

President David Oxtoby
Pomona College Commencement 2006
May 14, 2006

Drawing Lines: Charge to the Class of '06

In a world of uncertainty, where and how do we draw lines? How much are we willing to compromise and allow fuzzy boundaries, and when do we stop and say, this far and no farther? These are questions that have been much on my mind in recent months, in light of several events on campus during the last semester. They have also shaped your experience in the Class of 2006, and frame issues for you as you move on to the world outside.

The first of these events took place on March 7, when two agents from the Joint Terrorism Task Force of the FBI and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Office came to the Pomona College office of Miguel Tinker Salas, Arango Professor of History and Latin American Studies. After asking some students standing outside of Miguel's door about his teaching, and taking notes on some cartoons posted on his door, the two moved to the front of the line, entered his office, and proceeded to ask Miguel a series of questions about his research, his contacts with the government of Venezuela, and his knowledge of the Venezuelan community in the Los Angeles area. In a respectful but firm manner, Miguel declined to respond to most of their questions, the answers to which could have been found from publicly available sources. This incident led to discussions on this campus and around the country on the issue of political intimidation and academic freedom.

After the horrifying events of September 2001, this country and the world came together to assert that terrorist acts against innocent civilians are unacceptable and must be stopped. A line was drawn at that time, and that line remains a firm one. But over time, individuals have tried to move the position of that line. With the statement "you are either with us or against us" some have tried to argue that any and all actions against terrorism are justified, even questioning the patriotism of those who disagree.

On this college campus, we have drawn a different line, one that asserts the fundamental value of academic freedom and open discourse. A debate sponsored this year by the Pomona Student Union on Guantanamo Bay presented two speakers, one supporting government policy and one opposed to it, to a record crowd of 400 students in Edmunds Ballroom. This is consistent with the principle that every issue should be subject to debate and discussion on our campus, with a variety of views welcomed and encouraged. And that is why we were so concerned that the presence of a terrorism task force at Pomona would discourage open discussion and criticism of government policy, or would cause students to question whether perhaps they should head in some "safer" direction of study where the major, and controversial, international questions of the day would be less visible. This commitment to free speech and open discussion is a line that this College is prepared to draw and to defend.

The second event took place on the first of May, when hundreds of students, faculty, and staff from the Claremont Colleges assembled north of the Library to affirm the rights of immigrants. They stood and spoke out in opposition to another "line in the sand," this a literal one, namely

a proposed barrier across the boundary between this country and Mexico and a criminalization of the status of undocumented alien residents in the United States. The group in Claremont joined others across the country in calling instead for “an immigration policy that respects people as human beings struggling for a means of survival” (in the words of a message sent by Pomona’s Ray Buriel to the colleges).

Here again, the Pomona College community stood together to affirm the value of human beings in our society. There is much room for debate about the right immigration policy for this country in a time where globalization has increased the flow of money, resources, and information, as well as people, across national boundaries. But the point that the members of our community made on May 1, and that I want to emphasize here, is that whatever decisions we reach should be consistent with a view of society in which each individual is free to contribute to building a better world.

My purpose is not to say where we should draw lines on particular issues, nor to express opinions on one side or the other. It is rather to urge all of you in the Class of 2006 to take the fundamental values that I trust you have acquired in your four years on this campus with you after you graduate: a willingness to challenge accepted truths, an openness to new facts and persuasive arguments, and an engagement with the world and the difficult issues we face together. Resist dogmatic stances and be prepared to change your mind, of course, but at the same time be prepared to draw the line when it comes to defining core values of free expression and human dignity. Your values are the most important things that you carry from this campus, and you need to be firm in defending them and acting on them.

Congratulations to all of you!