Welcome to the opening Convocation in the 120th year of instruction at Pomona College. On this occasion I am pleased to welcome the Class of 2010 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. It is also a pleasure to recognize Pomona’s seventh President, David Alexander, and his wife Catharine.

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 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 remarks to open a conversation on campus on a subject of critical importance in the years ahead: sustainability.

Let me begin with a simple anecdote. I recently went to purchase safety razor blades; for some time I have used a “Trak II” razor, with two blades. But of course the rest of the country has moved on to bigger and better cartridges: first “Mach 3” with three blades (1998), then “Quattro” with four (2003), and now the latest and most heavily advertised is “Fusion” with “the power of five.” Obviously, if two blades are better than one, five are better than four. A rough extrapolation suggests that when all of you return in 2060 for your fiftieth reunion, the product of choice will have 47 blades, because clearly that is better than the previous year’s model with only 46.

I give this rather trivial example not to parody the excesses of American advertising and consumerism: that would be an entirely different talk. Rather, I use it to pose a number of questions: When is enough enough? Is growth in and of itself desirable? Are there limits to growth? Can we begin an urgently needed dialog on the move toward a sustainable world?

The most immediate context for sustainability is of course the environment. As natural resources are used up we must urgently recognize that the supply of materials we have taken for granted (ranging from pure water to oil to minerals) is not unlimited. Moreover, the impact of our waste materials on our surroundings is growing. We see that locally here in the Los Angeles basin with its largely unplanned growth, and globally in the impact of emitted carbon dioxide on the earth’s climate. Jared Diamond has recently written a powerful book, “Collapse”, in which he discusses the fates of different societies, from Easter Island through modern-day California. Some such societies learned to live with their local resources and have persisted to the present day, while others drove themselves into extinction. Diamond’s message is that in a connected world we need to work together to assure our future.

But sustainability goes beyond environmental policy to virtually every area that we study at this College. Can economics look toward a future where growth of new markets is replaced by a steady state? Of course, with a major fraction of the world still in poverty now, this is a distant goal, but perhaps one we should begin to think about. Can we use sociology to understand what makes a community sustainable through many generations? And what about the stability of democratic political systems in the world? This year’s first-year book, “The Future of Freedom” by Fareed Zakaria, asks about the factors that have caused so many countries in
the world to slip back from promising democratic beginnings into illiberal states that suppress citizens’ rights.

Earlier this summer, I took part in a conference in Strasbourg hosted by the Council of Europe on the subject of “Higher Education and Democratic Culture” which explored the linked questions of human rights and sustainability throughout the world. Presidents came together to talk about the specific role of colleges and universities in building democratic culture. Interestingly, Western European countries were largely represented by government bureaucrats at the meeting, but a substantial number of rectors from universities in Eastern Europe discussed with presidents of American liberal arts colleges how to build sustainable democratic institutions in their newly liberated countries. In one of the most powerful addresses to the group, the Minister of Education of the new Republic of Macedonia talked about the role of the University in his country in breaking down barriers between Macedonian and Albanian speaking peoples and building governmental structures to give his country a strong foundation.

Another speaker brought the question of sustainability even closer to home for the American participants. Marvalene Hughes, the President of Dillard University, a historically black liberal arts college in New Orleans, talked about the devastating impact of Hurricane Katrina on her college and on the city of New Orleans. She reminded all of us that building sustainable cities and democratic institutions is a critical need in this country as well. As we approach the first anniversary of this event, and recognize that similar events (from hurricanes to tsunamis to earthquakes) can and will occur throughout the world in the future, the urgency of building a sustainable society that can respond effectively to natural disasters is apparent.

I look forward to exploring with all of you in the year ahead how Pomona College can become a leader in educating students for a sustainable world.