persistence. Together, they mounted a challenge to the prestige model of institutional quality that higher education has still not fully answered.

From 1987 to Now: The Argument Deepens

Tinto revised and expanded *Leaving College* for a second edition in 1993, responding to a wave of new research and extending his theory to new student populations: minority students, adult learners, graduate students, and those attending community colleges and commuting institutions.

He gave new emphasis to the classroom itself as the most important site of integration, a recognition that not all students can participate equally in the residential campus culture that his original model assumed.

Since then, the field of student success has grown enormously. Learning communities, first-year experience programs, peer mentoring, intrusive advising, and early alert systems all trace their intellectual lineage, at least in part, to Tinto's framework. With more than ten thousand scholarly citations, *Leaving College* is among the most cited works in all of higher education research.

And yet, in 2026, approximately forty percent of students who begin four-year degree programs in the United States still do not complete them. The gap between Tinto's diagnosis and institutional practice remains wide. The challenge is not the absence of knowledge. It is the absence of sufficient will to redesign institutions around the students they serve, rather than around the traditions they have inherited.

The Book as a Mirror

What makes *Leaving College* enduring is not only its theoretical contribution but its moral insistence. Tinto wrote at a moment when higher education was congratulating itself on expanded access without asking whether expanded access constituted a genuine educational commitment. He forced the question.

The university of the future will be judged not by the students it admits, but by the students it graduates, and by what it gave them while they were there. Tinto gave us the language and the framework to ask whether that gift is truly being offered. The honest answer to that question, nearly four decades later, is still one that many institutions would prefer not to hear.

To those who dare to reimagine.

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ABOUT THE BOOK

TITLE	Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition
AUTHOR	Vincent Tinto
PUBLISHER	University of Chicago Press
YEAR	1987; second edition, 1993
PAGES	246 (1987); 296 (1993, second edition)
ISBN	978-0-226-80449-1
CORE INSIGHT	Students leave college not because of individual failure, but because institutions fail to integrate them into their social and intellectual communities, making retention a measure of a university's commitment to the education it provides, not merely a metric of enrollment management.

[#WisdomForgotten](#) [#StudentRetention](#) [#UniversityBelonging](#) [#LeavingCollege](#) [#HigherEducationReform](#)



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About this newsletter • *Wisdom ... Forgotten* is a weekly newsletter by Prof. Bassem Khafagy and Dr. Christopher Washington. Together, they bring six decades of combined experience spanning global higher education strategy, institutional leadership, governance, workforce innovation, and organizational transformation across multiple continents. Each week, this newsletter surfaces ideas from two classic academic works that were often written for moments very much like the one higher education is navigating today, and asks what becomes possible when those insights are brought back into active practice. This newsletter is not a book review. It is a conversation between two thought leaders and a growing community of academics, university leaders, and practitioners who believe the future of the university is strengthened when we reconnect with the intellectual foundations that shaped the field and reinterpret them for today's realities. Many scholars and leaders have carried these ideas forward. Our goal is to help reconnect them to everyday leadership, policy, and institutional design decisions.

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The visual compositions • throughout this newsletter and the series are original works by Prof. Bassem K. Khafagy. They are crafted using advanced technological tools, including artificial intelligence, guided entirely by the author's artistic vision and design sensibility. In a series about reimagining the university, it felt only right that the art itself reflect that spirit of creative possibility.

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