Welcome to the opening Convocation in the one hundred eighteenth year of instruction at Pomona College. On this occasion I am pleased to welcome the Class of 2008 to our community, and to greet the returning students from the College, our faculty, staff, and members of the Board of Trustees.

The purpose of today’s Convocation is to celebrate beginnings and to join together to explore the goals of a Pomona education. For those of you who are entering as first-years, this exploration will last through your four years on campus and, I hope, throughout your lifetimes, since education does not end with the granting of a degree. I will use my opening remarks to discuss one particular aspect of education that has been much on my mind in the last few months: the freedom of speech.

Speech is perhaps the most universal and characteristic human activity. Our newest department at Pomona College, Linguistics and Cognitive Science, focuses its attention on how humans acquire language, how the speech of different communities can be understood in common cognitive terms, and how, in some cases, those precious words and cognitive links can be lost with age. Speech has also always been a particularly American preoccupation. From our origins as a British colony we have talked about the freedom to speak out openly against government policies, advocating views even when they are strongly at odds with majority opinion. The right of free speech was enshrined by our forefathers in the Bill of Rights, as part of the very first amendment to the Constitution of the United States.

In the last several years, attention to First Amendment rights has grown. The war on terrorism since 2001 has caused some to argue that speech against government policies weakens us in the eyes of the world; others have responded that freedom of speech is at the core of the values that we are striving together to defend. This very day in New York City the controversial performance artist Reverend Billy will be leading a protest that centers on the reading of the First Amendment.

How do these national and international issues connect to our College, and the education that the class of 2008 is beginning today? Let me comment on three aspects.

First, the College must be a safe space that encourages and welcomes speaking out, in classrooms and dormitories, between faculty and students, wherever education is taking place. That freedom to speak and express opinions, sometimes in opposition to a majority consensus, is the way in which we build community and achieve change.

Second, Pomona must and does welcome a diversity of opinion in our community. We are not threatened by difference, and no education takes place if what others say is identical to what we think ourselves. We are only threatened by silence, by reluctance to express opinions.

Third, speech by itself accomplishes nothing unless it is heard. Each of us in the community must be open to the speech of others, listening seriously and being willing to be persuaded. Hearing takes every bit as much effort as speaking, and is just as important. Maybe we need
to add a “listening requirement” to the “speaking requirement” we now have as part of our curriculum.

Let me identify two areas in which our commitment to shared free speech will be critical in the year ahead. First, the College is undertaking its first major review in over a decade of the curriculum and the general education requirements. Last spring, the faculty decided to make that review a comprehensive one, and the conversation will begin with an all-faculty retreat next month. Discussions about the curriculum among faculty, and between faculty and students, need to reflect the core educational values of our institution: a willingness to speak out and to listen, an appreciation of diversity of opinion, and an openness to change. I encourage everyone here present to join in those conversations through the year.

A second area in which free speech is paramount is in the national election that will take place in two months. Talk about the issues and the candidates, from your own personal perspective and experience, whether you are an American or an international citizen, and listen to one another. Voting is an act of speech, not through words but in the privacy of a ballot box. I urge those of you who are citizens to register to vote either here in Claremont or in your home communities, and to cast a ballot in November. By speaking out and voting, each of you can make a difference.

So speak, and speak freely. Even speak loudly if you wish, but also be ready to listen and join in the building of our community. Welcome to an exciting year together.