



CLAREMONT
MCKENNA
— C O L L E G E —

Claremont McKenna College Opening Convocation 2011

A thoughtful, productive and responsible life

*Gregory D. Hess,
Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dean of the Faculty,
James G. Boswell Professor of Economics, George R. Roberts Fellow*

August 30, 2011

“Although we have made substantial progress in the last three or four decades, it is clear that the Achilles heel of our civilization is still the management of our political and economic affairs.”

With those powerful words and insights, Dr. George S. Benson, Director of the Claremont College School for Men, began our College’s first Convocation speech on October 6, 1946. There were 86 men enrolled, and one major course of study – “political economy”. Students who were veterans of the recently ended Second World War were housed in barracks in the basement of Bridges Auditorium. Non-veterans lived in the original Story House, the College’s only building and named after the Pomona College President. Russell Pitzer and Harvey Mudd were Trustees of this provisional institution. Saturday morning classes were required.

While the College has progressed substantially in strength, size and quality since those early days, limited is far too restrictive a word to describe the lack of progress we have made in managing the world’s economic and political affairs. It is against this somber but hope filled background that I welcome you, the Class of 2015, to Claremont McKenna College. CMC will challenge and inspire you to live thoughtful, productive and responsible lives. Much good work needs to be undertaken for our nation and our world. Mark my words – you will do it.

Let me start by giving you a personal welcome. My name is Gregory Hess, and I am a Professor of Economics and Dean of the Faculty. I am “the 13th Dean”, the title of the not very good novel that I will write when I am no longer in the job. This is the beginning of my sixth year as Dean (that’s 120 in human years). I’m sure that some of you in the audience are still scratching your heads as to how I became the Dean – it’s a long story. Sometime this summer, I decided that, like prior Deans, it was my year to give the Convocation address. So I thought I would use the occasion to tell you why CMC is a great institution, why you made a great choice to come here, and why I love CMC so very much.

Class of 2015, let me tell you about “our College”, now “your College”. The offer of the College is “to educate our students for thoughtful and productive lives and responsible leadership”. The title of my talk borrows from this offer. Since the end of WWII, we are one of, if not the, greatest success stories in American higher education. You can base this assertion on rankings, or alumni outcomes, or the quality of our faculty of teacher-scholars. Out of a landscape of river rock and citrus fields, this mission focused liberal arts college has emerged in 65 years as an exceptionally elite institution. You are now members of this great and proud tradition.

We offer to help you live thoughtful and productive lives. Liberal arts colleges and CMC in particular, are all partners to this higher education contract. Let’s begin with a productive life. It is the result of skill building—putting tools in your toolkit. Examples of the skill building you will experience at CMC are foreign language development, learning how to calibrate and calculate, enhancing your critical reading and writing abilities, and building your communication skills. Skill building and becoming more productive and effective is infused in every course you take at CMC.

Skills are important, but how important? In the film Napoleon Dynamite, Napoleon laments to his friend Pedro that no girl will go out with him. Pedro inquires, “Have you asked anybody yet?” Napoleon replies “No, but who would? I don't even have any good skills.” When Pedro asks, “What do you mean?” Napoleon replies, “You know, like nunchuku skills, bow hunting skills, computer hacking skills.”

Napoleon concludes, with only a limited concept and awareness of what the other gender prefers, that “Girls only want boyfriends who have great skills.”

Of course, as the dialogue points to, skills are important, but skills by themselves are not enough. For instance, even with any of those fine skills, Napoleon may still have struggled to relate to other people. That’s because skills reside in a context. Indeed, much of what is important and fundamental to your education is not just about learning to do things, but about learning to “see things”. That’s the “thoughtful” part of our offer. Seeing things better helps you to do things better, and to use your skill more wisely and with more purpose.

Gaining insight is a transformative process that occurs, often when you least expect it. Professor of Government Jack Pitney refers to these flashes of insight as the Clark Kent moment, when the soft spoken newspaper reporter in each of you rips off his or her glasses and unleashes the Superman or Superwoman within. You will have those “aha moments” here at CMC. They could come from economics principles, or literature, or philosophy, or America’s Founding, or organic chemistry, or some other academic prism. But a huge part of your education is to leave here seeing the world differently, using your skills in ways that you never thought you could.

Of course, lots of liberal art colleges teach you skills and perspectives. So why is CMC different? Why did you come here when you could have gone somewhere else? Here’s the answer -- It’s our story. It’s our narrative. OK, it’s probably the weather, but stick with me for a second. Our motto is Civilization Prospers with Commerce. We are a College about public life and the role of the individual who acts within the context of a public life. Civilization is about the things that matter and what we collectively live for and value. But the motto is clear. For society to achieve what it values collectively and individually, Commerce is a key driving force. There is no hand-holding, “kumbaya” or “Michael row the boat ashore” in this message.

To my mind, responsible leadership is the glue that allows effective Commerce to help create a thriving Civilization. It is instrumental in balancing and recognizing individual desires, incentives and constraints while fulfilling our collective values. Responsible leadership is fundamental for creating sound economic, democratic, cultural and social institutions that underpin this prosperity. Learning about responsible leadership is the third and distinctive part of our offer.

But our world continues to have a long way to go to better manage its affairs. President Benson is as correct today as he was in 1946. Our nation’s Achilles heel continues to be the administration of our collective affairs. If your life is like mine, by the time you are almost 50, you will have lived through 4 major wars plus one very un-pleasant Cold one. If you stacked only the major wars end-to-end, that would be 25 years of major war—50% of my life. You will have also lived through 7 recessions that account for 7 full calendar years of economic decline if you stacked them end-to-end. And our current dilemma, which has us bouncing between financial and fiscal crises within and between nations suggests an even more important crisis – that of responsible leadership. This responsible leadership shortfall is the same one pointed to by President Benson at our very first Convocation.

But here’s the good news. Your CMC education is designed to provide you the skills and perspectives, point of view and insight to step into and bridge the shortfall of responsible leadership. Your CMC education will also give you the opportunity and desire to take on these roles. But make no mistake -- it

Claremont McKenna College Opening Convocation 2011
A thoughtful, productive and responsible life
Gregory D. Hess

will take a thoughtful and productive generation dedicated to responsible leadership to tame and foster our private and public sector affairs in order to best fulfill our prosperity and our progress as a civilization. The offer of this great institution is to prepare you to be that generation. Thanks to each and every one of you for accepting our offer.