

Philip Whitcome: A “Payback” with Visionary Philanthropy for the Sciences

After receiving his Ph.D. in 1974 from UCLA’s Molecular Biology Institute (MBI), Philip J. Whitcome earned an M.B.A. and pursued a successful career as a biotech industry executive. In 2004, his success enabled him to create an undergraduate scholarship in UCLA’s Department of Biology.

“I had a fellowship at UCLA, and it’s payback time,” Whitcome said two years ago. “I want to initiate an activity that I can continue, that will help people benefit the way I benefited.”

Tragically, Whitcome became ill only a year later and died at the age of 57. His death was a tremendous loss to all who knew him, including his friends at UCLA. Not only had he been a devoted supporter of the university, but he was also an active member of the Sciences Board of Visitors, a group of scientists and executives who consult with College faculty and deans about how to enhance science education, develop partnerships with corporations, and encourage potential donors.

Dean of life sciences Emil Reisler said, “We miss Phil’s energy, his enthusiasm, and his dedication.”

But Whitcome’s support for UCLA was not over. His affection for the university and his insightful vision for its future had led him to bequeath \$5.2 million to endow the Philip J. Whitcome Ph.D. ’74 Scholarship Fund for UCLA undergraduates in biology or biochemistry, or graduate students in the interdepartmental program housed in the Molecular Biology Institute.

“A gift had been talked about for some time,” said Steven Clarke, director of the MBI. “But we had no idea that it would be of this magnitude.”

Whitcome’s extraordinary gift comes at a crucial moment for the MBI, when plans are under way to start a new program for highly talented Ph.D. students—plans that require substantial funding. Currently, the MBI Interdepartmental Program—like similar programs around the nation—requires graduate students to



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A bequest from a fondly remembered alumnus will create an innovative program for top students in the Molecular Biology Institute and provide scholarships to undergraduates.


undertake a standard first-year course of study, with general survey classes, topical seminars, and laboratory rotations, before narrowing their field. The unique new program will eliminate the mandatory first-year curriculum for more advanced students and enable them to begin their dissertation research earlier. (See page 8)

According to Sabeeha Merchant, chair of the interdepartmental program, the new program will be designed to attract superior students “who are sophisticated, knowledgeable and know what they want to do. The intent is to enable them to finish the Ph.D. sooner.”

Said Clarke, “It will mean something special to these students to be called ‘Whitcome Fellows.’ It’s a distinctive recognition that they’re part of a special program, part of the vanguard.”

Whitcome’s visionary philanthropy will help place UCLA and the MBI at the forefront of science education for decades to come.

Dean of physical sciences Tony Chan explained, “The Whitcome gift will put us on an equal footing with private universities, enabling us to put together a competitive package for the best students in molecular biology.”

In 2004, Whitcome said he hoped his philanthropy would inspire other alumni and friends to support the University. It may well do that, but it will also encourage generations of bright young scholars to pursue their dreams of scientific investigation at UCLA. 

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