Elspeth Hilton ’08  
ASPC President  
Pomona College Convocation 2007

Students, alumni, faculty, trustees and administration and guests, it is an honor to have the opportunity to address you today and I hope that what I say will have a lasting impact on how you carry out this coming school year.

Two years ago, ASPC President Lori DesRochers spoke about the power Pomona students have to make change. Last year, ASPC President Sarah Kuriakose spoke about impact, and how every action taken, each decision made, effects our campus as well as the greater community. Perhaps you notice a trend. I would like to continue on that note, and speak of the power we all have to make a difference and the need for us to do so.

I know that I myself keep busy going to senate meetings, playing tennis and attending classes. While I spend a great deal of time thinking about the problems our society has, I often fail to take action. Being one of the people on campus who elicits complaints from students gives an interesting perspective. Some of the issues people seem to be the most worked up about on campus appear to be who lives in what dorms and how many treadmills are in the cardio room. Since these issues immediately affect our quality of life, they are often what causes the biggest stir, and what also is marked as priority issues. The other, more ‘big picture’ issues include reducing our carbon footprint, increasing the diversity of economic classes on campus, better supporting our nearby communities and working with more socially responsible companies. It is these big picture issues which we often fail to provide solutions for.

While a select few Pomona students take the time act on their intentions and go into nearby communities to volunteer and downtown LA to attend rallies and protests, the majority of students spend their time attending class and taking part in extra curricular activities. If we, the intelligent, extremely well educated, and motivated students of Pomona College aren’t taking action on these big picture issues, what example are we setting for our generation and those younger than us? We are the best candidates to take action and implement change.

The effects of today’s worldwide political, environmental and financial decisions will be ours to deal with. We talk about it a lot, but what are we really doing to make change and our voices heard?

Social responsibility can be described as “an organization’s obligation to maximize its positive impact and minimize its negative impact on society” and that is exactly what we as an institution must do at all levels. Pomona College must establish itself as an institution that visibly and proudly fights the forces of environmental degradation and classism not only in its brochures and official statements but especially in its daily actions. This involves a host of reforms, from purchasing decisions and business partners to staff grievance policies to building and grounds management and beyond.

In order to maximize our positive impact, the Pomona College community must invite speakers that will revitalize the discourse on this campus so that it is vibrant and inspires action. We must be vocal about the unjust decisions made by local, regional and national politicians and
strengthen and support those groups on campus who already do so. Our alumni, administration and trustees must all set an example by way of treating support staff with the level of respect, benefits and salary that they deserve and by taking into consideration the lasting impact that each decision we make will have on the greater community, not just our own. In order to set the tone and give support, the administration must respond to student desires by appropriately responding to student movements for workers rights, supporting the organic farm and giving funding to student groups who educate and take action to be more socially responsible and take into consideration the well-being of the greater community.

Last year, a student group made a movement for socially responsible investing of our reserve money, so that we are sure that our investment of past student fees go towards companies who share the ideals and interests of those on campus. Another successful student initiative has put energy efficient light bulbs into a majority of dorm rooms and yet another has brought FlexCar to our campus in hopes of reducing the amount of student cars on campus and to aid those without. Another student initiative has sponsored an annual organic dinner to demonstrate to students how easy and tasty it is to eat locally and educate them on the greater positive impact eating locally can have. The students on our campus have already taken steps to minimize our negative impact on society, but further steps can and must be implemented, and administration and trustees must embrace the path followed by students and apply those ideals at the highest level. An emphasis on local food items in our dining halls, hybrid vehicles within our campus fleet, energy saving tactics in our dorms and the support of civil liberties to everyone in our greater community must all be a top priority, to students, faculty, administrations, trustees and alumni alike.

As emphasized by student body presidents in past years, action starts here. Everyone complains about the Pomona bubble, but the largest impact of that bubble is that it causes many to think that our community is self-contained, when in reality every decision made and every policy implemented effects people outside our community. An example of this is Sodexho, the company we contract to do our dining services. Many students see our contract with them on a good food/bad food basis, but the impact of our contract and support of Sodexho goes far beyond our food quality. While there is little emphasis on locally grown food products, we must also look at the political impact of Sodexho’s policies, their history of employee rights and their stock holdings. By giving money to Sodexho, we are supporting their policies and actions, many of which go against the intentions of the students on campus.

This year's Senate is ambitious and motivated and plans on making many changes and improvements on campus which are in line with the ideals I have outlined. It is time that our entire student body talk less, discuss more and take action. I encourage you all to consider what you do to set an example. There are so many ways in which you can be involved. For students and faculty, consider what organizations you are a part of and which clubs on campus you support. Consider how you can make change within these groups to be more vocal, to be more green, to better benefit the greater community and to take into greater consideration the impact of your actions. Trustees and administration, I encourage you to follow closely the desires of the student body to be the institution that sets the standards for taking action, for reducing its carbon footprint, and for being socially responsible in all avenues.