

President David Oxtoby
Pomona College Commencement 2007
May 13, 2007

Changing the World: Charge to the Class of '07

I look out at the Class of 2007 on this special day with particular affection, since I consider myself a member of your class. You and I arrived on campus together in the summer of 2003; we met each other in dorms and classrooms, at ice cream socials and senior dinners. Over four years, I have had the privilege of watching you as you played the clarinet, ran the mile, or performed the role of Hamlet. I have taught the few of you who had the courage to sign up for environmental chemistry at 8:10 a.m. I have watched you grow, mature, and become leaders. In four years you have met the graduation requirements of Pomona College and will leave today with your degrees. In my case, I have been a bit distracted by extracurricular activities and will need to stay on a few more years to complete my work.

In the course of our freshman year on campus, we created the list of 47 Things that every Pomona student should do before graduating from the College. How did you do on your lists? I checked recently and, with only one or two slight stretches, counted 28 of these items since I matriculated in 2003. But since I am not graduating today, I plan to keep adding to my list; as a matter of fact I will be visiting Channel Islands National Park this coming weekend.

Senator Graham spoke of the importance of service and of the famous words on our gates: "Bear your added riches in trust for [hu]mankind." The Class of 2007 will be leaders in this regard as exemplified in the record 21 of you who will be serving the world next year on Fulbright grants, as well as the dozens who will join Teach for America and other programs aimed at service in this country.

In my four years on campus, I have been struck that so much of the leadership at the College comes not from the top down but from you, the students. On issues ranging from workers rights to community development, from race and gender to political discourse, you have led our conversations on campus. Sustainability and the environment is one area I would like to highlight.

You recognized that food and sustainable agriculture are critical issues for the 21st century and were not content only with reading books and writing papers on the subject; you worked to build the organic farm, where these interests become real in the digging of soil and the planting of fruit trees.

You took the issue of climate change and did not just watch movies and throw up your hands; instead, you analyzed College practices and proposed specific strategies to reduce our carbon footprint; you started a campus climate challenge that lowered dormitory electricity use.

You laid the groundwork for other critical steps ranging from reducing water consumption to cutting the number of cars on campus through a Flexcar rental option.



It's been hard keeping up with you in the last year! The steps that the College as a whole has taken will move us forward, but we need continued student leadership. The Sustainability Committee established this year will help to coordinate and connect activities, as well as to keep our eyes on critical indicators of environmental performance. Earlier this month, I signed the President's Commitment on Climate Change, pledging the College to take serious steps to reduce production of greenhouse gases. As promised, we also purchased our first wind farm credits as the College's response to the success of your dorm challenge from last fall. This summer, we will begin negotiations with FlexCars with one goal being to reduce student cars on campus.

But much work remains to be done, not only on environmental sustainability but more broadly on social sustainability: building a society in which difference is respected and welcomed, in which everyone has the opportunity to use their talents to succeed and in turn to give back to the world, in which income is not the prerequisite for success.

Two weeks ago on this very stage, the College presented the Alumni Distinguished Service Award, our highest level of recognition, to John Fisher '67. John spent his career as a teacher at Colton High School, down the road in San Bernardino County. His students came from families where no one had been to college, and over the years he sent many of them on to fine opportunities in higher education, including several to Pomona College, where they stand among our most distinguished younger graduates, giving back in turn. In forty or fifty years I hope we will have the opportunity to recognize a similar measure of accomplishment from a member of the class of 2007.

I pledge to continue, with the help of future generations of students, with faculty, and with staff, the efforts on campus that you have initiated. I call on all of you in the class of 2007 to take the skills, the experience, and the passion that you have gained on this campus out into the world to make a difference. It will not be easy. You will need to build your own communities, find your own partners in initiating change, and overcome an inertia that may frustrate you at times. But it is a challenge that I have full confidence you will step up to.

Good luck and best wishes!