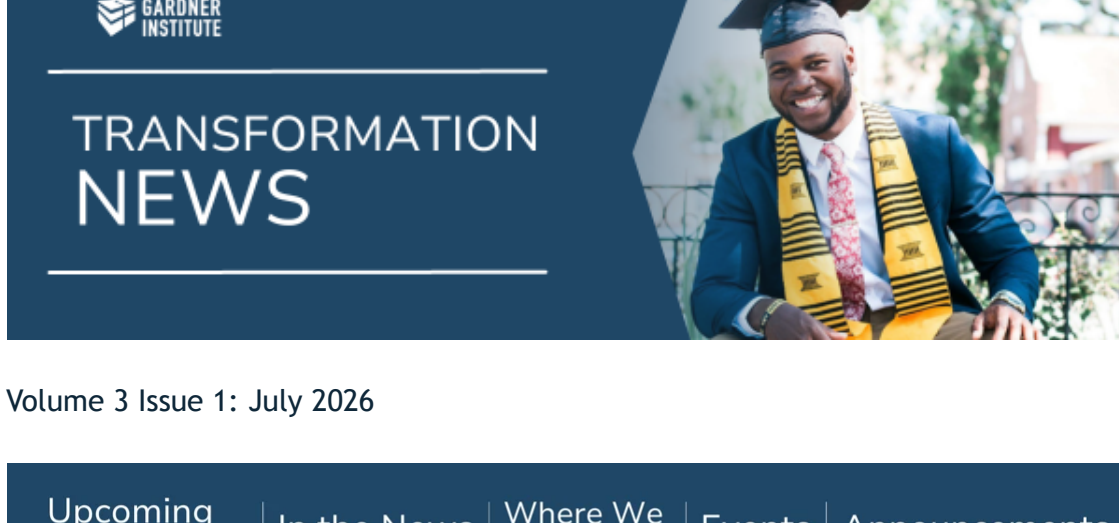




Volume 3 Issue 1: July 2026

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On Boots, Shoes, and the Legacy of Leaders

Systems fade. Their consequences remain.

Andrew K. Koch, PhD, Chief Executive Officer, Gardner Institute

July 2026

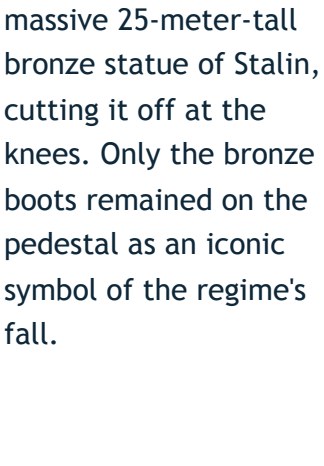
I'm the son of German immigrants. German was spoken in our home, and it is difficult to say whether German or English was my first language. In truth, I grew up with two first languages, often used interchangeably in the same conversation. My parents sent me to nursery school to strengthen my English and to German language school on Saturdays to strengthen my German. I played Little League baseball, was active in middle and high school lacrosse, marched in my town's bicentennial parade, attended German heritage festivals, and participated in New York City's Steuben Day Parade.

This duality often left me feeling caught between worlds. In Germany, I was "the American kid." In the United States, I was "the German kid." I never felt fully at home in either culture but instead occupied the space between them. Years later, while pursuing my Ph.D. in American Studies, I learned there was a name for this experience: cultural liminality.

As a child, I disliked my liminal existence. I wanted to firmly belong somewhere. As an adult, I have come to see it as a gift. Moving between cultures has taught me to see the world through multiple lenses - to view one culture from the vantage point of another and then reverse the perspective. International travel still provides opportunities for that kind of reflection.

That was certainly true recently when I had the privilege of participating in the 20th European First-Year Experience Conference at the University of Szeged in Hungary. In the days leading up to the conference, my wife, several colleagues, and I spent time exploring Budapest. Perhaps because I have spent much of my life thinking about how history, identity, and institutions shape one another, two monuments in particular captured my attention.

Along the Danube, rows of bronze shoes commemorate Jewish men, women, and children murdered by Hungary's Arrow Cross regime during World War II. Across the city at Memento Park, Stalin's enormous boots stand as a reminder of a political system that once appeared permanent. Once.



In October 1956, anti-communist revolutionaries in Budapest toppled a massive 25-meter-tall bronze statue of Stalin, cutting it off at the knees. Only the bronze boots remained on the pedestal as an iconic symbol of the regime's fall.

In a profound irony, the victims represented by the shoes remain vividly present in the minds and hearts of those who visit Budapest, while the regime represented by the boots survives only as a relic of the past.

The contrast is revealing.

One memorial preserves traces of ordinary people whose lives were violently interrupted, yet whose humanity endures in memory. The other preserves traces of power. One asks us to remember lives. The other reminds us that even the most imposing leaders, regimes, and systems eventually become artifacts.

Standing between those monuments, I found myself thinking about leadership.

Are leaders making decisions to protect their power, their preferences, and their reputations? Or are they making decisions that will strengthen institutions long after they themselves are gone? Are they building systems designed to preserve their influence, or creating conditions that allow future generations to thrive?

Effective leaders understand that systems are necessary. The challenge is to continually examine them from multiple perspectives - not only from the vantage point of those who lead them, but also from the vantage point of those who experience their consequences - to understand whom they help, whom they hinder, and what unintended effects they may produce.

For those of us engaged in institutional transformation, the lesson is clear. Policies, structures, strategic plans, and operating models will all eventually change. History suggests they always do. What endures is the impact institutions have on people - and the way leaders use their authority to shape that impact.

Systems fade. Their consequences remain.

The question is not whether today's systems will survive intact. They will not.

The question is what those systems, and those who lead them, leave behind.

Will future generations of students and staff remember the structures we fought to preserve? Or will they remember the lives we harmed or helped flourish?

Which answer are we writing through our own leadership today?

The shoes and the boots offer very different answers to that question.

Transforming The Postsecondary Experience™

Institutional Success Planning

With support from the Gates Foundation, the Gardner Institute is partnering with four intermediary organizations to bring Institutional Success Planning to nearly 40 colleges and universities during the 2026-2027 academic year.

Participating institutions will use the Institutional Transformation Assessment (ITA) and Readiness, Willingness, and Ability (RWA) survey to engage campus stakeholders in developing a strategic plan for student success.

[Read](#) six case studies highlighting how institutions have used the ITA and RWA to strengthen planning and improve student success.

Transformation Cohort 4 - Now Recruiting

This fall, the Gardner Institute and the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) will launch the National Transformation Collaborative through Transformation Cohort 4.

Building on the success of Transforming the Postsecondary Experience, the Collaborative expands institutional transformation across the full student journey, helping colleges improve student success, career readiness, and post-graduation outcomes.

[Learn more about joining Transformation Cohort 4.](#)



**Lighthouse Project
Participating Institutions**

1. California State University, Fresno
2. California State University, Los Angeles
3. Georgia State University
4. Houston City College
5. Lemoore College
6. San Antonio College
7. University of Nevada, Las Vegas
8. University of North Carolina
9. University of South Carolina
10. University of Texas at Dallas
11. University of Virginia
12. University of West Texas

Courseware Lighthouse Implementation Program

The Gardner Institute, TPSE-Math, and WestEd to improve student success in Calculus I and, beginning in fall 2026, Calculus II through AI-enabled, open-source courseware and evidence-based teaching practices at 12 colleges and universities.

As a project partner, the Gardner Institute supports participating institutions by:

- Facilitating faculty professional learning.
- Using evidence and institutional data to guide improvement.
- Supporting campus teams in developing actionable implementation plans.

Upcoming Opportunities for Engagement

Academic Leadership Community

The Academic Leadership Community is a year-long opportunity that provides academic leaders with effective leadership techniques to support student success efforts within and beyond their academic units. Begins September 29, 2026.

Join us for an information meeting on August 3 at 2:00 PM ET.

Chief Academic Officers Innovation Community

The Chief Academic Officers Innovation Community is a year-long opportunity that provides peer support, tools, and networking for Chief Academic Officers interested in developing skills in driving innovation.

Join us for an information meeting on August 4 at 3:30 PM ET.

Welcome to the Team!

Katie Easley, Assistant Vice President

Fellows

Myranda Crews, Brevard College
RD Montgomery, University of Richmond
Dan Volchok, Northeastern University

Summer Interns

Kennedy Allen, Senior at Florida Gulf Coast University
Alexander Bolton, Senior at Brevard College
Brooke Wilson, Junior at the University of Richmond

[Learn more about our team members](#)

In the News

John Gardner and Dan Volchok co-authored "[Using the First-Year Experience Concept as a Model for Creating the Graduate School Experience.](#)" Published in the NASPA 2026 Knowledge Communities Publication.

From our friends at the National Resource Center

33rd National Conference on Students in Transition

September 30-October 2, 2026 | Virtual

Join educators from across higher education to explore research, innovative practices, and strategies that improve student success from the first year through graduation.

[Click here to save your seat!](#)

Congratulations to the 2025-26 Chief Academic Officers Innovation Community graduates! [We are proud to recognize this year's participants.](#)

The Graduate Student Experience

April 12-14, 2027 in Atlanta, GA

[Call for Proposals is now open!](#)

Where We Will Be

71st SHEEO Annual Meeting

Drew Koch

Commission on Colleges and Universities (formerly SACSCOC)
Developing Student Success Strategies: What Matters Most for Your Institution?
John Gardner and Betsy Barefoot

2026 SHEEO Policy Conference

Drew Koch

ITLC Lilly Conference on Innovative Strategies to Advance Student Learning

"Strategies to Design for Student Engagement and Belonging"

Stephanie Foote

University of Central Missouri

Keynote presentation- Graduate Faculty
Drew Koch

Upcoming Campus Visits:

- California State University, Fresno
- California State University, Los Angeles
- California State University, San Bernardino
- CUNY Queensborough
- Eastern Connecticut State University
- Georgia State University
- Houston City College
- Lemoore College
- Northern State University
- San Antonio College
- SUNY Geneseo
- The University of Virginia's College at Wise
- University of North Carolina Asheville
- University of Redlands
- The University of Texas at Arlington
- Westminster University

A Symposium on Transforming the Postsecondary Experience

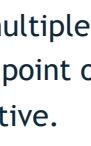
Join us October 14-15

Explore **eight learning tracks**, pre-conference workshops, and concurrent sessions designed to help higher education leaders transform the systems and practices that shape the student experience.

[Register here](#)

[f](#) [in](#) [@](#)

[Visit Our Website](#)



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