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Documents  
Charge to the Class of 2010

I have just handed each of you in the Class of 2010 a document: a diploma from Pomona College. In a literal sense, this document certifies that you have completed a four-year program of study, including everything from your ID-1 requirement to physical education to a senior exercise, and that your performance has been judged sufficient by the faculty for you to hold a Bachelor of Arts degree from Pomona College. The document you hold in your hands will open doors to future employment and to a lifetime of learning.

But what does this diploma really mean? It recognizes your accomplishment, to be sure, but it also represents the hopes and support of all those who are close to you, including the family and friends who believed in you and encouraged you to come to Pomona, the faculty members who challenged you in and outside of class, and the staff members who made your educational experience possible, from the housekeepers who cleaned your rooms, to the student life staff who provided advice in crises, to the dining hall workers who prepared your meals. As you go out, you carry with you the best wishes and support of the entire Pomona College community.

What you do with the document we have given you is up to you. You can frame it and place it on your wall to impress the world that you graduated from one of the most selective colleges in the country. You can use it to apply to graduate or professional programs, if that is the right direction for you. But more than this, I hope you will use the education that you received here over the last four years, and the trust that others have placed in you, to give back to the communities you will be a part of and to make a difference.

This diploma, this document, represents your hard work and accomplishment. But it also reflects some elements of chance and good fortune: accidents of birth that placed you on course to come to a fine college, families and support groups who helped to make all this possible. There is considerable discussion in the United States right now about those who are documented and undocumented. Some residents of this country carry with them a document (either a passport or a permanent residency card) that gives them the right to live here and gain legal employment. Other residents do not have this right: they are the undocumented.

Attention to this issue has of course grown with the recent law passed in Arizona, which allows arbitrary stopping and questioning of law-abiding people to identify individuals who are undocumented and expel them from the country. But this is only the most obvious form in which the power of government to reshape the lives of individuals is evident.

Consider two students who have graduated from the same high school, gone on to college, and are now thinking about their futures. One was born in the US and is by law a US citizen; the other was brought to this country as a child and is undocumented. The first is eligible for in-state tuition and federal aid; the second cannot study abroad, cannot hold a job on or off campus, and must constantly worry that any encounter with the law may lead to deportation.

This is an unjust and untenable situation. It is for this reason that on behalf of Pomona College and with the support of our Board, I will in the next week be writing letters to our legislators in support of the DREAM Act, legislation introduced in the House and Senate that would provide a pathway to legal permanent residency for high school graduates in this country. Over the last several weeks, I have spoken with other colleges and universities to urge their support of this legislation as well. I am pleased that our speaker, Secretary Napolitano, has stated that “The DREAM Act is a good piece of legislation and a good idea . . . I supported it as a governor and I support it now.”

We are one country: those who carry a document that lets them stay, study, and work here, and those who, by virtue of being “undocumented” live in constant fear of deportation. This country benefits from the ideas, the skills, and the hard work of those who do or do not bear proper documents; we need to recognize that fact and move toward comprehensive immigration reform.

Our President, Barack Obama, has spoken eloquently and personally about the importance of this cause. In his words, “I will never walk away from the 12 million undocumented immigrants who live, work, and contribute to our country every single day . . . we are a nation of immigrants—a nation that has always been willing to give weary travelers from around the world the chance to come here and reach for the dream that so many of us have reached for.”

So as you leave today with a very important document in your hands – a Pomona College diploma – do not forget the others who surround you who are undocumented. It is our responsibility to work together to achieve justice and opportunity for all.