



CLAREMONT
MCKENNA
— C O L L E G E —

Claremont McKenna College Opening Convocation 1999

Focusing On Liberal Arts

Remarks By President Pamela B. Gann

August 30, 1999

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I. Greetings

It is truly my privilege to welcome you to the opening convocation of the 1999-2000 academic year. I welcome back our returning students, our new members of the Class of 2003, our transfer and exchange students. I welcome our new and returning faculty, and our new and returning staff, and friends of the College.

As I mentioned at the opening freshmen convocation last Thursday, this fall semester 1999 is rather momentous: It is the last academic semester of the century and the millennium; and the next Spring semester is the first academic semester of the new 21st century and of a new millennium. It may seem somewhat quaint that your faculty would greet the 21st century in medieval robes, since our academical gowns, originating from ecclesiastical gowns, have changed very little since the origins of universities in Europe. Yes, your faculty does appear before you today in this ancient but honorable attire, but I assure you that the minds under those caps and mortarboards are nimble and the obstacles that they will place before you in the classroom will be modern in their complexity and even post-modern in their opacity.

This convocation is personally a very momentous one. I greet you as the newest and fourth President of this splendid college. Since my selection in February, I have had the unique opportunity for a significant period of transition in which I spent a week every month at the college. I express my warmest gratitude to President Emeritus Jack Stark, and to Mrs. Jil Stark, to Barbara Condit, the President's Assistant, and to many of you in this room, for your superb tutorials over the last six months. I have listened attentively; I hope that I have learned well. I am exuberantly enjoying every moment, person, and activity in my new, delightful community.

It has indeed been a long but fairly swift move from Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, to Claremont McKenna College, in Claremont, California. I cannot help but always think fondly of some of the most wonderful features of my home state. Like California, North Carolina is a coastal state with a beautiful seashore, but to the east rather than to the west; and North Carolina ends in the west, rather than in the east, with the highest mountains contained along the entire eastern portion of the United States. Of course, most things in California are measurable in extremes compared to the East. So the tallest mountain in the East, Mt. Mitchell, is located in North Carolina, but it is only a runty 6,800 feet, while the tallest mountain in the lower 48 is in California, Mt. Whitney, which looms 14,494 feet high, nearly 8,000 feet higher than its eastern cousin. Our very own Mt. San Antonio, or Mt. Baldy, stands tall at 10,064 feet. I have successfully climbed Mt. Cucamonga, and I look forward to climbing Mt. Baldy with some of you this fall semester. Someone told me that the PPE group always climbs Mt. Baldy, and if that is true, I'm waiting for an invitation.

In addition to seashores and mountains, you may associate North Carolina with tobacco, and that would be true. Tobacco was the source of wealth for several philanthropists, including the Duke family, which founded Duke University, and the Reynolds family, whose philanthropy developed Wake Forest University. The state is now the home of wonderful biotechnology and the corporate headquarters of the fifth largest bank in the world – Bank of America – yes, that's right, not headquartered in San Francisco any longer, but in Charlotte, North Carolina. Yet, you will still see tobacco growing along the roadsides of the eastern part of the state. North Carolina has now also become one of the largest pork producing regions of the world, almost all of which is also located in its eastern portion. In fact, I thought that a College that prides itself in its savvy about economics, would appreciate a joke about my home state that

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goes like this: How do you keep the economy of eastern North Carolina recession proof? Teach hogs to smoke.

Well, I have left one splendid state for another; and one splendid institution in higher education for another. I'm certain that I am very adaptable to California's geography, climate, and people; but do not expect me to lose my North Carolina accent.

II. The Landscape of Higher

And, speaking of landscapes, in this transition over the last several months, I have been thinking a great deal about the place of this College in the broad landscape of higher education. In particular, I have contemplated its future prospects to remain and sustain itself among the finest liberal arts colleges in California and the United States. I invite us to think about this together today and throughout this academic year.

One of the traditions in academic life is the installation of the college's new President in a formal convocation. Often associated with the installation are a series of events designed to bring the community together to celebrate its history and traditions, as well as reflect upon its best pathway into the future. These combined groups of activities are often referred to as the inauguration events. The College has scheduled these events for October 21st through 23rd. I am very pleased that the Inauguration Committee of trustees, alumni, faculty, and staff have thoughtfully linked all these events together under the theme of "Focusing Liberal Arts: Tradition, Leadership, and Innovation." I plan to place this theme before our community, not only today, but during the entire year, as we discuss and determine collectively what is best about our past to preserve and cherish, while also selecting the innovative and thoughtful methodologies and practices by which we pursue the astonishing opportunities of our future.

I would like to use this convocation to begin, and I emphasize begin, our year-long discussion of this theme: "Focusing Liberal Arts: Tradition, Leadership, and Innovation." Let me begin by setting the stage with some general observations about the landscape of higher education.

This semester 14.9 million students will be attending more than 3,700 institutions of higher education. More than 60 percent of all high school graduates will be going on to some form of higher education. Where does Claremont McKenna College, with its 1,000 students, fit into this extraordinarily complex and diverse sector of our economy? We are part of a group of 212 liberal arts colleges that compose the Liberal Arts I category of institutions of higher education, under the nomenclature developed by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. What are the key characteristics of this group? The colleges in this group are residential, small with 500 to 3000 students, selective in admissions, and dedicated entirely or nearly so to undergraduate education. They rely upon close teacher and student interaction and award baccalaureate degrees in fields of the liberal arts. Claremont McKenna College fits this description, and fortunately, has become one the very best liberal arts colleges in the United States.

This group of liberal arts colleges awards only about 4 percent of the total baccalaureate degrees awarded each year, a very small share of the total student market for higher education. This share will very likely experience a relative, market share decline into the future for several reasons. The institutions themselves are unlikely to grow very much, because their defining characteristic is one of remaining small; and the number of new residential liberal arts colleges likely to be created is also small, given the significant costs

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of starting any new college. Thus, the number of student places in these types of colleges will remain small and fairly fixed. On the other hand, the number of students who will attend college for the next 25 years is rapidly increasing, with California leading the way in student growth; and students increasingly express a preference for larger institutions (just like Americans increasingly shop at Wal-Marts, Virgin Records, Borders, and if they could, the splendidly comprehensive shoppers' emporium, Harrods in London). Thus, this growth in student demand likely will be met by increasing the number and size of the larger, mostly public institutions, and by more "virtual" institutions using the internet and multimedia technologies. I have now described one way to observe our place in the landscape of higher education.

Another way is suggested by Robert Zemsky and William Massy of Stanford University, who distinguish three broad types of institutions of higher education in America today: "brand name," "mass provider," and "convenience institutions."⁽¹⁾ Ouch! This vocabulary seems all too commercial in tone for such a mediocrally caparisoned occasion, but I will push ahead, since we have so many economists under those velvet caps and pointed mortarboards.

"Mass provider" institutions include many of the state universities, land-grant institutions, and four-year less selective colleges, and they will absorb much of this increased student demand. Yet, these "mass provider" institutions will also be challenged by newer, low-cost "convenience" institutions, which are flexible in their course offerings, and utilize the internet and multimedia forms of education, and which therefore appeal mostly to part-time students and adult learners who also work. Consider the Western Governors Virtual University and the rise of the University of Phoenix.

Liberal Arts I colleges are most definitely not in either the "mass provider" or "convenience" group of institutions. Yet, only a few of them are in the first category of "brand" name or elite institutions, and even those with a "brand name" do not possess the same level of "branding" enjoyed by larger elite institutions, such as Stanford, Yale, Duke, and Princeton, or the public Ivies, such as the University of Michigan, the University of Virginia, or the University of California at Berkeley.

Thus, the challenge for Claremont McKenna College, and also for the other four colleges in this consortium known as The Claremont Colleges, is both (1) to be within the group of "brand name" colleges and universities; and (2) to compete effectively within this "brand name" group for students, faculty, and resources.

What are some of the external challenges to achieving these twin goals? With respect to "branding" or "name recognition," today's modern markets are very much impacted by the media. Larger institutions of higher education get media attention due to famous sports programs, the impact of important issues of public policy, such as the uses of affirmative action (or not) in the public California system of higher education, and breakthroughs in research at their large science and medical facilities. People seek out networks, and large numbers of alumni in networks increase reputation. Thus, larger institutions can create more robust "brand names" through the media and through alumni. Colleges and universities now compete in a national market for the best students due to the ready availability of information and the ease of communications and travel, thus advantaging larger "brand name" institutions. Many of the best Ph.D. faculty graduate from "brand name" research universities. The explosion in knowledge and the large enrollments in many Ph.D. programs create environments in which faculty are trained to be highly specialized and socialized into the traditions and cultures of research. As a result, many of the very best do not naturally seek out posts in liberal arts colleges, and we are often at a recruiting disadvantage.

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Lastly, the increased consumer orientation of parents and student applicants toward education for employment makes many even well-educated parents and highly talented students discount the incontrovertible values of a liberal education and, therefore, discount the values of liberal arts colleges, which by characteristic and mission champion liberal education.

I have set forth the challenge and the reasons for the challenge to Claremont McKenna College in direct, market terms. I do not mean by these remarks to leave you with overly serious concerns, for that would be a huge over-reaction to, or misinterpretation of, my remarks. I do mean, however, to keep you awake a bit at night, and not just for purposes of dunking your friends in the College's fountains along the main promenade. Perhaps a story would help a bit at this point. So, hey you in the audience, listen up.

I understand that one of our young economics professors, Eric Helland, and some of the entering freshman went to Yosemite National Park for their pre-orientation, outdoor, bonding trip, and that they encountered some tenacious Yosemite bears. The story that I heard was that your fearless faculty leader, Eric Helland, became quite concerned that the bear in the tree, consuming the last of your campers' rations, was not going away and was going to invade your camping territory and even might attack. So fearless leader Eric Helland ordered all the freshman campers immediately to take down the camp and hike out as soon as possible. During the resulting commotion, one freshman student was observed stooping to the ground and tightening up her shoelaces.

Another new freshman student, who was fairly learned about bears, said to the student tightening up her shoelaces, "What are you doing? You can't outrun a bear."

"I don't have the outrun the bear," she replied, "I'm the newest member of the CMC track team, and I just have to outrun you."

Let's take a lesson from our students. We need to be out in front of our competition, whether it is bears, commerce, or education.

III. Focusing Liberal Arts: Tradition, Leadership, Innovation

I cannot in the time remaining adequately reflect on the landscape that I have described for you, and the challenge posed by that landscape to the future of the College. I will certainly take the opportunity of my installation address to begin my response. Of course, the ultimate response should be collaborative and reflect the combined wisdom of members of this community. It will take the entire academic year for this community to evaluate the challenge carefully and develop a response that reflects honesty, maturity, and ambition.

To assist us in beginning our discussions, I want to leave you with a few observations and then some fundamental suggestions that I believe we must consider in our deliberations.

First, I observe that the College has already achieved significant academic quality and reputation in an astonishingly brief 50-year history. We are greatly indebted to those who have founded and led this College. Incredible strength derives from the existing quality and from the habit of constant improvement. Second, when it comes to educational efficacy, highly selective liberal arts colleges yield positive educational outcomes in their students more completely and consistently than do either public universities

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or very prestigious private universities. (2) These outcomes are due to their close faculty and student interactions, their focus on writing and the liberal arts, the frequent involvement of students in independent research and faculty research, and the significant expenditures on student services. Faculties at highly selective liberal arts colleges are better able to combine excellent teaching and research than faculty at more prestigious research universities (that emphasize research) or faculty at less prestigious large universities and small colleges (that emphasize teaching). (3) These factors illustrate that selective liberal arts colleges possess the best educational practices for favorable impact on student learning and development.

Yet, these two positive observations—about our College’s own history of exceptional achievement and the efficacy of educational practices in highly selective liberal arts college—are still inadequate to assure this College a superb reputation in academy quality and an exceptional place in the landscape of higher education. What else might we consider to achieve such ambitions? Let me make several fundamental suggestions in response to the question that I have posed.

First, the College must be unswervingly attentive to the attainment of increased academic quality in everything that it determines is worth pursuing, whether it is in teaching, in research, on the playing fields, or at the debate team podium. When a College is already as good as this one, it becomes increasingly difficult to attain successfully even higher quality, but indubitably, it can be done.

Second, we must address the question what it means to be liberally educated for the 21st century, and to be prepared for not only national but global leadership and citizenship. Only by asking these questions will we prepare our students adequately to lead today’s globally interconnected, yet highly diverse, communities of business, government, and the professions.

Third, we must never lose our commitment to, and ability to afford, a meritocratic student body maintained through need blind admission and a financial aid policy that meets all students’ needs on an equitable basis. We do not want ever to risk becoming museum-like cloisters or comfortable spas for the wealthy; rather, we want to be the source of leaders for all parts of our diverse society.

Fourth, we must seek to convey to every single student that he or she can achieve large and important things in the world, that he or she will be discoverers and leaders, that he or she has the intelligence, education, and capacity to shape the society that they inhabit. (4) A College with a student body that collectively possesses this type of self-regard and optimism is an exciting, dynamic community that will be a magnet for the very best students and faculty nationally and internationally.

Fifth, we must tenaciously pursue and incorporate the habits of an intellectual community, of an intentional community, and of a community that possesses civic virtue. These attributes of community are essential characteristics of the very best and most genuine institutions of higher learning in a democratic society.

Sixth, we must build on the existing spirit of our community, which is so effectively captured by our wonderful students. We must mold that spirit into an esprit de corps that is so robust and full of playfulness that the resulting memories and friendships are so burnished and vivid that we carry them in the backs of our minds, wherever our pathways take us. Thus, through the commonality of mutual,

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intense experiences at this College, the members of this community will be bound together to alma mater for a lifetime.

If we can attain these sorts of aims, then this College community will build off the excellent objectives and habits established by our founders. It will maintain its remarkable rate of growth in academic stature. It will develop the best models of undergraduate education to meet the needs of the most qualified and ambitious youth in any institution in the world who go on to assume important roles in public and private life.

Are these goals outrageous? I do not think so. I look forward to joining you on this very interesting journey.

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Footnotes

¹Chester E. Finn, Jr., in “Today’s Academic Market Requires a New Taxonomy of Colleges,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, in January 9, 1998, pp. B4-5.

²Alexander W. Astin, in “How the Liberal Arts College Affects Students,” in *Daedalus, Distinctively American: The Residential Liberal Arts Colleges*, Winter 1999, pp. 77-100; see especially pp. 77, 79-85, 89-94.

³*Id.* at pp. 89-91.

⁴See this point made by Martin Trow in “Aspects of Diversity in American Higher Education,” in *On the Making of Americans: Essays in Honor of David Riesman*, ed. Herbert Gans et. al., Philadelphia University Press, 1979.