In the United States, as in most countries, universities confronted increasing social demands throughout the twentieth century. As higher education expanded, universities and colleges repeatedly took steps to serve a more diverse clientele, to deepen their research engagements, and to extend their public service and outreach activities. By the early 1980s, the term ‘multi-university’ came into use in order to describe the multiple roles and wide range of activities of major US universities (Kerr 1982). By that time, many universities enrolled 25,000 and more students, offered degrees in 40 or more subject areas, and supported research efforts that accounted for hundreds of millions in annual expenditures (Glenny 1980; National Center for Education Statistics 1989). Today, size and complexity have reached further dimensions, as more than 4,000 institutions of higher education enrol almost 15 million students (The Chronicle of Higher Education 2001: 7, 9).

It appears that universities have made a remarkably successful response to changing demands. Participation rates among high-school leavers have grown significantly, to the point that most of those eligible for university study pursue a post-high-school degree program of some kind (National Center for Education Statistics 2000). Universities have absorbed vastly increased enrolments, in some instances repeatedly doubling their enrolment totals every decade. New institutions have been founded, largely fulfilling the hope that some form of post-high school study could be available to American citizens throughout the country. Community colleges have become a ubiquitous presence on the American landscape; collectively, over 1,700 two-year institutions serve vital roles as a point of initial entry for members of previously underserved populations and as a transfer mechanism opening up opportunity for further study. New research centres and new forms of collaboration between academia and industry have emerged; entrepreneurial ventures and collaboration with local and regional partners have become a hallmark of university operations, sometimes in the form of applied research partnerships and in other instances in expanded study opportunities for employed workers.

Several questions can be raised about how universities have been affected by their responses to changing environmental conditions and demands. What structural adaptations have been made to accommodate an expanded scope of activity, both educational and entrepreneurial? Have relationships among the core units of
academic organisation changed? How has the distribution of power changed, as schools and departments have taken on new roles and as university structures have been modified to respond to more assertive external constituencies? Have the longstanding relationships between academics and administrators been changed within the university?

Numerous studies suggest that many internal changes have occurred among academic institutions (Brinkman and Morgan 1997; Dill 1997; Gumport and Pusser 1997; Kerr and Gade 1986; Massy 1996; Massy and Wilger 1998; O’Neil, Bensimon, Diamond and Moore 1999). Of particular interest for purposes here are several analyses showing that universities have modified their mechanisms of governance during the last few decades (Gumport 1993: 2000; Gumport and Pusser 1997; Lee 1991; Marcus 1997; Schuster et al., 1989, 1994). Special concern has been raised as to whether members of the professoriate have sufficient voice under the new arrangements that have emerged.

It must be acknowledged, however, that the available research is limited in scope. At best, studies have been exploratory, examining specific issues or the in-depth experience of a few institutions. Such work has provided largely descriptive evidence and interpretive commentary. These studies have yielded helpful insights but they do not offer firm conclusions about the overall direction of change. Moreover, scholarly analysis has given limited attention to broader questions about the impact of recent changes in governance patterns or the purposes they serve. Studies are needed that will help assess whether lasting gains have been achieved in terms of organisational adaptation and vitality (cf. Kezar 2001; Sporn 1999).

This paper is designed to encourage the pursuit of such broader research questions. Its purposes are, first, to assess some of the major changes that have taken place in governance and decision-making at US universities and, second, to offer a conceptual perspective that may guide needed research on the impact of recent changes. The larger question is whether these changes can be seen as examples of successful organisational adaptation, that is, whether recent changes will help universities and colleges to be stronger and more effective in dealing with the challenges they face in the years ahead.

The paper begins with an overview of the governance structures found at most US universities and colleges. Several aspects reflect the unique history of US higher education and, despite similar vocabulary, are different from what is found in many other countries (cf. Clark 1983; Goedegebuure and De Boer 1996; Van Vught 1995). A review is then offered of major changes over the last few decades that have had an important effect on university governance. This review is interpretive, bringing together a wide range of developments and assessing their effect on the prerogatives traditionally accorded to academics in university governance. The focus of the review is on institutions that offer at least a bachelor’s degree and, usually, master’s and doctoral degrees as well.

The paper then turns to some conceptual perspectives that might help create a research agenda to evaluate whether today’s style of university governance offers a stronger, more adaptive university structure. The work of John Kotter is given special attention because of its potential relevance in gauging the adaptiveness of recent changes. A particular focus is a distinction Kotter has drawn between the