Students, alumni, faculty, staff, the board of trustees, and guests, welcome to the first day of school. What a perfect time to talk about college. College, the four years, typically, during which privileged young adults all over the country leave their families and eventually become, and this is straight from the mission statement, “the next generation of leaders, scholars, artists, and citizens.” The college experience is often framed as that period of self-discovery and personal growth, when students discover their intellectual passions and ultimately decide what to do with their lives. But even with such an individualistic approach to this experience, the fact remains that in this society, colleges and universities are prominent institutions with significant power and influence. As members of this institution, we are a part of something larger than our individual selves combined. Pomona College is a billion dollar enterprise in a capitalist society, so we make a political statement each and every time we bring out, or don’t bring out, the checkbook. And the mere prominence of Pomona College confers all of us with the political clout that most of us could not muster on our own. Because of this, what you do and don’t do matters a whole lot when you are here.

The significance of this, however, is so easy to forget, particularly when it is possible to eat, drink, play, sleep, party, study, exercise, fall in love, and catch a movie without going more than two hundred yards away from the Smith Campus Center. Too many of us, I’m afraid, are unaware that we are now in a position in which we, as individuals, and we, as a large institution, make rather powerful statements with our actions, and the impact of those statements can only reveal themselves with time.

And what do I mean by statements? Well, for one, by creating gender neutral bathrooms all over campus, Pomona College took a stand and made the statement that the safety and well-being of transgender and gender queer individuals is not to be overlooked, even when it comes to something as seemingly mundane as bathrooms. By including a prominent community partnerships program in our strategic plan, we have made the statement that Pomona College is not an elite academic fortress and that we are indeed a dynamic part of the larger Los Angeles community. By creating an ombudsperson position, we have made the statement that housekeepers, maintenance workers, groundskeepers, and dining hall workers are an important and respected part of college communities and that they have the fundamental right to voice their concerns without fear of being fired or disciplined. Programs to recruit low-income students and the recent decision to eliminate loans have made the statement that institutions of higher education have a responsibility to level the playing field and to make a high-class education available to bright and motivated students regardless of their financial backgrounds.

So, these are all great examples of progressive and positive things that Pomona has accomplished. But, on the other hand, because of this same prominence that I spoke of earlier, there really is no such thing as inaction here. Inaction suggests approval and satisfaction with the status quo, no matter what we may actually think or feel. Even our passiveness will have far-reaching implications that cannot be neatly described or even understood.
So, along these lines, what kind of statement are we making when our students have practically stopped discussing the war in Iraq, where over 90,000 Iraqi civilians and 30,000 American troops have lost their lives? What kind of statement are we making when our dining halls still use eggs laid from miserable and diseased chickens in cramped battery cages, when countless other colleges across the nation have already made the switch to more humane cage-free eggs. What kind of statement are we making when, despite our mission to educate the next generation of leaders, scholars, artists, and citizens, students can still leave this institution without being exposed to rigorous academic discourse about the power dynamics that shape U.S. contemporary society? Just what kind of a stand are we making on these issues?

Inaction, here at Pomona, is usually excused by the concern that our efforts will be meaningless and that what we do here doesn't matter since this isn't the “real world”, whatever that means. Often, we are paralyzed by the dogma that tells us not to pursue something here that wouldn't be feasible in that same abstract “real world”. But you know what, you can disagree with me, I’m a naïve college student, but I strongly believe that the right thing to do is always the thing to do, particularly when our silence and our inaction implies approval of things we may absolutely disagree with. Even the smallest victory on or off campus can spark a national trend and affect the world in unforeseen ways. It’s happened before and it is happening now. Civil rights, apartheid in South Africa, the Vietnam war, free speech, the genocide in Darfur, global warming, sweatshops, the prison-industrial complex, the inaction of the government after hurricane Katrina, each and every single one of these issues has been profoundly affected by the actions of college students and administrations all across this nation.

And also, this profound influence that I’m talking can even happen inadvertently. Each and every one of us are particularly bright and motivated, it’s how we got here. We’ll go on to occupy relatively powerful positions in this society, and so things that happen here can have an exponential effect that will last long after we walk out of those gates. That late-night conversation you have with your roommate about environmental racism can influence local land-use policies 20 years from now when she becomes the city planner of a large metropolitan city. That friend you dragged to an event about the conflict in Darfur may learn something that, well after he becomes a wealthy investment banker, ensures that he does not invest in corporations that perpetuate ethnic conflicts in far away nations. That spoken word artist that you worked so hard to bring to Pomona may change an unlikely student’s worldview and she could very well become the next prominent critical race scholar. You just never know.

So my point is that you are in the position, right now, this very day, to be proactive. Be aware of the fact that you are a part of something larger than yourself, larger than your textbooks, parties, red marks and blue books, coffee-fueled nights, and the freshman 15. And the faculty and staff, you are in the perfect position to not only take participate, but to also inspire us, to be a part of our experiences, and to steer us in the right direction. The board of trustees, you are the big poo-bahs in this equation, and all I can ask of you is to continue to be open-minded and responsive to the concerns of the student body.

So, to sum up, this isn’t necessarily a call to a particular form of action, it is just a reminder, a strong reminder that how you choose to spend your time here will have an effect that goes far beyond your individual self. You may or may not “find yourself” during your time here, but you will act in ways that affect Pomona, this country, and ultimately, the world.
decision you get to make today, the first day of school, is whether or not you will be proactive in shaping that impact or if you will let your silence and inaction speak for you.

So, people of Pomona College, let's take a stand for what we believe is right, no matter what, and continue to make those strong statements that we can be proud of for years to come.