

The presidency at the crossroads of complexity and conscience.

The Presidency at the Crossroads.

*When Complexity Meets Conscience in the Work of University
Leadership*

WISDOM ... RECOVERED · ISSUE 07

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In This Issue

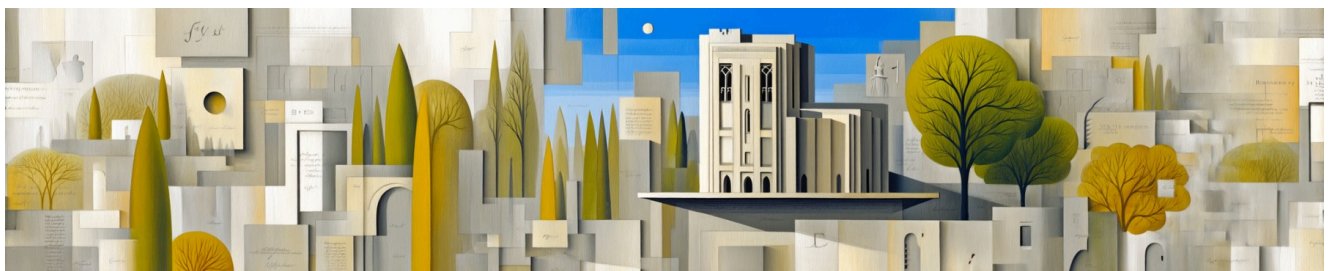
No office inside the university absorbs more competing pressures than the presidency. None is more frequently narrated as impossible. None is more consequential when it is done well, or when it is done poorly.

This issue of our newsletter returns to the office itself. Two books, written nearly sixty years apart, examine the presidency from two different angles that turn out to be inseparable. One explores what it means to lead a university of ever-expanding complexity. The other asks what it means to lead one whose institutional choices quietly shape the social fabric far beyond campus.

Prof. Bassem Khafagy opens this issue with Eddie R. Cole's 2020 study of college presidents between 1948 and 1968, drawing out how quiet choices inside the presidency shaped American racial history in ways that remain with us. Dr. Christopher Washington follows with Clark Kerr's 1963 classic on the multiversity, arguing that today's presidency has evolved into something closer to air traffic control than singular command.

Read together, the two articles sharpen a single question. When the office of the university president is asked to manage unprecedented complexity and, at the same time, to take a clear moral position on the structures the university helped build, what becomes of the leader who does only one?

This issue of Wisdom Forgotten is dedicated, as always, to those who dare to reimagine.



ARTICLE ONE

The Presidency as Prism

On What the Office Reveals, and What It Signs · Prof. Bassem Khafagy

Every university eventually learns that neutrality is itself a position. The only question is how long it takes to admit it.

Eddie R. Cole spent years inside archives to recover a history that higher education has largely chosen not to tell itself. His 2020 book, *The Campus Color Line: College Presidents and the Struggle for Black Freedom*, focuses on the two decades between 1948 and 1968. It is a book about seven institutions. It is, more deeply, a book about the office of the presidency.

Cole is Professor of Higher Education and Organizational Change at UCLA. His first book has won nearly every major recognition the field offers. The ASHE Outstanding Book Award. The AAC&U Frederic W. Ness Book Award. The AERA Outstanding Publication Award. The AESA Critics' Choice Book Award. The HES Outstanding Book Award. No recent book on university leadership has been honored more broadly. It deserves the recognition. What it deserves more is careful reading.

A Prism, Not a Lamp

The central argument is deceptively simple. College presidents during the mid-twentieth century shaped American racial politics far more than the historical record has acknowledged. Some did so by confronting injustice. Many did so by protecting their institutions at the expense of the Black communities, students, and faculty most directly affected.

Cole frames the claim with precision. The college presidency, he writes, is “a prism through which to disclose how colleges and universities have challenged or preserved the many enduring forms of anti-Black racism in the United States” (p. 4).

A prism does not generate light. It reveals what the light has always contained. The office does not create the institution's conditions. It reveals what those conditions already were.

The presidency does not generate the conditions it faces. It reveals how the institution chooses to meet them.

A National, Not Regional, Story

The chapters move across an unexpected geography. Morgan State College. The University of Chicago. The University of California. The University of Mississippi. The University of Alabama. Princeton. The University of Wisconsin.

Cole deliberately refuses to concentrate the story in the American South. His point is that the architecture of institutional racism in higher education was national, not regional. It was constructed in boardrooms in Chicago as firmly as on campuses in Oxford, Mississippi. It was built into housing policy, admissions policy, free speech policy, and federal contracting.

The book is, in Cole's own phrasing, "a national study of the college presidency" (p. 15). That framing changes everything that follows. Familiar scenes of confrontation are still there. But they sit inside a slower, larger pattern. The pattern is institutional. The pattern is everywhere.

This is why the book unsettles the reader who arrives expecting a regional history. There is no region to which the responsibility can be exported. The presidency carried the pattern wherever it went.

The Reach of the Office

Each chapter follows one president inside one institution, making decisions one at a time. Cole allows us to watch leaders perform what universities have long described as managing the situation. He also shows us what that phrase often meant.

The displacement of Black neighborhoods near the University of Chicago under the banner of urban renewal. The admission of new students while quietly preserving the conditions that made their presence precarious. The accommodation of white supremacist speakers, framed as a defense of free speech.

Cole's argument is that college presidents "played an outsized role in shaping racial politics and practices both inside and outside of the educational sphere" (p. 10). This is the sentence that reframes the whole period. The presidency was never confined to the campus. It reached into zoning hearings and housing policy. It reached into federal affirmative action debates. It reached into the state capitals where the financial future of the institution was decided.

Everywhere the office reached, it carried the institution's assumptions with it. The presidency was never outside these choices. It was their architecture.

The history of the American college presidency is not the history of what presidents said. It is the history of what presidents were willing to sign.

The Quiet Work of Recovery

And yet Cole is not writing a book of indictments. He is writing a book of recovery.

The Black college presidents in his study, led by Martin Jenkins at Morgan State, built institutional capacity under conditions that deliberately denied it to them. They did not wait for recognition that would not come. They did the work.

Cole describes this as the “quiet” work of Black presidents, the work most important to understanding how they shaped racial practices “beyond the white gaze of state legislatures, governors, and trustees.” This is the most tender thread in the book. It is also the most instructive.

The Black presidents of the mid-twentieth century are the figures from whom the modern presidency has the most to learn, precisely because they had none of the institutional leverage their white counterparts took for granted. They built what they could not name, and they named what they could not yet build.

They did not wait for recognition that would not come. They did the work.

The Weight of Inheritance

What Cole asks of the modern reader is difficult. He asks us to accept that the offices we now occupy, or report to, or aspire to, were shaped by choices we did not make but must now inherit.

Universities today are not battling the same color line of 1965. They are, however, operating inside structures earlier presidents helped build. Housing patterns. Admissions legacies. Faculty pipelines. Endowment compositions. Land holdings and neighborhood relationships. These are not abstract inheritances. They are present-tense realities with historical authors.

Even the contemporary language of institutional caution has a lineage. The carefully managed statement. The studied neutrality at moments of national tension. The insistence that the university “takes no position” on the question of the day. Cole shows that the cautious president is not a neutral figure. The cautious president is making a decision. The decision is to preserve the institution as it has been rather than to change it for what it could become.

What Cole Leaves Us With

This is where Cole’s conclusion lands with unusual force. His final argument, after three hundred pages of archival patience, is that symbolic gestures are insufficient.

“Campus initiatives geared toward racial equality,” he writes, “are only as effective as the college president’s clearly articulated acknowledgment that racism is a problem” (p. 317).

Every word in that sentence carries weight. Clearly. Articulated. Acknowledgment. Problem. A president who cannot say the thing plainly cannot lead past it. A statement that does not name what it is about becomes part of what it was supposed to address.

The book has become essential reading for anyone preparing for a presidency. At a historically Black university. At a regional comprehensive. At an elite research institution. At any university, anywhere in the world, where leaders believe that silence is a neutral position. It is not. It never has been.

If the presidency is a prism, the question for today’s leaders is not whether they will refract the light of their moment. They will. The only question is what that light will reveal about the institution on whose behalf they speak, and whose silence they inherit.

The office is never silent. Silence is what it says.

To those who dare to reimagine.

Bassem Khafagy

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Prof. Bassem Khafagy, Chairperson, World Universities Foundation · connect@wisdom-forgotten.com · 22 April 2026

ABOUT THE BOOK

TITLE	The Campus Color Line: College Presidents and the Struggle for Black Freedom
AUTHOR	Eddie R. Cole
PUBLISHER	Princeton University Press
YEAR	2020
PAGES	376
ISBN	978-0-691-20674-5
RECOGNITION	Winner of the ASHE Outstanding Book Award, the AESA Critics' Choice Book Award, the AAC&U Frederic W. Ness Book Award, the HES Outstanding Book Award, and the AERA Outstanding Publication Award.
CORE INSIGHT	The college presidency is not a reactive position but a historical actor. Between 1948 and 1968, American college presidents shaped the nation's racial policies and practices through the choices they made, and often through the choices they declined to make. Their decisions about housing, admissions, free speech, and institutional partnerships produced inheritances that continue to structure universities and surrounding communities today. The office is consequential not when it speaks, but when it acts.

#WisdomForgotten #CampusColorLine #RacialEquityInHigherEducation #HigherEducationHistory



ARTICLE TWO

Clark Kerr and Leading the Multiversity

On the Presidency as the Coordination of Crowded Airspace · Christopher Washington, Ph.D.

For many university presidents, the role has expanded well beyond traditional academic leadership. Today, it requires navigating demographic contraction, technological disruption, political scrutiny, and growing public skepticism, often simultaneously. These pressures unfold alongside enduring responsibilities: stabilizing finances, working with governing boards, and responding to external needs.

While the importance of the role remains, the conditions under which it must be performed have changed.

Yet the pathways used to prepare presidents have changed far less than the environments they are now expected to interpret. Most leaders still emerge from traditional academic trajectories, pathways that cultivate respect for shared governance, stewardship of academic quality, and deep institutional knowledge. Universities need leaders grounded in these traditions.

But as the environment has grown more complex, a question becomes unavoidable: are these pathways sufficient for the realities leaders now face? More than sixty years ago, Clark Kerr confronted a similar moment of transformation. As president of the University of California system, he was not simply observing change, he was leading through it.

In *The Uses of the University*, he offered a framework to make sense of this shift. The university, he argued, had evolved from a relatively unified community into what he called the multiversity, an institution performing multiple, often competing functions: advancing research while expanding access, preserving culture while driving economic development, and serving both public purposes and private interests.

Kerr named the structure. He also suggested something deeper: the university was no longer a single-purpose institution. It had become something more like an airspace, crowded with independent actors, each pursuing different aims, moving at different speeds, and requiring constant coordination to avoid collision.

The University as Managed Airspace

Kerr's central insight was that the university is not a unified organism, but an aggregation of missions, an infrastructure where government, industry, faculty, students, and communities intersect. These intersections do not produce alignment by default. They generate persistent tension.

Like a busy airspace, the university is defined by simultaneous activity. Different trajectories such as research, teaching, access, innovation, and public service operate alongside one another, often intersecting, sometimes conflicting. No single path defines the whole. Kerr understood this feature not as a flaw, but as a defining condition.

“The University is not engaged in making ideas safe for students. It is engaged in making students safe for ideas.”

Kerr also navigated one of the most enduring tensions: academic excellence and student access. The rise of the University of California system reflected a deliberate design including differentiated institutional roles, broad access, and elite research capacity operating as a coordinated whole.

Leadership, in this context, was not about eliminating competing trajectories. It was about sequencing and coordinating them so the system could function.

From Multiversity to Expanding Airspace

Kerr described the university as inherently inconsistent.

“The University is not one community but several. Its edges are fuzzy. It looks far into the past and far into the future, and is often at odds with the present.”

That description feels even more accurate today. What has changed is scope. Since Kerr's time, complexity has expanded beyond the institution itself. Burton R. Clark described the rise of entrepreneurial universities as institutions that must actively generate resources and partnerships.

More recently, alternative credential providers, corporate learning platforms, and digital delivery have created a distributed landscape of overlapping educational actors. The university is no longer a bounded airspace. What Kerr understood as institutional complexity now operates at the level of an ecosystem. It operates within a larger, more crowded sky, one where multiple institutions, platforms, and educational providers move according to different logics, speeds, and incentives.

Leadership as Air Traffic Control

For Kerr, faculty autonomy, public accountability, student voice, industry partnership, and political scrutiny were not problems to be solved. They were defining features of the multiversity. Leadership, therefore, is not the elimination of tension. It is continuous management of it.

The president, as Kerr observed, is a mediator among interest groups. But mediation, in this context, is not passive. It is an active process of interpretation, of making sense of competing demands, maintaining legitimacy, and guiding institutional action without resolving the contradictions that define the system.

For me the role begins to resemble that of a successful air traffic controller. Not controlling every aircraft, but ensuring that multiple trajectories can coexist without collision. Not eliminating complexity, but sequencing movement, allocating attention, and responding in real time as conditions change.

Failure is rarely dramatic collapse. More often, it is congestion, delay, or loss of direction.

Leading Under Expanding Complexity

Kerr described the university as an adaptive structure linking knowledge, public purpose, and multiple forms of social and economic activity. That structure now operates at greater speed and scale.

The presidency, in this context, is both custodial and interpretive. It requires the ability to read changing conditions, weigh competing claims, and act while those conditions continue to evolve. Yet many institutions still prepare leaders as if stability were the dominant condition.

“The president of the multiversity is leader, educator, wielder of power, pump; he is also officeholder, caretaker, inheritor, consensus seeker, persuader, bottleneck. But he is mostly a mediator.”

The consequences are visible today: shortened presidencies, strategic drift, and reactive governance. Revisiting *The Uses of the University* is a reminder that universities have long required leaders capable of navigating complexity without resolving it.

What has changed is not the nature of the multiversity. It is the density, speed, and pressure of the airspace in which it now operates. So the question becomes whether leaders are prepared to guide the multiversity safely, coherently, and at the proper pace within the increasingly crowded skies it now inhabits.

Christopher Washington

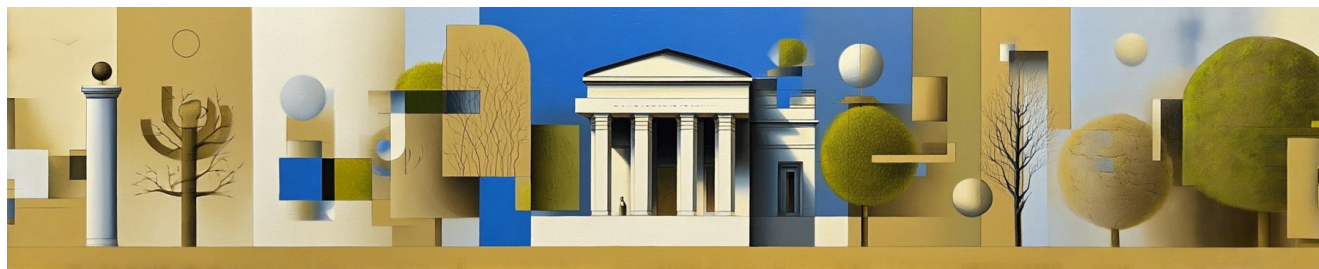
CHRISTOPHER WASHINGTON, PH.D.

22 April 2026

ABOUT THE BOOK

TITLE	The Uses of the University
AUTHOR	Clark Kerr
PUBLISHER	Harvard University Press (Godkin Lectures at Harvard University)
YEAR	1963. Expanded in subsequent editions: 1972, 1982, 1994, and 2001 (Fifth Edition).
PAGES	140 (First Edition); 261 (Fifth Edition)
ISBN	978-0-674-00532-9 (Fifth Edition, 2001). The First Edition predates the widespread adoption of the ISBN standard.
RECOGNITION	Widely regarded as the single most influential book on the American research university. Launched the term “multiversity” into the permanent vocabulary of higher education.
CORE INSIGHT	The modern university is not a unified community but a plurality of communities held together by competing imperatives. Its presidency, consequently, is less an office of command than an office of mediation. The leader who attempts to resolve the tensions of the multiversity misunderstands the institution. The leader who coordinates them makes the institution possible.

#WisdomForgotten #ClarkKerr #Multiversity #UniversityLeadership #HigherEducation



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- Forward the newsletter to a colleague with an invitation to join us.
- Share your comments, and let us all learn from you.
- If there is a book that you believe deserves a place in this conversation, tell us. Recommend it. Make the case for it.

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.

Dr. Christopher Washington • Provost Emeritus of Franklin University, is the Founder and CEO of ResiliencePlus Advisors LLC, an executive coaching and advisory firm focused on equipping leaders to navigate complexity, disruption, and rapid organizational change. He also serves as President of the ILI Think Tank at the Innovative Leadership Institute, leading a global network of scholars and senior practitioners advancing the theory and practice of innovative leadership. A contributing author to Forbes Nonprofit Council, Dr. Washington publishes on leadership innovation, organizational culture and performance, and learning ecosystem design.

Prof. Bassem K. Khafagy • An academic leader, best-selling author, award winning researcher, and strategic thinker whose work spans the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. He is currently dedicating his time to rethinking the “University” as a transformative force in society. Prof. Khafagy is the founding force behind several global academic initiatives, most notably the World Universities Foundation, WUF, the World Summit on Universities, WSU, and the Re-Imagine University Newsletter & book series.

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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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