Welcome to the opening Convocation in the one hundred nineteenth year of instruction at Pomona College. On this occasion I am pleased to welcome the Class of 2009 to our community, and to greet the returning students from the College, our faculty, staff, and members of the Board of Trustees, led by Board Chair Stewart Smith of the Class of 1968.

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 pose a question to the entire College community: What is the value of a Pomona education, and how do we test it, articulate it, and improve it?

My son John, who is a junior at Harvard this year, told me about a question that was making the rounds among students on his campus last year. Suppose you had the following choice. You could either have four years of a Harvard education but not receive a degree, or you could receive the Harvard degree right away but not spend any time on campus. What would you choose?

This question gets to the heart of what college education is all about. Is it primarily a credentialing operation, which “certifies” you to go on into the world of jobs and professional schools, singling you out as part of a network bound for success? To carry this line of reasoning to its illogical extreme, we could just give the whole class of 2009 a degree today and send you out into the world. Or is it, as I hope and believe, that the four years of a Pomona College education really do have a life-changing effect on the students who experience it?

The value of a college education to society is frequently presented in statistical terms. A recent publication from the College Board entitled “Education Pays” shows that the median income of full-time jobholders with a high school degree in 2003 was $31,000; for those with some college it was $36,000; and for those with a college degree it was $49,000. Rates of incarceration drop by a factor of four once an adult has some college, and another factor of three with a college degree. So just by appearing on campus you have already helped your earnings and reduced your chance of jail time.

Of course anyone with knowledge of statistics will appropriately ask: is this correlation or causation? To put the question baldly: suppose you walked out today, went home, and got on with your life. Wouldn’t your eventual income be higher than the median simply because you are a member of a highly talented group of students?

This gets to the heart of a question that I am asked frequently, by the media, by people in government, by our own alumni. Pomona graduates do well in the outside world after graduation. But is this just because they bring such extraordinary strengths to our college? What is the value added from four years on this campus?
We can respond anecdotally, of course, by citing examples of students whose directions of interest and level of accomplishment have moved in positive and unpredictable ways during their years here. We could, if we wanted, give incoming and graduating students a series of tests to find out what you learned (or forgot) during your time here, but that would trivialize what is at the heart of a liberal arts education. Or we can grapple together with the question: how do we assess our educational practices in ways that are consistent with the central values of Pomona College?

Why should we care about the value added by an education in our College? The first reason, and in many ways the least important, is that our accreditation association here in California asks us exactly this question every seven to 10 years, and if we don’t have a satisfactory answer they will keep asking us until we do. More importantly, though, we care about this because we are never satisfied with standing still but always want to do better. Education is a series of experiments, in which we try out different teaching methods, different learning styles, even different curricula. Assessment lets us ask and answer the question: what works?

There are critical roles in this process for both faculty and students. For the faculty it is important to keep an open mind, to share ideas with others, to have the courage to try new approaches. For the students, my advice is to be thoughtful and intentional about your education, to communicate with your instructors about what and how you are learning, to joyfully explore new fields with open minds. Together we will be working to further strengthen the already extraordinary education offered by this College.

I welcome all of you to an impassioned conversation on this subject in the years ahead.