

President David Oxtoby
Pomona College Commencement 2008
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Singing Our Song: Charge to the Class of '08

Graduation marks a rite of passage for the Class of 2008, as you move from being students in the College to joining our alumni body. Now I am not going to spend your last 10 minutes on the Pomona College campus lecturing you about staying in touch and giving us money as alumni, but I would like to talk today about both past and future: You are now part of the fabric of Pomona College, a link between our 121 years of history and our future.

At graduation, speakers usually look to the future, predicting the great things you will do in the world as you leave this campus. But I want to begin by looking back. Each of you is now connected to those who came before you, graduates from the classes of 1908 or 1958 as well as your fellow graduates in 2008. We don't talk about College history much. How many of you know that the very first football game in the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum was between USC and Pomona College? Or that we have a winning football record against UCLA of 6 wins, 5 losses and one tie, a record that is unlikely ever to change in the future? Or that our College Bowl team of this year, which won its regional championship and placed fifth nationally against many much larger universities, is a reminder of the 1961 Pomona College GE College Bowl team that won five times in a row on national television?

On a more profound level, too few students know of our founding in 1887 as a college "of the New England type." Surrounded by the beauty of Marston Quad, flanked by Bridges Hall of Music and the Smith Campus Center, it is sometimes hard to remember that the founders came to this site when there was only desert sagebrush and a single hotel virtually abandoned by the land speculators who had built it, only too ready to donate it as the first building of Pomona College, Sumner Hall. As you look back on your four years here, and the opportunities you have had to take classes on the other campuses in Claremont, eat in their dining halls, or play sports with or against them, it can be hard to remember that this whole vision of the Claremont Colleges Group Plan only emerged in the 1920s under the leadership of Pomona's fourth President, James Blaisdell.

Perhaps this reluctance to talk about our past is a reaction against the picture of history as triumphant progress in which, as American settlement spread across the continent to reach the Pacific Ocean, it brought enlightenment and education to uncivilized lands. We know too much about the dark side of Western settlement to take such a simplistic view. And there are dark sides to our own college history as well, which deserve to be looked at and understood just as much as the elements of vision and promise I have just described. As you graduate, you are connected with both the positive and the negative elements in our history, and I urge you to learn more about it.

We can celebrate together, for example, the fact that women have been a part of the student body here from the first days of the College, and that one of the first faculty members appointed was a remarkable woman, Phoebe Estelle Spalding. But how many of you are

aware of the following fact from our history: believe it or not, well into the 1960s, it was the custom for first-year women to be weighed and measured by upperclassmen upon their arrival on campus. This degrading ritual was laughed off by many but hurtful to others, until students finally spoke up and eliminated the practice.

This spring our attention was brought to another challenging aspect of our history. Flyers posted around campus reminded us of something that many of us had either not known or had forgotten: that the Pomona College Alma Mater, “Hail, Pomona, Hail” was written for and first performed as the finale of a blackface minstrel show in 1909-10. That a College song with such memories for so many of our community from the past and the present is connected with what we now recognize as a racist practice from a century ago is a difficult fact for us to accept. Some argue that the past is past and that we should not attempt to judge it; others would ask how such a central symbol of our College could be exclusionary to members of our community through its origins in history.

Today’s graduation ceremony will not close with the singing of the Alma Mater, because as a community we are pausing to consider the impact of these revelations. Conversations that have begun already about our college songs will be furthered through summer student research both here at Pomona and elsewhere, and that will lead to additional thoughtful discussion next semester. A broadly based committee, including students, faculty, staff and alumni, will look at the issue in the fall and make recommendations on how to proceed. Wherever we end up on this issue, I hope that we will listen to one another in a respectful fashion and turn this exploration into a valuable educational experience.

Please permit a physical chemist to make a few last suggestions about history to you, the members of the class of 2008. Take your history seriously, learn about it, both the heroic stories and the shameful episodes, and learn from it. While we pause today to consider the history of our own college, think about the broader context of this country and of the world. Turn that understanding of history into an invitation, even an imperative, not to accept the way things are, as our past has shaped the present world, but to go out and make a change so that the future can be better.

As you leave Pomona and walk through the College gates as alumni, read the words of James Blaisdell, urging you to bear your added riches in trust for all mankind — or, as we would say today, all humankind. These are words that connect our past and our future. As we continue to build a caring, inclusive community of students educated to make a profound difference in the world, listen carefully to one another and to these words.