A QUIET REVOLUTION:
FOCUS, COMMITMENT, AND RENEWAL AT
CLAREMONT GRADUATE UNIVERSITY

by

Steadman Upham, President
Claremont Graduate University

Remarks delivered to faculty, staff, board members, and student leaders at Claremont Graduate University’s second all-university retreat, March 23, 2000.
Having Claremont Graduate University’s faculty, staff, board members, and student leaders in one room this morning provides us with a powerful reminder of both our identity and scale. As you look around the auditorium, you will see clearly that we are not a mega-university or a faceless, mass-market provider of educational services. Instead, CGU is a small, elite, private, graduate-only university, and it is so by design. Claremont Graduate University is a community of scholars whose most precious resource is its human capital, and whose claim to academic preeminence is the intellectual relations that bind faculty and students in the educational and scholarly process. These are meaningful points of connection and identity for us.

My goal this morning is twofold: to focus our thinking on what makes us distinctive as a university and a community of scholars, and to suggest actions that will make us academically stronger in the future. I believe that if we strip away all of the structures, processes, and procedures of our enterprise to expose the foundation, that the answer to these two questions is fundamentally the same. What makes us distinctive is also what will allow us to become academically stronger, more influential, and better known.

I hope that my remarks challenge each of you to think about who we are, what we aspire to be, and how we need to plan, organize, and act to improve the quality, impact, and reputation of Claremont Graduate University’s people and programs. You will have the opportunity to express your thoughts on these and other matters in small group discussions that will follow this plenary session. We will then reconvene in Garrison Theater this afternoon to summarize and distill our collective thinking on these issues.

Let me begin by focusing on the word “progress,” a term used frequently by college presidents, but a practice that is theoretically risky for someone trained as an evolutionary archaeologist. When I use the word progress, I can hear my late major professor groan from the grave. Progress, you see is a bad word in the lexicon of evolution because it denotes both improvement and advancement toward a goal. The process of evolution does not produce improvement and does not advance organisms toward an end or an outcome. Rather, it is a process of biological and behavioral adjustments to circumstances of the immediate environment. Over time, these adjustments and modifications produce patterns which scientists describe as developmental, but it is important to realize that there is no aim
or purpose to the process of evolution other than to give organisms the best chance to survive in order to reproduce.

With deference to my late mentor, Fred Plog, we have loftier goals for Claremont Graduate University. It is not enough for us to reproduce ourselves with each graduating class of master’s and doctoral students; it is not enough for us to make only the necessary adjustments to circumstances of our immediate environment. Rather, in our roles as educators and scholars, we are the ones who champion learning and advance understanding for the betterment of society. As the learned and enlightened members of society, we are the ones who have an obligation and a responsibility to bring the world of ideas to bear on shaping and improving the future. Thus, our actions must be transformative, not just adaptive if CGU is to remain relevant as an institution of higher learning.

During the last two years, we have set goals and outlined strategic objectives for the University. CGU’s mission and vision statements and the list of strategic goals—documents that you have seen and discussed previously—are included in the folder you were given when you entered Garrison Theater this morning. These statements create a context for our discussions at today’s retreat.

Today, we continue to breathe life into these planning ideas. With this retreat and the many focus group discussions that preceded it, we act collectively to improve the effectiveness of CGU’s educational services, strengthen its academic culture and learning environments, and enhance its reputation for scholarly excellence. After working with you for the last two years, I know that we are motivated by the same revolutionary vision for Claremont Graduate University

- We want to prepare and advance our students so they can be change agents and leaders in their respective fields and in society.
- We want our academic programs to be rigorous, relevant, and intellectually coherent, and we want them to be recognized for their scholarly excellence.
- We want to create and disseminate knowledge in each of the disciplines we support.
- We want our teaching and the results of our research to influence thinking and transform practice.
These goals and more are all attainable, and our advancement toward them can be measured. It is for this reason that I have chosen to begin with the word progress.

So what process do we as a community of scholars follow to make progress on these ambitious goals? What do we need to accomplish to ensure that CGU’s graduates and programs have a transformative effect on knowledge and practice in their chosen fields? How can we enhance the impact and relevance of CGU’s academic programs? How can we develop the reputation of Claremont Graduate University as a national university of consequence and distinction? I believe the answer to each of these questions is essentially the same. And it is also the answer to the first two questions I posed when I began this morning. In other words, I am suggesting that there is a “prime strategy” that Claremont Graduate University must follow to achieve all of its goals.

Claremont Graduate University’s prime strategy begins and ends with faculty-student relationships. Graduate education is built around the strength and vitality of the faculty-student bond. Graduate education, when it works well, is a transformative experience for students and faculty. Faculty lead and mentor students through an educational process in which students discard old conceptions, disassemble their world view, analytically define new points of relevance and connection, and identify meaningful ideas. With faculty guidance, students are then charged with reassembling a new world view—a process that forces them to analyze, interpret, explain, and critically resolve new meanings. They are then asked to think, discuss, write, speak, and reflect upon the central ideas of their field. Importantly, we demand that students ponder how such ideas pertain to the world of work and practice. Faculty then critique and mold this process through more and more intensive interaction with students. These activities, repeated throughout the course of a degree program, create the intellectual breadth, depth, and maturity that we reward and recognize with the conferral of a graduate degree. Thus, at the core of everything we do and stand for is the faculty-student relationship. Improving the quality, value, meaning, and significance of such relationships constitutes Claremont Graduate University’s prime strategy for advancement to greater academic excellence and recognition.
CGU’s prime strategy instigates a quiet revolution because the activities that advance us toward excellence are done individually and in small groups, in offices, studios, labs and lecture halls. It is a quiet but continuous process that involves every single person at the University. When we succeed with our prime strategy, our quiet revolution facilitates progress on all of our other goals and objectives. Let me therefore begin by focusing on the nature of our prime strategy which is truly the foundation of our enterprise.

Faculty-Student Relationships

Graduate education must be a transformative learning experience for students. Outstanding graduate education not only broadens and deepens the foundations of knowledge for students, but it also creates in them new and robust patterns of thinking, seeing, reasoning, and problem solving. If these transformations occur for students in the educational process, then graduate education is also a transformative experience for the faculty who teach them. It is this dual relationship between teaching and learning on the one hand, and between students and faculty on the other that distinguishes graduate education from education at all other levels. This distinction is not simply a qualitative difference in organization and practice, but one that makes graduate education typologically distinct from all other forms of learning. At Claremont Graduate University, we begin our quest for academic excellence by recognizing and celebrating the importance of faculty-student interaction.

We are blessed with an assemblage of talented and creative faculty and able and prepared students at CGU. We thus start with the building blocks from which to form this vital foundation. But having the building blocks is not enough; many universities have the raw materials upon which to build academic excellence. Rather, the blocks must be held together so that a real edifice of learning can be constructed. Talented and creative faculty must be brought together with able and prepared students in ways that foster rigorous, progressive, and collegial dialogues and interchanges. Such interaction must be regular, intensive, and sustained over time to create a durable learning bond between student and faculty. The resulting relationship forms the cement that binds each “block” to another, and sets the foundation for more expansive construction.

Claremont Graduate University cannot make progress toward greater academic excellence if faculty-student relationships are weak, fragile,
transient, or ineffectual. Such relationships begin in the classroom, but must go well beyond this setting to include frequent face-to-face, telephonic, electronic, and even old-fashioned written communication about the subjects, research, people, and culture of the discipline. Students, of course, must present themselves to faculty for this kind of interaction to be successful. More importantly from my observations, however, is the fact that faculty must be available to students and must be willing to assume the role of advisor and, if appropriate, mentor for them.

In general, I give Claremont Graduate University high marks for the richness, quality, and integrity of faculty-student interaction. We are known for this feature of our academic culture, and it distinguishes us from most other graduate universities. However, although our foundation is intact, I see cracks and misalignments. We have students who are unable to find or contact faculty, even after repeated attempts. We have students who do not receive timely feedback on writing or analysis, are unable to bring their committee together because of faculty travel, cannot secure necessary and timely advice from faculty about teaching, research, practice, or employment in the profession. And this is not a one-way street. We also have students who are unwilling to accept instruction and advice from faculty, who breach the bounds of collegiality and academic etiquette, who use the grievance process as an oblation shield to avoid academic evaluation. We need to act now to reinforce and fortify this vital base of our enterprise. There is nothing more damaging to our mission than the estrangement of faculty from students, regardless of the cause. We fail as an academic institution when the faculty-student relationship is eroded or ruptured by such behavior.

I recall the time when I was a beginning graduate student. I was admitted into a very large graduate program at a big state university. The department was housed in a cavernous three-story building, and the faculty archaeologists whom I sought were spread out over two of those three floors. I will never forget my first impression of the department when I entered the building as a new student. Most of the office and lab doors in the building were closed, and the hallways were not places where students congregated. Over the next four years, my sojourn through this graduate program can be chronicled and explained by the progress I made gaining access to the people who occupied the office spaces behind those closed doors. Frankly, I believe it was this intimidating experience that led me to identify as one of my key research foci the subject of status systems and the way different
statuses have affected access to key resources in human society during the last 2,000 years.

Claremont Graduate University is not a big state university, and all of our academic programs are conducted at a human scale. In fact, our campus spaces are purposefully engineered to enhance CGU’s intimate learning environment. We should thus vigorously eschew anything that creates a barrier to this desired and desirable condition. Closed office doors and habitually absent faculty create a sense of intimidating exclusion for students from the academic culture of a graduate program. For Claremont Graduate University to advance and improve, its faculty must maintain a high-profile presence on campus and must be easily available to students.

By the same token, students who study at Claremont are part of a rigorous learning environment where not everyone succeeds all of the time. Failure in academic life is no different that failure in other domains of living. It’s not failing that’s important, it’s what we learn from failing and can apply to the future that’s essential. Robust and vital faculty-student relationships are a mediating force in the academic environment of a graduate university. Activities that run counter to this design are not consistent with Claremont Graduate University’s mission and vision. Stated more directly, contrarian behavior impedes our ability to advance. I hope that this issue and that of advisement and mentoring occupy significant portions of our discussion today in the breakout groups.

**Academic and Institutional Renewal**

Let me now turn to the issue of academic and institutional renewal. The quality and intensity of the faculty’s commitment to the institution and its students, and the coherence and impact of the faculty’s teaching and research are what distinguish a common from a great university. Over the last 75 years, CGU’s distinctive mission, its consortial union with The Claremont Colleges, and the breadth and importance of faculty and student achievement have given Claremont Graduate University a national reputation for academic quality in graduate education. CGU’s faculty and staff have worked hard to attain this important recognition, and I commend you for this noteworthy and laudable achievement. We have, however, no room for complacency; CGU has not yet reached its potential and it is at a critical juncture in its history.
Our collective actions during the next 10 years will be more important than at any other time in Claremont Graduate University’s existence. There are two reasons why the next decade is determinative for us. First, on July 1, 2000, CGU will stand on its own as an independent and autonomous corporation for the first time in the history of The Claremont Colleges. During the previous 75 years, graduate education has been sustained as a central service in Claremont. After July 1, 2000, however, CGU will no longer have the cover and sanctuary provided by a supraordinate Board of Fellows that includes the presidents and board chairs of the other six Claremont Colleges. Instead, the Board of Fellows will now be composed only of CGU board members, and the sole business of the board will be the management and advancement of the Graduate University. This change gives CGU much needed control, independence, and freedom to act strategically in its own interests, but it also creates the need for a new operating reality and financial discipline as we head into the future.

Second, over the last three decades, Claremont Graduate University’s academic reputation has been built by a core group of senior faculty and staff who came to Claremont in the 1970s. During the coming decade, many of these individuals will retire, and we shall need to replace them with faculty and staff of similar great talent, dedication, and ability. In fact, we are currently in the midst of an incentive retirement program that is aimed at creating faculty and staff turnover in a stepwise versus cliff-like manner. Thus, the replacement of faculty and staff looms especially large on our institutional agenda. It means we must literally rebuild the university in the most fundamental manner by replacing up to one-third of its intellectual capital in the next few years. This is a vitally important activity, and a rare, daunting, and significant challenge for our scholarly community. I remind us, however, that the replacement of faculty and staff also presents an unparalleled opportunity to advance significantly on all of the strategic goals we have set for the institution.

As faculty openings occur, we shall not fill them without first thinking about our total institutional needs and the academic expertise that is available at CGU and in the other Claremont Colleges. We are too small to be mindlessly duplicative. We are also too small to build disciplinary silos—narrow and impermeable cylinders of academic expertise. If we are serious about creating a world-class graduate university, then we must carefully survey our talent pool and hire faculty who complement and enhance our existing and developing strengths. With each and every hiring
decision, we need to think carefully about the future. Faculty who come to CGU generally remain for long periods of time. Thus, we need to know what disciplinary specializations will be required a decade from now to sustain Claremont Graduate University as a national leader in the subject areas we support.

When we have faculty openings in the future, we shall tie our recruitment plans to a university-wide understanding of teaching and research. Moreover, we shall use a faculty recruitment strategy that is built around the concept of cluster hiring, or the simultaneous recruitment of several faculty who have compatible, perhaps even overlapping areas of expertise. The aim of the cluster hiring strategy is to create more vital and robust intellectual communities across the disciplines at CGU. We shall advance rapidly if we are able to recruit academic stars whose expertise and interests intersect with each other, and with those already represented in our scholarly community. To this end, I have asked Provost Hart to appoint and convene immediately a university-wide faculty recruitment committee to be composed of our best teachers and most productive researchers. This committee will survey CGU’s academic strengths and strategic advantages in teaching and research. It will also review all subsequent requests for faculty replacements, recommending to the provost the areas in which hiring should occur to maximize CGU’s impact and importance in the disciplines and to improve the internal environment for interdisciplinary collaborations.

The recruitment of new faculty also creates for us the opportunity to diversify CGU’s faculty. Plans are currently underway to ask The James Irvine Foundation to help the University fund the significant faculty transition that will occur at CGU during the next few years. Because of a negative civil judgment made against the university some years ago, the U.S. Office of Civil Rights will permit Claremont Graduate University to use target-of-opportunity recruiting strategies to hire faculty of color. We shall take advantage of this designation and circumstance and turn them to our advantage. Under Provost Hart’s direction, and hopefully with financial support from the Irvine Foundation, we shall follow a proactive recruiting plan in which we identify and selectively recruit to CGU distinguished teaching scholars of color in the senior ranks. This initiative will be sustained by CGU’s already deep commitment to diversity, and by the work that has been undertaken over the last decade to diversify our student population.
Finally, we must be mindful that institutional resolve is a key to recruiting outstanding faculty. In every case, we want scholars who are more accomplished than we, scholars who raise the bar of talent, commitment, and achievement for the entire institution. To put it bluntly, we want teaching scholars who are academic “rate-busters.” In some cases, we may find that our individual comfort level is challenged by the possible entry of someone to our academic community whose light shines brighter than our own. Let us remember if such occasions arise that a luminous star shines its light in all directions, thereby helping everyone to see more clearly.

**Going Forth**

I am pleased with what we have accomplished since I became president, but I am by no means satisfied that we have achieved enough, moved quickly enough, thought deeply enough, acted resolutely enough to make progress at the pace of which we are capable. I do, however, give thanks each day that I am here working with all of you. Claremont Graduate University is blessed by the abundance of its talents, but all of us must focus our resolve and commitment if CGU is to be successful in the future.

I want to conclude my remarks with a comment about reputation, both within Claremont and beyond. As I move around the country seeking to advance our cause, I am repeatedly reminded of what Claremont Graduate University does well. Our graduates have achieved success in nearly every major area of endeavor. They proudly identify with us and speak favorably about their education and its lasting value. The University itself is also highly regarded, both for its academic quality and as a place where change and innovation are possible. And our academic programs and faculty are increasingly mentioned in the national press for their outstanding achievements.

Closer to home, we are also held in very high regard. In California, the reputation of Claremont Graduate University is strong and growing. We are frequently mentioned along with Stanford and Cal Tech as premier providers of graduate education. Such perceptions reflect upon our excellence and enhance our ability to succeed.

In Claremont, however, sometimes Claremont Graduate University is not accorded the academic respect and recognition it merits. I am puzzled by this circumstance, but explain it by reference to the long-standing and
overwhelming influence of undergraduate education in our environment. It’s time that we challenge and change this perception. On the basis of academic quality, Claremont Graduate University is the equal of any college in Claremont. In fact, I am willing to match the quality of CGU’s faculty against any other faculty in Claremont vita for vita. Moreover, our students are older, more mature and focused, more ready to learn, and more challenging to teach than the 18- to 24-year-old population of the undergraduate colleges. Please do not be silent if our reputation and quality are challenged here in town. Without foisting undue hubris on the challengers, tell them how wrong and misguided their assertions are.

And then let’s walk our talk. We must attend to our core business, to the academic foundation of faculty-student relationships that makes us strong and excellent, to our quiet revolution. Our future is squarely within our own grasp, but to bring it into view each of us must take greater responsibility for the success and advancement of our students, our programs, and our University. As a community of scholars, we know how to accomplish this task. This morning, our renewal of Claremont Graduate University begins. I look forward to being a part of this quiet revolution with each of you.