

President David Oxtoby
Pomona College Special Convocation 2014
February 4, 2014

Your Royal Highness, members of the faculty, staff, students, and distinguished guests: It is my honor to welcome you to this special Convocation and honorary degree presentation at Pomona College. I am also pleased to welcome you to the City of Claremont on behalf of our Mayor, Opanyi Nasiali, who joins us today and who has shared with me a certificate of appreciation to our distinguished honoree on behalf of the City.

Today represents not the beginning but the continuation of a partnership in higher education between Pomona College (and our sister Claremont Colleges) and Thailand. For many years we have had a number of relationships built by individual students and faculty with Thailand and its fellow southeast Asian countries. Located as we are on the Pacific Rim, near the city of Los Angeles with its deep historic and personal connections to all of Asia, these relationships have developed and deepened in natural ways.

Several years ago, the Thai government sent a delegation of leaders in higher education to Pomona College to learn more about liberal arts education: our curriculum, our approaches to pedagogy, and the ways in which the residential character of our college enhances the education of our students. That was followed by a visit to Bangkok by our own Professor John Seery, who was a keynote speaker at a Thailand-United States round table on higher education.

In the fall of 2011, I had the opportunity to visit Bangkok and continue the conversations on liberal arts education with a group of leaders representing the Ministry of Education and many of the leading universities in Thailand. That visit left an indelible mark on me, as it took place during a period of severe flooding for the city of Bangkok and the surrounding region, and I was deeply impressed with the courage shown by the people of Thailand in responding to this emergency. Now that we are together again in Claremont, the conversations on our campus and our sister campuses over the last two days have broadened and deepened our relationships.

There was a point in the not too distant past in which liberal arts education, and most especially the residential liberal arts college, was referred to as “distinctively American.” While I do still feel that Pomona College and the Claremont Colleges represent the very best qualities of such an education, in emphasizing small discussion-based classes, opportunities for close faculty-student relationship outside the classroom and in student research, and co-curricular learning opportunities on a residential campus, such an education is becoming increasingly international. Of course our student bodies have changed over time so that we now have students from 28 countries other than the US on the Pomona campus. In addition, the rest of the world has become more and more aware of the value of a liberal arts education in preparing students to be creative and collaborative citizens of the world, leaders both in their occupations and in their volunteer commitments and civic engagement.

A liberal arts education provides a foundation for a lifetime of accomplishment and service, reflecting the words of our fourth President, James Blaisdell, on the gates of Pomona College:



“They only are loyal to this College who, departing, bear their added riches in trust for all mankind.” Over the last several years, I have had the opportunity to take part in conversations about the role of liberal education in building democracy and entrepreneurship in countries ranging from Brazil to Belarus, from Kosovo to Kyrgyzstan, from Ireland to India. Some of these conversations have been initiated by the leadership of these countries, while others have been organized by students and citizens. I am so pleased that Thailand is so committed to these conversations at every level, as exemplified by the presence of Her Royal Highness Princess Sirindhorn on our campus today.

It is now my pleasure to invite two other members of the Pomona College community to greet all of you. The first is Trustee Bernard Chan, a 1988 graduate of Pomona College, who has deep family and professional connections with Thailand and who has worked tirelessly to develop new relationships for Pomona with all of Asia. He will be followed by a student greeting from Witisada Wattananimitgul, a member of the Pomona College class of 2016. We will then proceed to the conferring of the Honorary Degree.

Thank you very much.