

President David Oxtoby
Pomona College Commencement 2005
May 15, 2005

Asking Questions: Charge to the Class of '05

The painter Pablo Picasso is reported to have said "Computers are useless. They can only give you answers." My purpose in bringing this quote to you today is of course not to engage in a Luddite bashing of computers, nor to dispute their valuable roles, which are self-evident. Rather, it is to begin a conversation about what I consider the major goal of higher education: teaching students not just how to answer questions, but how to pose interesting and important questions themselves.

Like students everywhere, those of you in the class of 2005 gained admission to Pomona College four years ago in large part because of your success in answering questions. You were skilled in that very special ability to answer multiple-choice questions under time pressure in the Scholastic Aptitude Test; you clearly demonstrated proficiency in taking high school tests and writing papers on assigned subjects, as well as no doubt a certain polish in responding to questions during admissions or alumni interviews.

At Pomona College, as at other fine liberal arts colleges and universities, I hope that you have moved beyond this ability to answer questions. Of course it is still important to be able to obtain data, marshal arguments, and argue coherently; these are all aspects of answering questions clearly and will serve you well in the outside world. However, the more important skill, or perhaps it is better to call it an art, is the ability to ask profound and significant questions, and that is what I hope you have gained in your four years at Pomona.

Asking the right question is key, whatever your field of study. In your senior theses, careful methodology is important, but the significance of your work depends largely on the novelty of the question or hypothesis with which you began your work. A physicist has profound impact when she asks the question that no one before her has thought to ask; working out the answer may take years, and involve many collaborators, but it is the initially posed question that makes the difference. The hypothesis with which a sociologist begins a study can shape a year-long project; the novelty of a contribution from a literary scholar arises from the import of the questions being asked of the text. A fine actor is not only good at responding to direction; he is able to ask pointed questions himself about the character he is portraying on stage. Learning must move from passive to active in the college years.

The same observations apply in the world outside academia after graduation. In the workplaces (whether corporate, government, or non-profit) that many of you will enter, you will be given assignments: problems to solve and questions to answer. Your education at Pomona will have equipped you well with the tools to do this. But your real contributions, the ones that will make a lasting difference, will involve the questions that you yourself pose, the companies or organizations that you start, or the transformations you initiate from the inside by asking: Why do we do it this way? Is it possible to look at this in a completely new fashion?

During your time on campus you have asked some very good questions of this College. Should our buildings and grounds be designed to higher standards of sustainability, with lower impact on the environment? Why should we not allow courses at the other Claremont Colleges to satisfy our general education requirements? Should we have a broader range of political discourse on campus, including speakers whose views might be strongly opposed to those held by a majority of students here? How can we improve our recruitment of students, faculty, and staff to achieve a diversity that truly reflects that in our country and in the world? You have challenged us by posing these questions, and we on the faculty and in the administration have responded with partial answers; future generations of students will keep asking us again until we have real solutions.

I hope that after you leave Pomona you will pose equally good questions about your country and the world. How can our educational system leave so many students behind while arguing that increased testing is the solution? Why is the United States government transferring prisoners in American custody to Uzbekistan? How can a society with our level of affluence borrow so extensively from future generations by exploiting the environment in ways that will need to be paid for by others? There may be a large range of answers to these questions; I do not presume that there is only one correct response. But only by posing these types of questions and opening up public discourse can we move forward.

As you leave this hall today and move on in your lives, take with you the questioning spirit you have developed on campus. Challenge accepted dogma, look at both sides of every issue, and don't give up until you are satisfied with the answers to the questions you pose.