Welcome to the opening Convocation in the one hundred twenty second year of instruction at Pomona College. On this occasion I am pleased to welcome the Class of 2012 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-year students, 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 would like to begin today’s program with a few remarks about crossing borders and breaking down walls.

Walls have been much on my mind in recent months. On an early spring morning in April during a visit to Beijing, I had the opportunity to visit the Great Wall of China, getting there early enough that in our walk out along the wall we did not see a single person, though by the time we returned the tens of thousands of visitors who come each day were thronging the site. This was, of course, a heavily restored portion of the wall from a section originally built over five hundred years ago. I read about the millions of Chinese thought to have died in the construction of the wall, let alone in battles attempting to break through it. An extraordinary feat of engineering, it could still be breached through bribes, betrayal, and human ingenuity.

Another wall I visited a few months ago left an even stronger impression on me. My daughter, then a senior at Carleton College, invited me to assist her on a senior thesis project that involved following the New River (Rio Nuevo) from its mouth in the Salton Sea, some one hundred fifty miles southeast of here, to its origins in Mexico. Her project involved photographing the river along its length and taking water samples for chemical analysis of what is considered the most polluted river in North America. It was the first time I had seen the US – Mexico border wall, at the junction between Mexicali, Mexico, and the US border town of Calexico.

Metal, barbed wire, electronic surveillance, border guards in Jeeps: this is what the United States is constructing across thousands of miles of border. The only border I could recall that resembled it was the Hungary-Austria border I saw as a college student. But this was a wall built in the 21st century, supposedly in a new global era, by a democratic country to keep others out. What will the future think of this country, five hundred years from now, looking at the rusted remnants of a wall that will inevitably fail to hold back the forces of economic demand, or to cut off family relationships across this border? How will people try to explain the thousands of deaths occurring at the border, the families divided by immigration proceedings, and the economic exploitation of undocumented workers unable to protest their conditions?

I thought of the words of Robert Frost, speaking of those much more harmless stone walls separating New England homesteads:
Before I built a wall I’d ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn’t love a wall . . .

I hope that you, the members of the class of 2012, will use your education to break down walls, both literally and figuratively. During your four years here, I hope that each of you will cross borders, so you have the experience of seeing the United States from the outside; if you are yourselves international students, I hope you will have the chance to explore what this country is like and to engage in discussions about what separates the world and what brings it together. And talk about that wall to the south of us and what it means for this country and for the world.

Of course, you don’t have to leave the United States to cross borders. There are boundaries everywhere, generally not marked by walls but equally effective in shaping our lives. In your time here, cross the borders that exist between communities in the Los Angeles area and that separate us from one another. Don’t just spend your four years in the city of Claremont, aside from hops out of Ontario Airport to the rest of the country; get out to the city of Pomona, or to La Puente, or to Monterey Park.

As you plan your four years of education here at Pomona College, make sure you move across boundaries into unfamiliar territory. Don’t just stay within the comfort zone of courses and fields you know you can succeed in, but challenge yourself by exploring new subjects that lie outside your area of familiarity. Work with our faculty to break down walls between disciplines, connecting areas that passionately interest you so that the education you leave with four years from now is truly your own.

Welcome to Pomona College and to a shared adventure together.