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Claremont McKenna College Opening Convocation 2000

Citizens as Intellectuals: Claremont McKenna's Teaching Mission

William Ascher, Vice President and Dean of the Faculty

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It is a great honor to welcome you on behalf of Claremont McKenna College and to share with you some thoughts about why we are all here. I thank President Gann for the opportunity to speak to you. I appreciate the opportunity to build upon the thinking that she expressed in last year's convocation address.

I came to Claremont McKenna because I believe that the College is all about public engagement. After sixteen years of teaching and program-building in a public policy institute within a much larger university, I have come to a college that, in many different ways, is fully engaged in public affairs. I want to articulate a vision of how public engagement is linked to the liberal arts education, the task of training intellectuals, and faculty and student research. Last year, President Gann spoke about Claremont McKenna's place among the thousands of educational institutions in this country. I would like to speak today about Claremont McKenna's role in support of participation in our democracy.

Public engagement reflects broad trends in the United States. *Direct democracy* – that is, public participation in specific policy decisions, has been on the rise throughout the country. No national forest plan is approved without elaborate public input; no environmental regulation is adopted without multiple hearings. Referendum and recall initiatives are at an all time high. Policymakers seem to be more attuned to public opinion on specific issues as well – we are coming close to “opinion poll democracy.” And the news is full of stories about marches, rallies and protests.

In many ways, California is at that forefront of direct democracy. I have tremendous admiration for the level of attention that many Californians display for public issues: this is truly the referendum capital of the world. Whether through a petition to the Claremont City Council – just go the Sunday farmers market to be approached about such issues – a state referendum, or a protest from Seattle to Washington, DC – you will find Californians of all political stripes mobilized on public issues.

Yet public engagement, whether California style or in the form of a New England town meeting, is fragile. Yes, there is a trend toward very intensive public engagement, but there are also countertrends. The pull toward engagement is countered by a pull toward apathy. The more complicated and intimidating the world seems, the more likely people are to try to privatize their lives. Our current affluence allows people – at least those enjoying the affluence – to buy distance from common social problems. The gated community is perhaps the most vivid symbol of this. So too is the “Generation X” mentality that politics is for the middle-aged. Successful specialization – computer experts becoming multimillionaires from writing clever code – reinforces the temperament to ignore the broader social issues. The requirement to be well informed may itself lead many people to apathy. Many issues are so complicated that it is easy to tune out – C-SPAN does not have the ratings of Fox or ESPN. The message that engagement requires expertise implies that many people are unqualified; and in fact, that none of us is fully equipped to understand the details of a host of issues. How can we come to a broad, reasoned, robust orientation toward complicated issues without having in-depth knowledge?

By the same token, the pull toward apathy is matched by a pull toward purely confrontational engagement. In some societies, and at moments in U.S. history, this may be necessary, but in relatively normal times public engagement is most effective if it can be constructive, sustained, and fairly civil. Confrontational engagement is often anti-analytical; it is as if protestors are saying, “We don't want to hear the reasons, we know what we want to condemn.”

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Let me outline the specific case that seems to epitomize my concerns. During 1999 and again this year, protestors disrupted the Seattle meeting on the International Trade Organization and the joint World Bank-International Monetary Fund meetings in Washington, D.C. In the case of the International Trade Organization, the disruption may actually have impeded the organization's progress; in the case of the joint World Bank-IMF meetings, the disruptions probably had little impact. But the concerns I have are not with these short-term consequences, but rather with the mindsets and the behavior of *some* protestors, and the potential long-term effects of their perspectives.

I am very much in favor of public engagement on such international issues, but the question is whether the confrontations were truly constructive. Some of it was pure street theater; perhaps a way of evoking the spirit of the Viet Nam War protests. And perhaps it is acceptable to rekindle the spirit of public concern even at the discomfort of people trying to do very serious work. But there were also strong undercurrents of cynicism toward both the officials of these organizations and of the governments involved, including the United States, and the trends of globalization. Globalization is an extraordinarily complicated trend, with good aspects as well as bad. Among the good aspects are the increasing standards of human rights and environmental protection around the world, and the spread of certain technologies and investments that can make the world's poor far better off. The risks include the dilution of cultures and greater opportunities for environmental dumping. One could – and in fact should – have lengthy discussions about whether on balance globalization should be encouraged or discouraged, and, even better, how to capitalize on the positive aspects and minimize the negative. So the problem is not skepticism toward the claims of globalization and its side effects, but rather it is the blanket condemnation of globalization without much by way of analysis or efforts to understand both sides of the issue. It *presumes* that leaders are not to be trusted and that these institutions only serve the interests of the rich and the powerful. Many protestors regard themselves as being motivated by altruism, but reject the possibility that anyone on the other side may be similarly motivated. Even leaving aside the anarchists who simply seized on these opportunities to wreak as much havoc as they could, many protestors revealed more cynicism and self-righteous close-mindedness than constructive skepticism.

It is clear that many protestors have minimal knowledge of these international organizations: how they get their money, how they are governed, how they have been changing their policies, and what functions they serve in the international arena. Therefore the message from many protestors was, "We don't really know what you are doing, but we are sure that it is heinous." The reactions to this message are also unfortunate. First, when public input is so broad and unrefined, governments are often less willing and able to respond in sophisticated and measured ways, and are much more likely to simply ignore the criticisms. Why respond when any response will also be attacked? Second, many people who were not involved in the protest came to view the protestors with disdain, dismissing them as *merely* troublemakers and self-indulgent kids. In some respects, the protests actually discredited the valid concerns about the operations of these organizations and the trends of globalization. Some of us recall the same kind of polarization that occurred with the Viet Nam War protests.

It is useful to note that these are old problems but have different and new causes. In the 1920s, America's most influential commentator, Walter Lippmann, wrote a chilling book called *Public Opinion*, in which he acknowledged the growing importance of the public's views on policy matters, but seriously challenged the capacity of the public to serve its role in democratic governance. Lippmann argued that attitudes toward community issues come from the "pictures in people's heads," and these pictures are all too often simplistic – he introduced the concept of "stereotypes." Lippmann bemoaned the ignorance of

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the populace. Stereotypes and simplistic analysis were the result, according to Lippmann, of the low levels of education and the lack of adequate and digestible information, in light of the intricacies of public issues. The consequences were public reactions based more on misconception and emotion than on informed opinion; or simply public apathy, and the resulting weakness of democratic participation.

Today, one might argue that the situation is perversely reversed: education levels are, by any comparison, extremely high, and information is abundant. Yet this very complexity, and overwhelmingly technical aspect of many issues, can lead to the same results as before: either apathy or destructive engagement.

For those who are not apathetic, there are two opposing dilemmas of public engagement. First, how can you be engaged and yet responsible, given the complexity of public issues and how easy it is to act with inadequate knowledge? Civic responsibility requires activism and action. The question for the individual, however, is whether the action is truly reasonable. The fact that many other people take the same position does not validate the choice; majorities are often wrong. Policies that discriminate against ethnic or religious minorities, here or abroad, often gain majority support. In fact, many inappropriate public policies are embraced by political leaders precisely because these policies are popular with voting majorities. Without mastery over the substance of policy, people tend to take policy positions to express their self images and emotional orientations. In other words, they embrace positions that resonate emotionally and symbolically – but they may not be policies that contribute most to the public interest. And the uninformed, acting from the heart more than from reason, are often ill-equipped to confront the narrow interests.

The second dilemma is that public concern can sour into cynicism that undermines both loyalty and the willingness to engage constructively. By loyalty, I do not mean unquestioning acceptance of authority. But constructive engagement does require that citizens have an abiding commitment to the democratic process and, in this country, to the American experiment of having various groups go at one another within a framework of interest-group politics and checks-and-balances government. Cynicism undermines loyalty: cynical people come to believe that practically everyone else is corrupt or selfish. I have seen this sort of cynicism contribute to the destruction of democracy in several Latin American and Asian countries. There is a huge distance between skepticism – the unwillingness to take things for granted – and the cynicism of assuming the worst. The cynical are often politically destructive and even self destructive: inactive during long periods, then harshly vindictive in times of crisis. Cynicism can come about through education that interprets political and economic action too narrowly in terms of selfish interests, without giving due to either the genius of institutional arrangements that make self interested actions serve the public good in both the economic and political spheres, or the acts of public spiritedness that can also be found in any public initiative. The media often imply that the self interest, whether economic or political, is a sufficient explanation for political and policy decisions, as if the commentators would be naïve if they did not uncover the considerations of political gain behind every position and decision by a government leader or political group. How can the educational system instill skepticism rather than cynicism?

So far I have identified the problems of apathy, undisciplined engagement, and cynicism. How can Claremont McKenna College address these problems? First of all, CMC attracted you, its students, and we, its faculty, not simply by the promise to train professionals in public affairs and business – as laudable as such training may be – but rather to develop *intellectuals*. Many fine educational institutions

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train professionals and technicians – but Claremont McKenna trains intellectuals. This is what liberal arts is all about.

What makes the role of the intellectual so important? What does it mean beyond the pretentiousness that the term usually implies? The most insightful definition of *intellectual* is simply “an individual who accepts the *responsibility* to be competent over the broad range of human pursuits.” So we are not speaking of the narrow policy specialist, whether economist or political scientist, nor the *literati* who believe that quoting Foucault is sufficient. The intellectual is the person who knows that it is unacceptable to say, “I care about literature, therefore I simply don’t care about science politics;” or “Literature and language studies are for the culturally effete – I want to be a policy wonk and just concentrate on the important practical things.” Nor should he or she say, in a more modest vein, “That is far beyond my area of expertise.” The intellectual takes seriously the need to have an informed opinion and to act as a citizen. Now, this does not mean that intellectuals believe themselves to be competent in everything; that would be the height of arrogance. Rather, intellectuals feel the obligation to *strive* to be informed about everything.

This breadth of intellectual aspiration is the key. Apathy is simply unacceptable. And the dilemma of responsible action is minimized, as much as possible, by the imperative of keeping informed on all fronts. But it is also crucial because it squelches the cynicism that arises from narrow perspectives. Cynicism often arises when each individual ignores the considerations that motivate others. Without understanding why others oppose one’s own honorable positions, these others seem to be dishonorable. This accounts, to a certain degree, for the cynicism that many environmentalists and cultural preservationists hold toward any initiative of economic development. If the role of the intellectual forces environmental and cultural specialists to take economics into account, their cynicism is likely to diminish even if they stick to their value positions.

Finally, the intellectual’s breadth is an antidote to the temptation for professionals to burrow into the narrowness of their specialties, and to get their satisfaction out of accomplishments for and within the profession rather than for society. Every profession has its contribution to society: scientists to lead technological advances as well as to enlighten us about the functioning of the universe; economists to enhance our material prosperity; lawyers to contribute to justice and public order; and so on. The problem arises when experts respond to professional rewards in ways that run counter to their social missions. For example, scientists sometimes lose sight of the most socially relevant lines of inquiry in order to pursue more professionally *avant garde* research; economists sometimes do the same. The intellectual, regardless of his or her profession, recognizes the limits of any profession – it is only the base for a broader range of considerations. The commitment to intellectual breadth requires that the professional reach beyond the narrowness of the profession. In other words, the antidote to being caught up within the profession is to view one’s role in the broadest possible perspective.

How do we prepare future professionals to become intellectuals? First, by training in the liberal arts. CMC students are required to take a broad range of courses. Sometimes students wonder why there are so many distractions and diversions from their majors and their career preparation. There are obvious personal reasons: learning how to enjoy the rest of your lives as well-rounded human beings. But the most compelling social reason is that critical thinking is broad thinking; students trained to map out the broad range of considerations relevant to a particular issue are more responsible decisionmakers, professionals and citizens. Equally important, though, CMC students take integrative courses. I was thrilled to learn that

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CMC has physicists whose courses focus heavily on ethics; that political scientists here can lead students in exploring what Shakespeare did or did not write; that Leadership courses blend psychology with management and ethics; and that teaching something as seemingly technical as cost-benefit analysis actually focuses on the philosophical question of whose interests ought to be taken into account in planning government actions.

Yet no matter how compelling the cultural and intellectual reasons for the liberal arts education may be, it is often under attack because of our own insecurities. Parents want their children to acquire skills, often defined very narrowly, and we all feel safer sticking to our narrow expertise. In the short run, skill acquisition is most efficient when skills are conceived narrowly. In the long run, however, our understanding of any issue depends on its linkages with so many others. CMC has been holding out against these pressures toward over-specialization, and this is a very important battle. In fact, CMC's commitment to both liberal arts and public engagement is a brilliant way to reduce the risk of self-absorption that broad studies sometimes produce if they are not linked to preparation for professional responsibilities.

Finally, let me explain how research also plays a pivotal role in preparing CMC students for public engagement. This requires explanation, because many students and parents may prefer an instructor who simply devotes full time to teaching. However, such an instructor is more likely to take the passive role of reading about issues and simply repeating the knowledge of others, while a professor engaged in research is struggling for mastery over the relevant field. The researcher can bring an excitement and freshness to the classroom that is hard to come by from those who learn about the world from secondary sources. But in terms of the issues of public engagement, the key point is that faculty engaged in research may be less likely to be doctrinaire insofar as their research unveils the complexity of the reality they study. More often than not, research undermines the conventional wisdom, because the conventional wisdom is usually simplified and reality is usually not.

Yet by the same token, CMC instructors want students to be engaged in meaningful research, whether in collaboration with faculty, as course assignments, or via the senior thesis. It may come as a big surprise to new CMC students that not only does *faculty* research play a huge role in enhancing teaching, but also that *you* are expected to be engaged in research – in labs, libraries, marketplaces, political arenas, and so on. CMC students are not just the passive recipients of knowledge; they create knowledge. This means fuller engagement and greater effort to master a subject. Student research goes far beyond the technical issues of research design, statistics, data manipulation, and so on, although these things are undoubtedly important. Research is about creating and classifying concepts, searching for meaningful propositions, determining what can be confirmed, and then getting into the messy real-world reality. Therefore research is an amazing way to learn how broad generalizations break down in the face of specific cases, how many questions and assertions are poorly defined, and even how some things are simply unknowable. Students engaged in real research, as opposed to classroom exercises, become both more sophisticated and more modest about what they know. They are better equipped to master enough knowledge about public issues to participate constructively, and are also more disposed to tolerate other views as they come to understand the complexity of the issues.

I would conclude by saying that Claremont McKenna's mission – which I have taken the liberty of casting in terms of creating publicly-engaged intellectuals – is remarkably coherent and powerful. It drives so many aspects of CMC's strivings in teaching and research, and guides our efforts to turn the

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liberal arts commitment toward contributing to society. Claremont McKenna students are given every opportunity to become engaged intellectuals of the finest and most socially useful sort. The public affairs mission of CMC, embedded within the liberal arts tradition, is an excellent antidote to the anti-intellectualism seen on many other college campuses. Claremont McKenna should be enormously proud of its commitment and accomplishments. As Dean of the Faculty, I hope to be able to sustain this mission.