MARY SOO and CATHRYN CARSON

MANAGING THE RESEARCH UNIVERSITY: CLARK KERR AND THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

ABSTRACT. In the 1950s and 1960s, Clark Kerr led the University of California's Berkeley campus, and then the University of California as a whole. Throughout these years, he developed a system of managerial strategies. This paper shows how Kerr's administrative views drew upon his background in industrial relations, his liberal theories of pluralistic industrial change, and contemporary understandings of American business organization.

INTRODUCTION

Clark Kerr (1911–2003) was Chancellor of the University of California (UC) Berkeley between 1952 and 1958, and twelfth president of the University of California system between 1958 and 1967. He was one of the most prominent, and has since become one of the most memorable figures in American higher education since the Second World War. During his tenure, American universities underwent explosive growth and structural transformation. When he became president of UC, the university already comprised seven elements – the Berkeley flagship; campuses at Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, Davis, and Riverside; the San Francisco Medical Center, Scripps Institution of Oceanography, and Hastings College of the Law. But the system soon expanded, with the creation of new general campuses at San Diego, Irvine, and Santa Cruz. In the process, Kerr became a national spokesman, and his views became universally known, not least through his celebrated book, The Uses of the University, published in 1963.

Kerr’s decisions permanently changed the University of California, which has come to be seen at home and abroad as the very ‘model’ of a public university system. Strangely, however, Kerr’s role as an advocate and practitioner of management has not received the attention it deserves. Before he became an administrator, Kerr was an expert in business administration, labour relations, and economics. At UC, he implemented a management approach
towards the new research university, based upon a reformed liberal individualism he believed suitable for an industrial age. Not by accident, he invoked contemporary business understandings of organizational structure and function. The result in many ways reflected contemporary business practice. However, Kerr’s programme involved more than a simple imitation of private enterprise. In context, his achievements can be seen as interesting both for what they say about twentieth-century organizational thinking, and for what they contribute to our understanding of present relationships.

The coming years will undoubtedly see new interest in Kerr’s wider views of higher education and university management. This paper attempts a start in this direction, by analysing Kerr’s place in the history of contemporary management theories. We argue that his views of university administration were fundamentally continuous. Beginning in his academic research, and flowing through his work as chancellor and president, we find traces of his views that universities, like other large organizations, have to foster autonomy and initiative, while they combine, and reconcile, competing demands.1

**MANAGING THE UNIVERSITY**

To manage Berkeley, not to mention the UC system as a whole, has always required great patience, as well as imagination.2 Chartered by the California State legislature in 1868, and accorded Land Grant status under the Morrill Act, the University was made responsible to (and for its first decades, closely supervised by) a Board of Regents, selected by the State governor. After a first interim leader, in 1872, Daniel Coit Gilman was brought to

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Berkeley as UC’s second President. Gilman had great ambitions, but was frustrated by the interference of the legislature, and within three years he left for a distinguished career at Johns Hopkins. In 1879, following the adoption of a new state constitution, UC was given greater independence, if not greater scope. After twenty years of uninspiring leadership, Benjamin Ide Wheeler was made President, and in two decades (1899–1919) he did much to broaden its mission and structure.

In particular, Wheeler brought to Berkeley a new emphasis upon research. This, at a time of international admiration for the German research university, brought in its train some great buildings, a strong library, and off-site experimental facilities. Owing, however, to undercurrents of resistance on the part of the academic staff, his successors were less able to imitate Wheeler’s autocratic model. The modern era of university life may be said to have begun in 1930, when Robert Gordon Sproul, who had moved upwards through the university’s financial administration, became President. For the next twenty-eight years, Sproul, a commanding personality, steered the University through the Depression, the Second World War, and a major expansion of its Federal research activity. During his tenure, UC became the first American institution to adopt a multi-campus plan, formalizing a process begun soon after the First World War, when the Los Angeles branch (later UCLA) was added. Sproul brought many first-rate scholars to UC, and built up its reputation in the sciences. When Sproul retired in 1958, Kerr was named his successor.

THE RISE OF CLARK KERR

Clark Kerr was a complex man. Raised in semi-rural Pennsylvania, he took his AB degree in social science (economics and political science) from Swarthmore College in 1932. Becoming a Quaker at Swarthmore, he went West to work with the American Friends Service Committee for a summer, but then stayed in California, earning first an MA in economics from Stanford in 1933 and then a PhD from Berkeley in 1939. His expertise – labour relations – led him into the emerging field of management–labour mediation. After a brief

3 See Daniel Coit Gilman, University Problems in the United States (New York: Century, 1898), and The Launching of a University, and Other Papers (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1906), and Abraham J. Flexner, Daniel Coit Gilman: Creator of the American Type of University (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1946).
period at the University of Washington – during which he became one of the most sought-after wartime arbitrators on the West Coast – Kerr returned to Berkeley in 1945, as an associate professor and first director of a newly established Institute of Industrial Relations.

Kerr’s appointment was in business administration and later, in economics. In this respect, he taught labour economics, including personnel administration, collective bargaining, and industrial relations. In the 1940s and 1950s, he worked in arbitration and public service, mediated for the longshoremen and meatpackers, and served as an industrial relations consultant for the Atomic Energy Commission and the Department of Labor. Academically, he carried out studies for the National Planning Association. He evolved a broad intellectual agenda, stressing the inevitable transformations wrought by massive industrialization and its processes of organization and bureaucratization. In a fashion characteristic of post-war American liberalism, Kerr sought a non-Marxist framework to explain and manage social change.4

Kerr situated Berkeley directly in the world of affairs. To do so was one reason he transferred from Stanford to Berkeley to finish his graduate work with Paul Taylor, a farm labour specialist who encouraged Kerr’s interest in the lessons that could be learned from Depression-era self-help cooperatives. As a Berkeley professor, Kerr frequently invited guest speakers from management and labour. Once he became an administrator, he often sought professors of agriculture as his advisors, considering their practical orientation well-suited to guide the University in its dealings with the State.5

Before 1952, Kerr served on several Berkeley committees (one of which secured better relations among students, faculty, and administration), but he acquired little formal administrative experience outside his institute. As is well known, Kerr rose to prominence in no small part during the loyalty oath controversy of 1949–1950. At that time, the University’s Regents required Berkeley teaching staff to

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sign a statement confirming their non-membership in the Communist Party. About thirty who refused to comply were fired. Kerr signed the required statement, and as a ‘Cold War liberal’, he backed the exclusion of Communists from teaching positions. However, he argued vigorously for those who refused to take the oath, and, as a member of a key committee of the Academic Senate, tried to find a compromise. In the course of this battle for academic freedom, Kerr became seen as a heroic spokesman for an embattled faculty against regental intrusions. His ascent to campus leadership was widely welcomed.  

Kerr’s appointment as Chancellor fitted the moment. Certain Regents, notably those with ties to UCLA, pushed to reorganize UC by creating a position of chancellor at each of the two major campuses. The Regents believed that, under Sproul, the University had remained too centralized (although they disregarded complaints about their own intervention). When he became Chancellor of Berkeley, Kerr did what he could to define his role. However, Sproul still headed the UC system as a whole. Sproul, in Kerr’s view a micromanager by nature, was completely engaged with the University’s day-to-day operations and its relations with the State. At the outset, Kerr was stuck in a small office with no direction or help, and with only a few duties not already reserved for the President. As Kerr much later recalled, Sproul ‘did almost everything that was humanly possible to make [the chancellorships] not work in just all kinds of ways’.  

This experience impressed upon Kerr the value of delegating authority – a principle he thereafter practised in his relations with both faculty and students. The experience also led him to carve out a niche for himself in university planning. In 1957, he gave the Regents a long-range development strategy for Berkeley, surveying faculty recruitment, student admissions, research programmes, and space.  

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When Sproul retired, Kerr was the Regents’ choice for President. The editor of the student newspaper, the *Daily Californian*, pronounced his selection ‘a victory of the liberal over the reactionary, humanism over IBM machines, student-interest over political and self-interest and intelligence over incompetency’.  

As Chancellor and President, Kerr also remained an academic. His close friend and mentor, Ewald T. Grether, Dean of the Business School, thought Kerr’s first ambition was to be a leading scholar. Indeed, he continued to conduct research, and pulled back only when other duties made this impossible. (His most famous book, *Industrialism and Industrial Man*, came out in 1960.) Whatever the task, as Grether recalls, Kerr intended to excel, and he did so with single-minded dedication. Although Kerr was a member of the famed Bohemian Club – a social gathering point in northern California, well known among important men in business and government – he attended rarely. When he did, he would discuss business, which was against the rules.  

Kerr benchmarked the University’s competitors, both the first-class private universities whose status he wanted to match, and public universities more similar in structure and role. Traditionally, Berkeley compared itself to public universities, but when Kerr became Chancellor, there was, as he put it, ‘a very major reorientation of our aspirations to watch Harvard, Stanford, Princeton, MIT, Chicago and Yale as much or more than Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois and Texas’. Over the years, his speeches made reference to national rankings and other comparative measures as the visible standards of excellence. In the same spirit, he championed a review

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11 Kerr, *The Gold and the Blue*, vol. 1, op. cit. note 1, 78. By 1952, Berkeley was regarded as one of the ‘Big Six’ research universities, together with Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Chicago, and Michigan. There was a general consensus, however, that Berkeley would fall out of the rankings following the loyalty oath controversy. During a meeting at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, a discussion ensued over which institution would take Berkeley’s place. As Kerr tells it, he was the one who dared advance, ‘Noone.’ *Ibid.*, 28, also 18, 56; Stadtman, *The University of California, 1868–1968*, op. cit. note 2, 338.
of departmental chairmen every five years. (The practice became
standard throughout UC when he became President.) He was con-
vinced that this was the key to raising a department’s national rank-
ing to the top six. If a department was ranked sixth or higher,
Kerr did not intervene, but each year he focused on three or four
that were not. As Chancellor, he vetoed one-fifth of all tenure bids
that had passed earlier hurdles. Indeed, Kerr rejected so many nomi-
inations for tenure and departmental chairmanships that deans
quipped he had ‘the fastest “no” in the West’.

However, when he became President in 1958, Kerr was deter-
mined not to dictate to the several campuses. In any case, chancel-
rors were at times given to think they had more power than the
President. At Kerr’s insistence, they were permitted to read the
Regents’ minutes, attend their meetings, and view copies of the
campus budget. While sharply reducing staff in the president’s
office, Kerr created new consultative groups, including an advisory
council for the chancellors, a cabinet of university-wide officials,
and a student body council. By delegating authority, he effectively
put to work the people from whom he sought advice. Kerr
argued that a pluralistic power structure (comprising the presi-
dency, chancellorships, Academic Senate, and Board of Regents)
made the university work better. This practice contrasted dramati-
cally with the one-man decision-making of Sproul’s presidency.

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12 Kerr, The Gold and the Blue, vol. 1, op. cit. note 1, 51, 320; TBL, MSS 97/111x,
34–35, Clark Kerr, oral history interview with Nancy M. Rockafellar, 19
December 1994.

13 Concluding that home economics was detrimental to Berkeley’s reputation, for
instance, he terminated it; as President he was involved in eliminating UCLA’s
agriculture department and Santa Barbara’s industrial arts program. Kerr, The Gold
and the Blue, vol. 1, op. cit. note 1, 87, 207; and Maresi Nerad, The Academic
Kitchen: A Social History of Gender Stratification at the University of California,

14 Roger L. Geiger, Research and Relevant Knowledge: American Research
Universities since World War II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Kerr,
The Gold and the Blue, vol. 1, op. cit. note 1, 26 (quotation).

15 Loren M. Furtado, Budget Reform and Administrative Decentralization in the
University of California (Berkeley: Institute of Governmental Studies, Public Policy
Press, 2002), 40–45; TBL, UA, 308d.r 1966, [Clark Kerr]. ‘Development and
Decentralization: The Administration of the University of California, 1958–1966’;
Kerr, The Gold and the Blue, vol. 1, op. cit. note 1, 164; and Grether, oral history
interview, op. cit. note 10.

Kerr’s notion of the beneficial pluralism of industrial societies.
Kerr’s vision of human nature and social organization persuaded him that high performance derived from individual initiative and competitive encouragement. Like the business entrepreneur in Adam Smith’s world, motivated by self-interest in a market of free enterprise, the academic in Kerr’s university would contribute to the well-being of society on the basis of academic freedom. As Kerr observed in his inaugural address in 1952,

[The individual faculty member is a genuine entrepreneur; the real producer of the intellectual product. The university’s function is to choose enterprising men and to provide the conditions whereby their enterprise may be successful… . Freedom for the academician in the university serves a public purpose just as does freedom for the entrepreneur in his marketplace – and it is the same purpose: the quality and progress of society. Out of the free action of each the public gets the best product as business competes with business and mind with mind.17]  

For the academic staff, Kerr aimed to create a pleasant and liberating environment, with cultural and aesthetic attractions.18 When the loyalty oath controversy proved that job security was vulnerable to political interference, he instituted a continuous tenure system with review by the Regents.19 He believed that his professors, given access to excellent laboratories and libraries, should also receive competitive salaries – even if they were ‘providentially more responsive to non-economic rewards than members of some other professions’.20 Kerr presumed from the start that academic

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17 Clark Kerr, ‘Constituent Elements of the University’, California Monthly, LXIII (7), (March 1953), 8–9, 40–43, on 41. Much later, Kerr remarked that the University was run much like the Saturn Corporation because the faculty member, like the worker at Saturn, was in charge. See TBL, MSS 2000/106 z, Clark Kerr, oral history interview with Lynne M. Wiley, 21 July 1997.


19 Kerr, The Gold and the Blue, vol. 1, op. cit. note 1, 140, 207. He also provided less stringent retirement options; see University Bulletin, VIII (13), (1959), 65.

staff would know how to manage their own research. Creativity could not be administrated, he suggested; massive organizations needed freedom within.

By the time he became Chancellor, Kerr had already formulated his idea of the university. The modern university, he said, must ‘act from a perspective [that] encompasses the multiple duties which are placed upon it by the people into whose life it enters in so many ways’. Its stakeholders imposed many different commitments and obligations, including teaching and the provision of public services. However, the university’s ultimate purpose was to create useful knowledge. Kerr’s vision was anchored in the situation of the post-war American university, and in the willingness of outside agencies to fund its research. As he observed in *The Uses of the University*, based on his Godkin Lectures at Harvard, the American university had become the nexus of the ‘invisible product’ of new knowledge that, according to his vision, would serve as a catalyst for social and economic development, raising the standard of living and transforming society. The university trained the experts and professionals who kept society running. Indeed, the university’s production of knowledge affected everyone – to the point that, Kerr argued, it could even cause the rise and fall of nations.

The emerging ‘multiversity’ that Kerr famously described in *The Uses of the University* was new to America, and to the world. This new university, in his view, was characterized by multiple sub-units and by the need to serve different parties. It lacked a unifying mission. As such, its pluralism resulted in growing tensions within itself and *vis-à-vis* the external world. As a realist, Kerr noted that the ‘multiversity’ was ‘a mechanism held together by administrative rules and powered by money’. And as an observer of complex organizations, he saw a particular role for the university’s administration. True to his experience as labour arbitrator, he believed that the university’s president needed to assume, above all else, the function of a ‘mediator’. The mediator sought to find where competing interests intersected, producing persuasive agreement in the place of what Kerr called ‘class warfare’. The

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21 Kerr, ‘Constituent Elements of the University’, *op. cit.* note 17, 8.
24 Ibid., 15.
successful ‘mediator president’ would create a climate of workable and forward-looking cooperation.25

Kerr’s vision did not escape criticism. Former University of Chicago President Robert Hutchins argued that the modern university could not pursue such contradictory roles. Hutchins called Kerr’s university a ‘service station’; one of Hutchins’s proteges went so far as to label it ‘an educational General Motors’.26 But for an institution of its size, and with an ambition to be accepted into the elite, the University of California, and especially the Berkeley campus, had little choice. As Kerr noted, ‘It is an imperative rather than a reasoned choice among elegant alternatives’. In truth, Kerr’s ‘multi-versity’ seemed to him a historical destiny; its president was ‘driven more by necessity than by voices in the air’.27

KERR AS CORPORATE THEORIST AND PRACTITIONER

Such ways of thinking drew deeply upon contemporary discussions. The loyalty oath controversy was clearly part of the picture, but so were considerations of organizational theory. Kerr was keenly interested in organizations. In both his Master’s thesis and his doctoral dissertation, he had studied structures and functions, accounting practices, and their consequences.28 During the 1930s, he had compared the expenses, profits, and customer services of self-help cooperatives in relation to retail stores (and reached the conclusion that cooperatives executed retailing services at lower cost than private business).29 In 1947, he and Roger Randall

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27 Kerr, The Uses of the University, op. cit. note 23, 5, 28.


studied management–employee relations in the Crown Zellerbach Corporation and the Pacific Coast pulp and paper industry. They concluded that success – ‘industrial peace’ in the terms of the day – derived from careful selection of workers, progressive-minded consultation with unions, decentralization, line organization and union hierarchy, job security, and good personnel policies. Kerr published on the need for equitable private pension plans, job evaluation, and wage policies. His ideas regarding what made a business enterprise productive, profitable, and steady in growth would shape his ideas about how he thought a university should be run.

In the post-war decades, this transfer of ideas between institutions seemed natural, as American corporate structures were a common model for large organizations generally. Although he was no advocate of heavy-handed managerial practices, Kerr often used business terminology. As Chancellor, for example, he referred to his predecessors and colleagues as ‘chief executives of the University’. A speech in which he commented upon Ernest Lawrence’s cyclotron equated the massive sums devoted to research with social ‘risk capital’. When Kerr became UC President, the Daily Californian pronounced him an ‘ideal man in the eyes of

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many. . . a combination of scholar and business man’; the new
president, after all, would be running a ‘big business’.33

As President, one of Kerr’s first steps was to create a committee
of the Regents (with himself a member) to revamp the University’s
administration, taking a step as telling as it was consequential, by
engaging the management consultants Cresap, McCormick and
Paget.34 Since 1946, this company had garnered a notable clientele,
including Ford Motor Company, United Airlines, and Smith Barn-
ney. Moreover, it created a special unit catering specifically to non-
profit organizations. As the business historian Christopher
McKenna has shown, Cresap, McCormick and Paget was central
in reconstructing American educational organizations along busi-
ness lines.35

The use of management consultants was not universally popu-
lar in universities. Current managers were often the most vocal
critics. Columbia University’s President Dwight Eisenhower, in
commenting on a management study produced during Nicholas
Murray Butler’s presidency, called the $80,000 report ‘the most
expensive and least read book the university ever acquired’.36
However, UC’s relations with Cresap, McCormick and Paget
proved happier. The firm worked with the University for more
than a decade and submitted dozens of reports. Although hired
by a committee of the Regents, they were soon addressing their
reports to Kerr. Their findings were in synchrony with Kerr’s. In

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33 Sue Meadows, ‘Berkeley Chancellor Chosen by Regents in Davis Meeting’,
_The Daily Californian_, 21 October 1957. Unsurprisingly, several of the most powerful
Regents had backgrounds in business. See James Ridgeway, _The Closed Corporation:
American Universities in Crisis_ (New York: Random House, 1968), 155. As
Ridgeway details with investigatory fervour, other UC chancellors had business
ties, too.

34 Kerr, _The Gold and the Blue_, vol. 1, op. cit. note 1, 197; Stadtman, _The
University of California, 1868–1968_, op. cit. note 2, 383; and TBL, UA, CU–5.4,
Reports Commissioned by the University of California on Various Facets of its
Administration, 1958-1973, Box 1, Folder 1, H. J. Heneman to Edwin Pauley, 29
January 1958. The firm was hired on 19 April 1958.

35 Christopher McKenna, ‘Finding Profit in Non-Profits: The Influence of
and ISPS Working Paper No. 2236 (New Haven: Program on Non-Profit
Organizations and Institution for Social and Policy Studies, Yale University,
1996).

at least one case, the consultants’ report simply confirmed recommendations that Kerr had already sent to the Regents.37

When Cresap, McCormick and Paget began its work, the University looked in need of help. The firm suggested that a vast array of problems stemmed from years of ‘neglect of sound management’ – of ‘inefficient planning, management of money and people and space’, and of grindingly slow responses to questions from below. Lines of reporting and authority were unclear.38 The relationship between the campuses and the administration was opaque. ‘Some campuses report’, one study noted, that ‘they always send a number of copies of any inquiry in the hope that one will reach the proper official.’39 For this reason, important above all others were Cresap, McCormick and Paget’s recommended administrative reforms, including the introduction of basic principles, such as that no individual should report to more than one supervisor. In addition, they suggested the production of a policy manual, organizational charts (none existed for any campus), and substantial changes in the president’s office. Based on these reports, Kerr drew up plans for a reorganization, which the Regents unanimously approved.40

Hand-in-hand with restructuring went cost savings and personnel options. Preemptive control of spending was a major challenge, at a time when expansion inevitably produced increasing demands on state funds. Cresap, McCormick and Paget foresaw huge potential gains through reforms in the purchasing office, in business services, the university press, registration, and in the computerization

37 TBL, UA, CU–5 Series 8, UC President Policy Files 1958–1973, Box 11, Folder 9, Clark Kerr to Chief Campus Officers and University-Wide Administrative Officers, 25 February 1965; CU-5.4, Box 2, Folder 17, Contracts and Grants Research Administration, University-Wide Review, 10 August 1965. Although Kerr was the main UC contact, other administrative officers (vice presidents and campus chancellors) were also involved. With the exception of one final report, UC’s contact with the firm ended in 1967, Kerr’s last year as President.

38 TBL, UA, CU–5 Series 8, Box 11, Folder 9, Harlow J. Heneman to Ivan Hinderaker, 9 June 1965.


40 TBL, UA, CU–5.4, Box 1, Folder 2, Report on Statewide Administrative Reorganization, 28 November 1958; Folder 3, Organization and Staffing of the President’s Office, 30 January 1959; CU-5 Series 8, Box 11, Folder 9, Check List of Recommendations for Progress Reports: The University of California Report on Decentralization Program, vol. 1, 1 July 1960. For an overview of decentralization, see Furtado, Budget Reform, op. cit. note 15; for Kerr’s explanations, see the University Bulletin, VIII (5), (1959), 25–30; and X (37), (1962), 195–200.
of rote administrative tasks, not to mention the aggressive reevaluation of government overhead rates. The consultants considered staffing, and suggested reductions in full-time positions. At Kerr’s request they and an actuarial firm also studied UC’s retirement system. For non-academic staff, the consultants recommended benchmarking practices to define comparable job categories and compensation standards.

In many ways, the firm also moved the University along the road to administrative decentralization. Decentralization was among Kerr’s principal concerns. In this, he reflected a trend among large American corporations, such as Sears, DuPont, and (of course) General Motors, which since the early 1920s had introduced the ‘multidivisional model’ into their organizations. By the 1960s, decentralization had triumphed in American big business. As McKenna notes, the administrative plan that the consulting firm shaped for UC was similar to the structure it devised for Shell Oil at the same time. At UC, as in big business, decentralization was meant to empower middle managers and stimulate initiative. Over and over, however, Cresap, McCormick and Paget repeated the formula: ‘administration’ would devolve to the local level, but leadership at the centre would be reinforced.


42 TBL, UA, CU–5.4, Box 1, Folder 9, Study of Academic Retirement System, November 1959; also Folder 27, Plan of Action for Immediate Improvement in the Statewide Nonacademic Personnel Program, September 1962.


44 E.g., TBL, UA, CU–5.4, Box 1, also Folder 8, Management of the Building Program, 4 May 1959; Folder 35, A Study of Campus Administration, Santa Cruz, February 1963.
Kerr’s views were strategic, and his decisions brought certain costs. Some employees, especially those who lost position or influence, opposed decentralization. Kerr’s critics suspected that he began to get rid of Sproul’s staff as soon as he came into office; management consultants’ reports had often served similar purposes. However, in other fields, his decisions merely accelerated trends already underway. By 1963, Kerr would comment that in his university of ‘individual faculty entrepreneurs’, much administrative power and burden had ‘effectively been decentralized to the level of the individual professor’. In business, opponents of decentralization cited the evils of competition between divisions, and higher costs arising from duplication of activities. There was also huge pressure on administrative support as each functional unit tried to make do on its own. This last difficulty was one that even Cresap, McCormick and Paget noted, headlining the point in a progress report: *Needed Staff Services to Facilitate Decentralization Have Often Not Been Provided.* Kerr’s decentralization would fundamentally shape the University, and its consequences remain today.

**Organization and Leadership**

Ralph J. Cordiner, President of General Electric, observed at this time that successful decentralization depended upon the ability of a CEO to switch to a philosophy of planning. The successful CEO must be ‘a long-range thinker, a planner, an organizer and a teacher, rather than solely a “doer.” . . . [H]is great contribution comes through his capacity to influence, guide and multiply voluntary work and achievements of his fellow workers in the business’. This was essentially Kerr’s position. By 1962, Kerr led an enterprise with an annual inflow of $450 million. Although he possessed little absolute power, he proved that he was the boss – at least, so concluded one *Business Week* reporter. In *The Uses of the University*, Kerr described the

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46 Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, *op. cit. note* 23, 15, 33.
American university president as ‘a marginal man but at the very center of the total process’ – marginal, but only in the sociological sense of that word. The president must be in fact a ‘leader, educator, creator, initiator, inheritor, wielder of power, pump; he is also office holder, caretaker, inheritor, consensus-seeker, persuader, bottleneck’. Of course, he was also – and principally – a mediator.\(^50\)

Evidently, Kerr’s account of the characteristics of a university leader mirrored his understanding of management. These were also the talents he possessed to perfection. One unnamed Regent, describing Kerr’s persuasive abilities, commented, ‘He could talk the feathers off a bird’.\(^51\) Eugene Burdick, a political scientist and Kerr’s academic assistant, observed of his boss, ‘If you made an Organization Man, he would be it. That sleek, seal-like look. In a crowd no one would see him. He has the reputation of being terribly cool. But then he’s got this other thing of always fighting at the right time’.\(^52\)

In fact, Kerr spoke out against the conformist ‘organization man’ criticized in William Whyte’s 1956 book of that title; and outlined his opposition in so many articles and speeches that even Time magazine was led to comment.\(^53\) By way of return, Whyte praised Kerr for encouraging ‘the independent spirit’.\(^54\) Yet, in a way typical of mid-century America, Kerr was in fact an ‘organization man’ par excellence. He knew how to manage an organization to extract the desired results; the experience of UC proved it. He, too, like the ‘organization man’ whom Whyte described was tied to the ideas of the business school, just in a different way. Closing the circle, in his presidential inaugural Kerr cited a passage from Whyte’s book – a passage that painted the university as the best environment for creative scientific work.\(^55\)

Kerr’s version of corporate leadership depended upon his carrying constituencies, and on bringing individualist academic entrepreneurs into line with the President’s goals. Kerr wanted to let many programmes flourish, but he also encouraged decisions that left some

\(^{50}\) Kerr, The Uses of the University, op. cit. note 23, 23, 27.

\(^{51}\) ‘Master Planner’, Time, LXXVI (16), (1960), 58–69, on 60.

\(^{52}\) Ibid.


\(^{54}\) William H. Whyte, Jr., The Organization Man (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 46.

parties behind. For instance, he ruefully reported a decline in the University’s humanities departments, or at least their status on campus. Yet this may have borne some relationship to his lack of feeling for these disciplines, or his disinclination to do much (beyond building libraries and expanding cultural offerings) to offset external imbalances in research support. Likewise, although he was proud to cite a study from the mid 1960s that ranked Berkeley ‘the best balanced distinguished university in the country’, he had less patience for concerns that sharing resources with UCLA would eventually mean syphoning resources from Berkeley. This issue involved more than an intramural squabble; it foreshadowed the prospect that State support would be inadequate to sustain Kerr’s decentralizing expansionism.

There were other tensions as well. Once he became President, Kerr was not interested in providing identical resources to each UC campus (so he put it later). Instead, he suggested, with a certain self-deprecation, ‘I’m an economist – and I was concerned with the best use of resources which is not always just spreading them out equally’. The conglomerate university was proliferating divisions at a precipitous pace. For each of the new campuses, Kerr wanted a distinct personality, attractive to different kinds of students. For example, San Diego, incorporating two existing scientific institutes, was given a research profile and priority over other campuses. It began with graduate students, and only later accepted undergraduates. On the other hand, Kerr envisaged Santa Cruz as a place where undergraduates could thrive.

56 E.g., Kerr, *The Gold and the Blue*, vol. 2, op. cit. note 1, 6; and Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, op. cit. note 23, esp. 83–86.
57 Alan Cartter, *An Assessment of Quality in Graduate Education* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 1966), 107, cited in Kerr, *The Gold and the Blue*, vol. 1, op. cit. note 1, 57. Kerr’s reading was optimistic; Harvard would have come out clearly on top, were it not for its weak engineering programs.
58 TBL, MSS 92/710 c, Clark Kerr, oral history interview with Randall Jarrell, 4 February 1987.
60 The Santa Cruz faculty effectively decided that research was no less important than teaching. Kerr, *The Gold and the Blue*, vol. 1, op. cit. note 1, chapters 17, 19; and Gerald Grant and David Riesman, *The Perpetual Dream: Reform and Experiment in the American College* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), chapter 8; Stadtman, *The University of California, 1868-1968*, op. cit. note 2, 413–416.
Kerr said he wanted to find ways to make the university manageable for students: ‘to be small while big, personal in a mass society’. For students, Kerr foresaw benefits from decentralization: it could create smaller communities more responsive to their needs. However, he warned of disadvantages, too: the cost of duplicating activities, and the possibility of neglecting certain groups of students, including undergraduates without definite plans for the future, who might simply get lost in the shuffle.

To manage these tensions required all Kerr’s negotiating skills. Early in his presidency, he helped strike a famous deal between the idea of a research university and a coming ‘tidal wave’ of college-age students. This compact combined his ambitions for UC and the desires of the less prestigious state college system (incorporated as the California State University). As a public institution, UC had to do its part in educating California’s rush of new students. To maintain standards, however, Berkeley’s Academic Advisory Committee began as early as 1954 to look at the idea of an enrolment cap, taking as role models Princeton, Harvard, Yale, MIT, Stanford, Chicago, and Cornell. At the same time, the state colleges, already educating more undergraduates than all the campuses of UC, were lobbying for the right to award the doctoral degree, and were threatening to take a share of the State’s research funding as well.

Kerr’s proposal, formalized in the Master Plan of 1960, confirmed UC’s status as California’s research university. However, to meet the demand for undergraduate education, UC agreed to admit the top 12.5 percent of California’s high school graduates, while the state college system was open to the top 33 percent, and the community colleges served the rest. The community college system would also supply the lower division
courses, so that UC campuses would not become overpopulated.65

Kerr acted on his belief that UC should provide its students with an environment (not limited to the classroom) that encouraged growth and critical reflection. Thus, at Berkeley he pushed forward plans for residence halls, sports facilities, a student union building, and an undergraduate library, and he held regular office hours, open to all. Invoking the conventional formula, he agreed that teaching and research could be ‘happily integrated’ as the researcher passed on his knowledge to his students.66 But he also insisted that it was ‘in the nature of a great university that its faculty devote a considerable portion of its time to research and to public affairs activities . . . If this were not the case, it is no doubt true that they would have more time to devote to teaching and to students’.67

Above all, Kerr was determined that UC as a whole would become a prestigious research institution. At Berkeley and some other campuses, he emphasized graduate student and faculty research. Undergraduates came and went, but research had a far more lasting impact. Moreover, Kerr observed that while Berkeley’s academic staff and graduate students were outstanding, only the top ten per cent of its undergraduates were comparable to those enrolled at the best private schools. The University’s reputation rested on cutting-edge research. Undergraduates remained necessary, not least as a source of political and therefore economic support. The curriculum would mirror this reality. In any case, Kerr assumed that Berkeley undergraduates knew what was in store for them, for they had chosen to attend the antithesis of a small private

65 Kerr continued to stress the need to maintain Berkeley’s reputation as the student population rose, while not limiting out-of-state students (presumably because of their fees). He also considered shifting faculty salaries to Federal contracts, and other ways to increase academic compensation. TBL, UA, CU–9, Minutes of Academic Council Meetings, vol. 121a–126 (formerly vol. 123), 11 December 1963, 15 January 1964.


liberal arts college. The ‘Brand Name’, as he later put it, had attracted them.68

In The Uses of the University, Kerr foresaw conflict on this score, when undergraduates came to lose patience with a research institution that they perceived to be uninterested in their welfare. ‘Recent changes in the American university have done them little good’, Kerr was to say.69 He deliberately framed his commentary on the coming ‘multiversity’ as description and analysis, and not advocacy.70 Yet his message was that such changes were part of an unstoppable evolution.

During the Free Speech Movement (FSM) of 1964 – Berkeley’s famous forerunner of student protests to come – objections to the campus administration’s restrictions on speech sometimes merged into attacks on the University’s leadership in general.71 Radical students took Kerr to task for stripping the University of its politically critical function, and for turning undergraduate education into functionalist training. This was far too simple, given Kerr’s personal and educational philosophy, but the FSM’s leaders picked up something in the President’s tone. Whether or not they misquoted Kerr’s idea of a ‘knowledge industry’ as a ‘knowledge factory’, they got the general drift that, in Kerr’s words, ‘The process cannot be stopped. The results cannot be foreseen. It remains to adapt’.72 ‘Inevitability’ was the conclusion that Kerr drew from his early studies of industrial relations, with a vision of progress moving from an age of class warfare to one of industrial pluralism.73 ‘Inevitability’ in university life meant that the manager’s job was to mediate among conflicting constituencies. Kerr’s notion of mediation was no passive compromise, but the forces shaping the University came from outside. And if success were to be measured by organizational expansion and marketplace rankings, then

69 Kerr, The Uses of the University, op. cit. note 23, 77.
70 Ibid., xi (from the 1963 preface).
72 Kerr, The Uses of the University, op. cit. note 23, 93.
the University risked taking its standards for granted, not challenging them. Writing in 1963, Kerr did not foresee the massive student unrest that would soon break out in the US. He was absent from California in the autumn of 1964, and as the FSM unfolded, he declined to overrule the campus regulations of Berkeley’s Chancellor, Edward Strong. For this ‘failure’, he faced the wrath of right-wing politicians, led by the man who would become California’s new governor, Ronald Reagan. Ironically, at least as Kerr tells it, his determination to preserve autonomy and free play may have hastened his undoing. He was fired from the Presidency in 1967. His years as a university manager were over, though in many ways his career in American higher education had just begun.  

CONCLUSION

Kerr’s years at the University of California were transformative. Huge numbers of American students entered college, while the State, and the nation, enjoyed an unparalleled period of economic prosperity. At the same time, the tensions of the Cold War dramatically fueled the growth of academic research, and forced a reconsideration of the uses of the university. Kerr did not claim to have invented the ‘multiversity’, which he attributed to a confluence of local functions, Federal research dollars, and professorial desires for grant money. But he saw how changing circumstances could turn the University of California into a top-rank research institution. Kerr saw the future and – partly with reluctance, partly with enthusiasm – made himself its spokesman. By Kerr’s own admission, some parts of the University flourished, while others, including its undergraduates, suffered.

This paper has focused upon Kerr’s strategies as theorist and practitioner of university management. This approach is instructive because Kerr had an uncanny capacity to comprehend the complex organizations he studied. Certainly, his background in economics and business administration helped him see the big picture. It also influenced his perspective. Views he had formed in organizational studies led him to recommend balancing structure with freedom, while his work in industrial relations led him to offer an agenda of

74 Kerr became chairman of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education. His role in its reforms lies outside the scope of this paper.
planned evolutionary growth. For future university leaders, Kerr foresaw a mediator's role. With the help of management consultants, he brought to bear a business model of a special kind. Kerr's view of organizations turned a post-war conjuncture into a durable institution. In this way, as in others, he signally shaped the leading American public university of his day.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mary Soo graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, with a BS degree in business administration. She is currently on leave from Columbia University, studying for the LL.M. degree at the University of Groningen.

Cathryn Carson is an Associate Professor of History at the University of California, Berkeley, where she directs the Office for History of Science and Technology.

MARY SOO
Office for History of Science and Technology
543 Stephens Hall
University of California
Berkeley, CA 94720-2350 USA
E-mail: mary-soo@alumini.haas.org

CATHRYN CARSON
Office for History of Science and Technology
543 Stephens Hall
University of California
Berkeley, CA 94720-2350 USA
E-mail: clcarson@socrates.berkeley.edu