Welcome to all the students, faculty, staff, trustees, alumni, and all those in this room who care about the College in some way. I want to welcome in particular the Pomona College Class of 2010.

Convocations are a time of rhetorical questions. Questions like, “What is the value of a liberal arts education?” “What does it mean to be a scholar in the modern world?” “How can we as students navigate the information age?”

A rhetorical question has three parts. First, it’s a question. That makes sense, because we’re here on day one. It’s a time to ask questions. If we already had answers, there would be no need for us to be here for four years, or one year, or go to class after this. Second, it’s a question that’s meant to be answered later. A rhetorical question is one that you take with you on your journey, stopping to reflect on it every once in a while to see the progress you’ve made. Third, it’s a question you don’t answer out loud. The only person you have to give an answer to is yourself.

I have a question for you today. It’s not a rhetorical question. My question is, “What will you do?” It’s a question I want you to answer now, not later. It’s a question I want you to answer aloud, to each other, not to yourself. “What will you do?”

Today I want to talk about impact. I want to talk about impact because I believe there are a lot of misperceptions in these beginning days about impact. I think that those who are new to Pomona, whether it’s faculty or staff or students, but particularly students, misguidedly believe that their first days or weeks or months are a time of observation. There is an idea that nothing that you do when you first get here makes an impact. In the same way that there is an add/drop period for Pomona classes, people act as though there’s an add/drop period for Pomona. A period of time where you feel as though nothing you do means anything later on; nothing you do has a lasting impact.

I’m here to tell you that that’s wrong. From the very first moment you got here, you’ve had an impact. From the first blade of grass you stepped on, to the first person you said hello to, to the first light switch you turned on, to the first hole you put in your dorm room wall, you have had and are having an impact. The point that I want to make is in some ways trivial, but in other ways overwhelming. Everything you do here makes an impact.

I want to talk briefly about impact at three levels at Pomona: the individual, the classroom, and the institution, and then I want to talk about how it comes back to you.

First, the individual. At a place like Pomona, or any place really, it’s easy to fall into the trap of thinking that nothing one person does, nothing you do, can make an impact. I was lucky enough over the weekend to participate in the diversity discussions with all of you, and I heard two stories that I want to share. They are stories about impact, stories that make me proud. They are both stories about sponsors. First, in my discussion group, someone said that on the
very first day their sponsor said, “We will not be using the word ‘gay’ as a derogatory term here. We can talk about why if you want, but we will not be using that word in that way here.” The second sponsor I heard about looked at her sponsor group on the first night and said, “Just because there are no people of color in this sponsor group, doesn’t mean we’re not going to talk about race.”

These two stories are just about words. But they’re also about impact. These sponsors said things that impacted some of you, which you told your discussion group, which impacted me, and now I’m telling it back to you, impacting even more people. But the real reason I bring it up is this: what would have been the impact if those sponsors hadn’t said those things?

Everything has an impact. The impact of things not said and not done can be slower and more subtle, but it does eventually have an impact, and maybe one greater than you would have originally thought. Those sponsor groups already are different than they would have been if those things had not been said. Everything you say has an impact. Everything you don’t say has an impact. Everything you do has an impact. Everything you don’t say has an impact.

What will you do? What will you not do? What will you say? What will you not say?

Second, the level of the classroom. One of the things that I hear repeatedly from Pomona students is that there is gap between the classroom and the real world. And I think that what it points to is this idea a lot of us have about Pomona as an institution dedicated to learning. We think of Pomona as a bubble where knowledge comes in one way, but not out another. It brings up the important question – what is our responsibility to the world around the classroom? What we learn comes from the collected histories and voices of communities around us. What do we owe to those communities?

The idea of reciprocity in education is one that we forget too often at an institution like Pomona. How are we using what we learn in the classroom to do something about the world outside the classroom? The question is, what will you do?

I want to be clear that I am not saying that the work done in the classroom is not important. The ideas that we learn in the classroom are the reason many of us are here. You all sitting in front of me are here because of your potential to produce good ideas. The faculty sitting behind me are also here because of their proven record in coming up with innovative and important ideas. But it can also be dangerous to sit in our bubbles and come up with ideas.

This summer, I went to a conference where we took a tour of the CIA. When we were walking through I saw a big shelf of books to the side and I said the guy what they were. He said, “I have a group of Ph.D.s who sit in a room all day and read these books, and write books about them, and those books go on the shelf and then they read them and write more books about them.” Yes, ideas matter, but if you don’t share those ideas – if you don’t DO something with those ideas, they stop mattering. As students at a college like Pomona, as staff, faculty, alumni, whatever – it is our responsibility to think about how to make an impact with our ideas.

This summer, I read something interesting I want to share with you. It taught me a lot about ideas. As a disclaimer, it is very trite sounding and admittedly simplistic, but I want to share it because it’s also very elegant. I read, “The solution to homelessness is simple. The solution to homelessness is homes.” The solution to homelessness is homes. And I was stunned.
Because it’s true. The solution to homelessness is homes. There is a place for ideas here. Where do you build the homes? Who gets to live in them? How do you pay for them? What do you build them out of? And so on and so forth. But at the end of the day, the solution to homelessness is homes. The question is interesting because it is NOT ‘What will you think of to be done?’ The question is ‘What will you do?’

Finally, the level of the institution. The institution is a funny thing. The problem with the institution is that everyone thinks the institution is someone else. I think it’s you, you think it’s them, they think it’s someone else. How can you impact a place so amorphous? How can you impact a structure that is not owned by an individual? Because the truth of the institution is that it is all of you, all of you and the culture that we create together.

I want to share something with you. I brought this document with me. It’s called “Revisiting a Call to Action.” “A Call to Action” was a document written by students of color at Pomona College in 1996 in response to pervasive problems that they observed and experienced at the Colleges. In the spring of 2004, another set of students came together to write “Revisiting a Call to Action” after sadly concluding that the College had not seen the kind of changes hoped for in the past eight years. I am telling you about these two documents because I truly believe that they have made and continue to make an impact on the institution. The students who wrote this document may have been small in number but the impact could not have been foreseen. I think that document has three important lessons to teach us about how to impact an institution.

First, the students who wrote this document acknowledged that they were part of the problem. The first page reads, “It is our hope that this document, this product of intense individual labor and large-scale cooperation, will spark some thoughts...catalyze a few conversations...and ignite movement for real, radical change...” The document was and is truly a product of cooperation. I think it is fairly unique in documents of this nature in that the entire spectrum of opinion at the Colleges is represented. There are voices that feel completely supported and those that feel completely marginalized and everything in the middle. There is no us vs. them—just us. The students who wrote this acknowledged that they were part of the institution and that they were part of the problem. This is the first step towards changing an institution – recognizing your place within it and how you too will have to change.

Second, they understood the depth of the problem. The first page says, “We, the Call to Action Coalition 2004, recognize that this document in your hands is hefty. It is thick and brimming with important information. But please don’t stop—don’t put it down. This document is heavy because it has a lot to tell.” There is a lot within these pages, just like there is a lot within the pages of an institution. The students recognized that the problem was big. They did not believe it could be fixed in the snap of a finger, or a week or year or any timeframe. They understood that they were part of the problem, and that the problem was large.

Finally, they remained optimistic. The very last page ends with a quote from a Pomona College staff member: "My comments may seem harsh and infer that perhaps I don’t like my job. Nothing could be further from the truth. It’s because I am so invested in my job and this environment that I want to see changes implemented. I want to believe that I work at one of the brightest and best colleges in the nation, if not the world. I want to know that this is an environment where people of all types and with many experiences/talents come together to be more creative and successful.” They understood that they were part of the problem, and that
the problem was big, but they believed that things could be changed, and that things should be changed. The institution is in some ways that final frontier that you can’t imagine impacting in your time here, but these courageous students show the exact ways in which it is possible to impact the institution.

I’ve talked about the individual, the classroom, and the institution. The question is ‘What will you do?’ One of the statements that Pomona students make most often about each other is that we are apathetic and complacent. I don’t know if it’s too soon to tell you that, but I tell you for an important reason. The reason is that I believe that that statement hides two myths in it – one not-so-dangerous and one extremely dangerous.

The first myth is that you always have to know where you stand. People will accuse you of being apathetic if you’re still trying to figure out what you think. That’s not a legitimate accusation. You’re young, you’re learning, you have time to figure out what you think. It’s okay to not know exactly how you feel about everything. I would guess most of us on stage don’t know exactly how we feel about a lot of things. You don’t need to know exactly what you think about everything.

But, and this is the dangerous one, there is a myth that if you do not state where you stand, you do not stand anywhere. And that is wrong. If there’s one thing you take from this, take that. Just because you do not know yet where you stand, or haven’t stated where you stand, doesn’t mean you don’t stand anywhere. Everything I’ve told you here is about how you make an impact. The things you don’t say make as much of an impact as the things you do say, and the things you don’t do make as much of an impact as the things you do. Remember that responsibility. It’s okay to not know yet what you think, but you cannot pretend that until you make up your mind you have no effect on the world around you.

I have one final story. Last year I attended the commencement exercises for the Class of 2006. I’m graduating this year, you know. I wanted to see what it would be like. There was lots of talk of journeys and wisdom and lots of things that happen at commencement. At the very end, something happened – something that I had no idea was coming. President Oxtoby got up for something called “Charge to the Class of 2006.” I was blown away. It was literally that, a charge. And it was so interesting to me that the literally the very final thing you hear from this institution in your time as a student is a charge. To put it bluntly, a charge is an unveiling of responsibility and a command to take on that responsibility. And that is what Pomona College wants you to leave here with.

I’m not here to charge you with anything. I’m not here to call you to action. I’m here to simply call you to remembering that you are always acting, and always impacting. Everything you do here has an impact.

To the Pomona College Class of 2010 – I wish you luck. I wish you challenge. I wish you action.