

The background is an abstract composition of swirling, ethereal shapes in the colors of the American flag: deep blue, white, and vibrant red. Numerous white, five-pointed stars are scattered across the upper half of the image, some appearing sharp and others slightly blurred, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall effect is reminiscent of a stylized, artistic representation of the flag's stripes and stars.

American Democracy Is in Jeopardy

A Call to Higher Education
Governing Boards

BY HENRY STOEVER

The background of the page is a vibrant, abstract pattern of red ink splatters and swirls, creating a dynamic and artistic feel. A central rectangular box with a light beige background and a thin orange border contains the main text.

AERICAN DEMOCRACY and our nation's role as a beacon of hope and leader of the free-market economy are in jeopardy. Our place in the world has been advanced immeasurably by world-class colleges and universities that graduate an educated citizenry—one that is vital for participatory democracy, research and innovation, and well-prepared talent. But sadly, these qualities that sustain American democracy are in danger due to three overarching threats: growing political intrusion into higher education, insufficient preparedness to address demographic shifts impacting campus communities, and public skepticism regarding the value of higher education. Left unaddressed, these threats will weaken our colleges and universities and severely limit their ability to serve our country and its strategic interests.

Higher education governing boards and communities can address these threats; and they should do so with urgency to ensure the health and vitality of American democracy and our country's economy. Specifically, college and university governing boards must provide strategic leadership—in collaboration with chief executives, administrative leadership teams, and faculty—to drive lasting, consequential change to cultivate an informed, educated citizenry prepared to fully participate in democratic opportunities and create a thriving society and economy.

Boards and institutions have the most powerful means to reaffirm that a well-educated population is a national imperative and align the outcomes of institutions with this need. For example, boards should make it a priority to address the decline in the number of students who now enroll in and graduate from college. To be blunt, governing boards cannot continue to conduct business as they have. Rather, they must insist that the institutions they serve develop strategies that will retain and graduate more students prepared to participate in our democracy, society, and workforce. Failure to do so will erode not only our campus communities, but also the vitality of our country to compete on a global scale.

Governing boards also have a duty to protect the tenets and values of higher education. Thus, boards need to stand firm to protect academic freedom and to establish policies that foster the intellectual development and free expression of students, including the ability to present, defend, and question ideas from a broad range of perspectives. This is essential if college graduates are to acquire the skills to think critically and creatively and to work effectively with others—abilities that are central to the health of a participatory democracy, a thriving

economy, and an inclusive society. Boards also play a critical role in supporting and protecting the free expression of faculty and research that is aligned with institutional missions—even when it is controversial. AGB's recent statement, "Freedom of Speech and Diversity on Campus: Considerations for Board Members and Chief Executives," emphasizes this point even as it compellingly describes the tension on campuses today between a commitment to free speech and a desire to create a welcoming environment for all students.

AGB's 2019 *Guardians Initiative* report *Renewing the Democratic Purposes of Higher Education* identified five takeaways for higher education that are relevant to our nation's current challenges:

1. Democracy and higher education are inextricably linked in the United States.
2. Democracy as a way of life—a social ethic—is a critical concept for understanding how to renew the value of American higher education.
3. A healthy democracy requires engaged citizens, and engaged citizens require preparation and practice. Higher education is uniquely positioned to prepare engaged citizens, and evidence shows college enrollment is related positively to a lifetime of civic engagement.
4. The democratic purpose in American higher education has a long and meaningful history, though in every generation it has been challenged by forces within colleges and universities and in American culture.
5. Though there are signs of promise, today's crises in democracy and higher education are real, and those who have the privilege to lead must face them with imagination and resolve.

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Political Intrusion into the Academy

Political intrusion into the academy is negatively influencing the future of American democracy, our society, and our economy because some politicians are tampering with the basic tenets and values that have made American higher education the envy of the world.

Since the Guardians report was issued in 2019, the country has witnessed unfortunate new divisiveness in many sectors, including higher education. For example, some governors, state legislatures, and other elected officials are infringing on the independence and autonomy of colleges and universities, limiting academic freedom in teaching, learning, and research, which taken together are the hallmarks that have led American colleges and universities to make significant contributions to our society and the world.

It is time for boards to face the essential question: Should they

be passive in the face of political intrusion or should they challenge it? And if the latter, how can they do so productively?

Some points to consider:

- Governors, state legislatures, and governing boards should not interfere with the long-standing practice that the faculty develop and teach the curriculum, unless it requires resources the institution does not have or is somehow inconsistent with the mission. Instead, boards should establish and defend policies that foster and support academic freedom, the unfettered intellectual development of students and faculty, and faculty research that is aligned with the institutional mission—even when it is controversial.
- Boards can encourage innovation within academic programs, and they typically have authority for program approval at the institutional level. Boards should seek guidance from chief executives who rely upon recommendations from chief academic officers and the faculty in terms of programming, hiring, promotion, and tenure. They should also support the faculty's efforts to expose their students to multiple, well-rounded perspectives of new knowledge and challenging ideas to prepare students to become informed, articulate citizens and future leaders of our democracy, society, and economy.
- Boards, in their governing capacity, should focus on determining their institution's strategic priorities and verifying the outcomes. At the same time, while boards are ultimately accountable for the outcomes of their institutions, it is equally essential that boards delegate operational duties to their chief executives, who in turn delegate primary responsibility for academic matters to faculty and the responsibility for other nonacademic outcomes

to staff. Each institution must determine how it serves its students and responds through policies and resources to political forces that impact them. This is especially important in light of the recent Supreme Court decision in the case of *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* ("Dobbs").

- In fulfilling their fiduciary responsibilities, governing boards should listen to and understand the perspectives of all interested parties, for these perspectives can help shape well-informed policies and strategies. At the same time, governing boards must not allow others to usurp their work and authority or to exert undue influence on board members. As stated in AGB's *Principles of Trusteeship*, it is of utmost importance for board members to think independently and act collectively as a board without undue influence that can come from policymakers, donors, alumni, and community stakeholders.



Demographic Shifts

Demographic shifts are influencing the outcomes of higher education and leading to a reduced number of graduates, weakening the future of American democracy, our society, and our economy. Boards must understand the facts of demographic change and seek ways to adapt and increase the number of citizens who benefit from higher education.

The typical profile of an American family has significantly changed over the past 60 years. In 2020, U.S. families on average had 1.9 children under the age of 18, a decrease from more than 2.3 children under the age of 18 per family in 1960. Moreover, the number of families with children under the age of 18 and living at home declined by about 3 million over the last decade, dropping from 66.1 million parents in 2010 to 63.1 million in 2020. This decline means that there will be fewer traditional students available to apply to, enroll in, and graduate from college.

One way to counteract this decline is to increase the college-going rates among cohorts of students who have traditionally been underserved by higher education. American colleges and universities—including community and technical colleges, regional public universities, liberal arts colleges, minority serving institutions, and research-oriented universities—are a critical pathway to social and economic mobility for many students, especially those from the lowest income quartile. For many institutions and for the country as a whole, these are the students of the future.

Despite some early progress in closing opportunity gaps, we need to find additional and more effective ways to encourage and support low-income students, students of color, and older

and first-generation students so they can pursue and complete a postsecondary education. To achieve this, many of the operational practices of colleges and universities may need to be redesigned to reflect the rapidly changing needs of American students.

Compounding these challenges are harsh realities that impact many of today's students. From food and housing insecurity to physical and mental health challenges, job loss, financial stresses, social disconnection, or lack of belonging, these new realities require the attention of institutional leaders as well as additional resources from often already-constrained budgets. Determining the appropriate allocation of resources is ultimately a board responsibility.

Boards should also evaluate institutions that have developed strategies to influence the health of American democracy favorably while simultaneously addressing demographic realities. For example, many colleges are already working to retain and graduate more students while also encouraging more adults with some college but no degree or certificate to reenroll and graduate. According to the National Student Clearinghouse, the nation's six-year college completion rate is 62.2 percent. If we could increase this rate by at least 10 percentage points, or more, substantial benefits would accrue to students, colleges, universities, and to our democracy, society, and economy.

Addressing the demographic shifts of our nation while also strengthening American democracy will take a concerted effort by federal and state governments, higher education governing boards, and college and university chief executives, administrators, and faculty to capitalize on this opportunity. Part of the solution may be for board members and campus communities to advocate for increased student financial grant aid such as the efforts to [#DoublePell](#).

Further, more deliberate and effective campus outreach to and partnerships with K-12 schools to increase student interest in and preparation for college will influence favorable outcomes.

Doubts and Skepticism of the Perceived Value of Higher Education

Doubts and skepticism of the perceived value of higher education are also damaging our institutions and the future of American democracy, our society, and our economy. Fueled by a combination of high cost, student debt, and the time often required to earn a college degree, many perceive that lower cost and faster alternatives are a better choice.

While higher education is a public good that benefits democracy, society, and our economy, it is also a private good that benefits students and their future employers. The public benefits of higher education, notwithstanding, governing boards should also understand that for many students and their parents—and for many elected leaders and employers, as well—the private good of higher education is their primary interest.

Earlier generations of college graduates could expect to lead prosperous lives, but today, with the cost of four-year degrees absorbing ever larger percentages of family income, many students and parents are demanding a clear “return on their investment.” Students and parents seek evidence, even prior to enrollment, that the money they will invest in college will lead to a well-paying career and economic security. And employers also increasingly question the need for job applicants to have college degrees. Some suggest that technical skills-based certificates or credentials are credible substitutes, a misguided assumption that threatens the primary offering of colleges and universities.

Although technical skills are a useful part of job preparation, education is a lifelong journey meant to cultivate the life of the mind—to learn to think critically and creatively, to evaluate analytically, to work collaboratively and effectively in diverse groups, and to understand and communicate perspectives with sensitivity and passion. Beyond the intrinsic importance of these intellectual and behavioral skills, multiple surveys of business leaders, the American Association of Colleges and Universities, and the Business-Higher Education Forum confirm that these abilities are precisely what employers seek in new employees.

Given these challenges and the vital need to graduate more students, boards and their chief executives should reflect upon their

fiduciary duties and consider whether strategic transformations may be required for their boards, leaders, and institutions. The status quo is not enough to ensure student success for all students, nor will it ensure long-term vitality for our colleges and universities.

Conclusion

A well-educated population is a national imperative. Unfortunately, the combination of inappropriate intrusion of politicians into higher education; of fewer well-prepared college graduates; and of the increasingly—and sometimes justified—negative perceptions of higher education’s value proposition, are threatening American democracy, our society, and our economy. If not addressed, the outcomes of American higher education will decline, a danger that will not only erode the reputation and nature of our work but also sap the vitality of our country to compete on a global scale.

The strategic partnership between higher education boards, their chief executives, leadership teams, staff, and faculty can help to ensure that postsecondary education continues to make a profound contribution through graduates who have the knowledge, expertise, and perspective critical to our democracy and our economic health. College, university, and foundation boards need to recognize that for most institutions, the future will not be the same as the past.

This is a clarion call to higher education governing boards and their members to serve as consequential, strategic thought partners for their chief executives and campus communities. Given that American institutions are widely varied in terms of mission, size, type, location, and student body, a one-size-fits-all solution does not exist. Therefore, my guidance is for boards and campus leaders to collaboratively establish strategic North Stars in the context of what is best for their stu-

dents; the long-term vitality of their college, university, and community; and our nation’s democracy, society, and economy.

I urge higher education governing boards to deeply understand that they are ultimately accountable for the outcomes of their colleges and universities and must address these challenges. In collaboration with their chief executives, leadership teams, and faculty leaders, boards should establish strategies, policies, priorities, and practices that can favorably influence the long-term health of their institutions to ensure the continued health and vitality of American democracy, our society, and economy. ■

Henry Stoeber is AGB’s president and chief executive officer.

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