

Tanya Domi:

Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting-edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi:

Robin Garrell became president of the Graduate Center on August 1st, 2020. A distinguished scientist and academic leader, committed to higher education, Garrell continues the line from the Graduate Center's first president, Mina Reese, another renowned STEM scholar. Garrell came to the Graduate Center after nine years as Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate Division of UCLA, where she had campus-wide responsibility for nearly 12,000 academic and professional graduate students and postdoctoral scholars. She has been noted throughout her career for advancing diversity, and during her appointment as Vice Provost and Dean, enrollment in UCLA's graduate and professional degree programs by members of the historically underrepresented groups, increased 40%.

Tanya Domi:

Garrell was born in Detroit, Michigan, and received her undergraduate degree in biochemistry with honors and distinction from Cornell University in 1978. She earned her PhD in macromolecular science and engineering from the University of Michigan in 1984. She previously taught at the University of Pittsburgh, where she was the first female faculty member in the Department of Chemistry. President Garrell, welcome to the Thought Project.

President Robin Garrell:

Thank you very much.

Tanya Domi:

You've made this bi-coastal move from the West coast to New York city. You've been making your transition here, as the new President of the Graduate Center, and you're quickly approaching your first 100 days. How does this feel?

President Robin Garrell:

Well, I was thrilled to be offered the opportunity to lead this extraordinary and storied institution, and was really happy to accept and that was just before the pandemic took hold and no one knew how it would ultimately unfold. As the spring progressed, I actually had people ask whether I was still going to come to the Graduate Center. Of course, that wasn't even really a question, but certainly moving during a pandemic was an adventure. Everything from renting an apartment sight-unseen, based on 13 photos on the web, having movers wear PPE, and quarantining in New York for two weeks upon arrival and having groceries delivered, which was an alien concept for me. But really, what was most challenging, was not being able to meet and engage with the faculty and the staff and the students, even over the past few months.

Tanya Domi:

I really have to congratulate you. I mean, it's a remarkable thing that you've done and I can believe people asking you, are you still going? Because, it's just an unbelievable situation that none of us have

ever faced before, let alone becoming the President of the Graduate Center. I mean, it's a remarkable series of events.

President Robin Garrell:

It is. People say, "Are you crazy?" What have I learned that I didn't know before? I've learned about the people. Everybody I've met, virtually of course, our essential workers, our faculty leaders, administrative leaders, student leaders, librarians, everybody's just excellent. They care for one another. They're committed to the university and to our mission and everyone is optimistic. Everyone has shown a real can-do spirit and an openness to creative thinking that to me, it makes everything possible.

Tanya Domi:

The Graduate Center is based in New York City and I think that can-do spirit is very New York.

President Robin Garrell:

I think so, yeah.

Tanya Domi:

That spirit is within the Graduate Center too. I'm not surprised by your observations, but very pleased to hear them.

President Robin Garrell:

California, we think of ourselves as very optimistic, but maybe here you combine that with a little bit of toughness and grit. I've also been really excited to learn about transformative projects like the Futures Initiative, amazing discoveries happening at the ASRC and lots of other things. Every day is a really great adventure.

Tanya Domi:

You have had a distinguished career in higher education, most recently as the Vice Provost for Graduate Education at UCLA. Now, here you are at the Graduate Center, at one of the most distinguished grad schools, particularly within CUNY, but really I would say New York City, given all that I know about the Graduate Center and having taught uptown, I teach uptown, but this is a distinguished school for so many reasons. How do you see the opportunities for public higher ed now, and specifically in graduate education?

President Robin Garrell:

Indeed, the reputation of the Graduate Center is really stellar. In some ways I think the scholarship is much more widely known, than some of the other things we do, like the amazing impact on teaching in the region.

Tanya Domi:

Yes.

President Robin Garrell:

That's a story that I think needs to be told. What I think is really important for listeners to know is that graduate education isn't just something that benefits an individual. It benefits everyone because graduate education, whether it's professional degree in social work or law or a doctorate in comparative literature, these individuals go on to become leaders in their fields, leaders in public sector, in industry and entrepreneurship and of course, in academics. That just pays dividends for all of us, in our daily lives and frankly, for generations.

Tanya Domi:

As a champion, you're well-known for your championship of diversity in graduate programs, where you have really been very successful. Do you think any of those strategies would translate to the Graduate Center, as we do our best to attract a diverse pool of challenging candidates?

President Robin Garrell:

Absolutely. In thinking about diversity in graduate education, really the goal is for our graduates to represent the communities we serve. That's primarily this region and frankly we're not close, but we have so many tools that we can use. One is that we have, at the undergraduate level, just an extraordinarily rich student population of first gen students, students who represent many different backgrounds, and we need to be drawing those into the Graduate Center. There are a lot of strategies we can use. Taking a holistic approach to graduate admissions, looking not only at accomplishments but potential and promise and what that individual brings to the table, in terms of how they think about the world and what they aspire to do.

President Robin Garrell:

Another tool that we can deploy is funding. New York and both the state and the city invest a lot in higher education, more than California in some ways. Making sure that that investment happens, not only at the community college and undergraduate level, but at the graduate level, to ensure that we really are preparing folks to become leaders. Third, I think it's by the nature of the programs we have and the work that we do. The Graduate Center is a magnet for students who want to pursue particular areas of research, but also want to do research that has public impact. We're an urban university that focuses on challenges facing our communities, whether it's public health disparities, or access to the arts or any number of social and societal problems, including climate change. Students here in the city and this region want to tackle these big problems and solve them, and that's something that the Graduate Center can help them do.

Tanya Domi:

Yes, the university and the Graduate Center is very, very much engaged in influencing public policy and creating knowledge, to affect change. It's a remarkable characteristic of the Graduate Center and very exciting too to see it. Given the rigor of doctoral studies, we know that our doctoral graduates are well-prepared for a wide variety of careers outside of academia. How would you suggest the Graduate Center look to support its students professionally and their career goals, in this shifting job marketplace?

President Robin Garrell:

That's a great question. Well, I mean, the fact is, that doctoral students have always pursued jobs outside the Academy. Here at the Graduate Center, maybe a higher fraction go into careers higher education, as teachers and scholars, researchers, than at most places. Part of the answer to your question lies in exposing students to what they can do with their degrees. I'd love to see us do more to

connect our students with our extraordinary alumni and with leaders throughout the different sectors in the city, cultural institutions, in public service organizations, nonprofits, all the kinds of things where a doctoral education really prepares you. You've got an incredible skillset as a communicator, thought leader, someone who engages in teamwork and problem-solving. These are amazing talents and skills that every sector can use and so it's about putting the pieces together.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. When you think about New York City, it's just a comment, the world comes to New York City. New York City is a global capital, a cultural capital, a finance capital, a media capital. It is, so many people come in and out of the city. It's part of the dynamism of New York and so I think the Graduate Center sits at 34th and 5th, and I think your ideas, they align I think, with that New York centralism, of where it sits in the world. What has it been like for you to be a woman who STEM field? I mean, I take note of the fact that you were the first woman to teach on the science faculty at University of Pittsburgh. How has your background as a scientist shaped you as a leader in higher education?

President Robin Garrell:

Early on, I was one of very few and sometimes the only one in my habitat, and I was somewhat undaunted, I guess. As the first female chemistry faculty member at the University of Pittsburgh, I didn't know what to expect and they didn't either. No one had ever had a female colleague. What I learned though, after moving to the University of California, Los Angeles, where I was the fifth or sixth in my department, was how different it could be. What I think I bring to the table is, I know some experience of being the other or the first or knowing what it's like to be maybe isolated or without that sense of community or connectedness for people who don't really quite get you. I think that maybe I bring a certain empathy, based on experience to the equation.

President Robin Garrell:

But as a scientist, so I'm a chemist and a chemist engaged in analysis and synthesis, and those are really useful tools for higher education leaders. The kinds of problems I focus on as a scientist, are maybe messier than what most people tackle. While someone who's interested in surfaces, might typically study a molecule that has two atoms, carbon and oxygen, carbon monoxide on a very pure platinum surface. I like problems like how does a mussel or a barnacle stick to a rock? It's a wet surface. How does that glue work? It seems impossible. You can figure that out, maybe you can figure out how to make a glue that will fix cartilage in your knee, or design three-dimensional clusters of cells on little glass slides to model real human tissue for medical diagnostics, and drug discovery. These complicated problems in the lab, and how you tackle those, that skillset, me think translates over into higher ed.

Tanya Domi:

That's really fascinating. It is a different framework than a lot of people would think about. Have you been to the ASRC? Have you seen it? Have you gone into the physical space?

President Robin Garrell:

Sadly I have not, but we're going to arrange that tour soon. They're very happy, they're now at 50% occupancy.

Tanya Domi:

It's a beautiful facility. It's very impressive. I'm sure they'll be excited to have you. Speaking of challenges, scientific ones, we have this microscopic disease called COVID-19, which has upended everyone's lives this year. How do you think we can successfully return to stability? What do you think the new normal is going to be for higher education?

President Robin Garrell:

Well, I think we're, the scientists are giving us very clear guidance. Public health experts, as well as lab scientists, on what we need to do to protect one another, not only ourselves. That comes down to mask-wearing, and I prefer the term physical distancing, because I don't want to be socially distant, but physically distant, I can do that.

Tanya Domi:

Yes.

President Robin Garrell:

Just being understanding and empathetic about that. No one knows, at any moment, whether they're carrying the virus or transmitting the virus. You may have been tested, but the situation might've changed five minutes ago and you don't know. We just have to be proactive in taking those basic steps. I think a second thing of course is, as we develop our plans to reopen the campus, I've just been really happy with the conversations we've been having with our big group, the Reactivation Steering Committee, where everyone's voice gets heard. It's really important for us to listen to one another, hear each other's concerns and address them. We can't be dismissing fears or ignoring them. There's thought and feeling and information behind those concerns.

President Robin Garrell:

Moving forward deliberately, step-wise in a way that allows us to step forward and also step back if we need to. Not making lurching leaps into the beyond and the unknown, where we then have to retrench, I think that's important. The new normal boy, Nobody knows what that looks like. We're all hoping that it's sooner rather than later. But one thing that has been really remarkable in higher education. First off, people are still coming. Whether it's a recession or a pandemic, people still recognize the value of education as something that will change their life, change their trajectory, and it's something they want to do. We want to keep making that possible for them. But the second thing is, is that things that people thought were hard and they were reluctant to do, like teaching remotely or online.

Tanya Domi:

Right?

President Robin Garrell:

Well, we had to do it and we stood it up and the Graduate Center did it, in an amazing way, so fast and so well, in part, because we had these incredible capabilities, the teaching and learning center, our interactive technology and pedagogy resources. Those all enabled us to pivot really well. Not only graduate students who are maybe more facile with technology than the average person, but everyone. Once you do that, okay, you can gain confidence. But beyond the confidence, what I've seen is people have gotten really excited about the different things you can do with asynchronous instruction or remote instruction. You can navigate your classroom differently. You can create ways of engaging more

people than just by pointing at someone who raises their hand. The technology has enabled us to transcend time and distance. Now, we're all comfortable doing things online, anytime, any place. I see opportunities for us to have courses and seminars and public engagement, where we actually reach more people. That's amazing. I think that's what the future brings to us.

Tanya Domi:

With respect to COVID, actually people should know. I mean, you shared a drawing. You have a drawing coming out in the journal that Alison Cole and her colleagues, our editors, for this coming winter, of the COVID at the micro level, right, the molecular level. That's an example of how you're using your science personally. At the Graduate Center, it's going to be pictured on this journal cover, but what can researchers do in the sciences and the humanities and social sciences, in addressing COVID-19?

President Robin Garrell:

Well, we know some scientists are hard at work, developing vaccines, rapid testing, testing that is cheaper and can be more widely deployed. Spit pool testing is a great example where you can have everyone spit into a bucket. If it's all clear, you've done 10,000 tests just once, rather than having to do them sequentially. That kind of parallel testing, but I think we really need our social scientists and humanists to help us solve this pandemic as well. How do we recover our ability to engage and communicate with one another, in ways where we've maybe lost the habit? You see, even now, in Zoom worlds, the rhythm of a conversation, the flow of a personal interaction, is different when you can't detect the cues that were used to us as social creatures.

President Robin Garrell:

Having anthropologists and humanists help us understand that and ideally recover from it, regain those skills, but also apply what we've learned through the absence of things, to be better as we go forward, as empathetic creatures, and as those who are committed to a more inclusive success for all of us.

Tanya Domi:

Is there anything else that you would want to share with the Graduate Center listeners and beyond?

President Robin Garrell:

This pandemic has been incredibly challenging. We can layer on that, the fact that we're going to have incredible economic challenges, not just for months, but probably for several years. I want our students to know that we understand how difficult it's been for them financially, and being separate from one another and from us. We're working every day to try to close that distance and to provide the support they need. We want to ensure their mental health and their economic wellbeing, as best we possibly can. But beyond that, knowing that we at CUNY, have the opportunity to model what we want everyone to be during this time, and as we go forward. That is to stay optimistic, to stay in New York, [inaudible 00:20:45] but to bring our curiosity and our Commitment to solving the world's problems to bear and to really lead the city forward through the recovery.

Tanya Domi:

Well, thanks for being with us today, President Garrell. It's been a pleasure.

President Robin Garrell:

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Thank you.

Tanya Domi:

Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project and thanks to our guest, President Robbin Garrell, of the Graduate Center, CUNY. The Thought Project is brought to you with production engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolf of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.