Stephanie Almeida ’11  
ASPC President  
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Good morning students, faculty, staff, trustees and other members of our college community. To the incoming Class of 2014, welcome to the start of your first academic year at Pomona.

Just over a week ago on my flight across the country, I sat to the left of an older woman. Evidently skilled in the art of needlepoint, she was talkative and curious and eventually asked what I was studying at college. I then shared with her the fact that I am English and Politics double major. I was not surprised by the awkward pause that followed. After processing my answer, she let out a puzzled: “Oh.” And then, quite sincerely and quite worried, she added: “What are you going to do with that?”

She could have asked for more details about what I was studying within my majors or about how I was supplementing my academic education with other activities, but instead she asked that particular question almost as if my chances for future success in life had clearly been jeopardized by my failure to choose a major geared toward a specific job market.

Like many Pomona students who are confronted with this question, I considered defending the merits of a liberal arts education or pretending to be decided on some socially acceptable plan or other involving graduate or professional school. I decided to just smile and shrug and ask her some more questions about needlepoint.

According to some, our generation is jeopardizing the orderly progression upon which our society depends. We go back to school because we don’t have other options, we fight each other for unpaid internships or temporary jobs, we travel, we avoid commitments.

The author of a recent New York Times article titled “What Is It About 20-Somethings?” claims that the “adults” of the world are “caught in a weird moment, unsure of whether to allow young people to keep exploring and questioning or to cut them off and tell them to just to find something, anything, to put food on the table and get on with their lives.”

I was struck by how much this supposed dichotomy relates to the choice between attending and not attending a liberal arts college: between the idea that education is for sharpening the ability to think not only creatively, but critically about a well-rounded range of disciplines and perspectives and the idea that education is for the transferring of knowledge necessary to grant individuals a good-paying position in a specific job market.

Of course, this “choice” is most often first a matter of affordability and only secondarily of “allowance,” a reality Pomona has thankfully committed itself to fighting. But even with financial burdens eased or nonexistent, the pressures remain: What are you going to do with that? In other words: How will you survive the job market? Are your courses really preparing you for a secure and stable adulthood?
Some of you may be tempted to make this question the central question that guides you as you choose your courses and majors. That Pomona is facing pressures surrounding this question is clear: This year alone we will see a Trustee Pre-Professional and Career Development Task Force and a Student-Trustee Retreat exploring how students perceive different majors and educational experiences at Pomona preparing them for life and work choices beyond Pomona. Perhaps most importantly, we will see the launch of a Capital Campaign with a significant focus on “real world engagement” through “building local and global connections” and “expanding real-world opportunities.” The ASPC has been and will continue to be very involved in all three of these attempts to understand and shape Pomona’s relationship to life outside of and beyond itself.

Yet as important and as critical as it is to look to life outside and beyond Pomona, to push outward, we must at the same time not forget the importance of looking inward. A Pomona education is not about the mere transferring of knowledge: here more is learned than taught. That is, Pomona is not here to tell students what to do with their lives, but to equip them with universal skills and opportunities for productive exploration. We are privileged with the ability to set aside many chores of adulthood not so that we may better receive our educations and futures, but so that we may better seek them: seek them through challenging courses, subjects, and professors; seek them through experiences, not necessarily academic, that are tied up intimately with Pomona. While a surplus of students around the world can involve themselves in activities that will benefit them personally, fewer students have so many opportunities to involve themselves in activities that will have significant impacts not merely on their individual lives, but deeply and directly on their respective communities.

The ASPC recognizes and applauds Pomona’s continued commitment to providing students with opportunities to not only shape College culture, but also to make and enforce College policy, to determine the College’s future. The ASPC has and will continue to make strong stances on policies such as those that govern our residential life here and how we are held accountable for our actions. We will look for ways big and small to improve our community and to protect that which we love about it.

Students, and especially the Class of 2014, this convocation I challenge you to dig boldly and to dig deeply without explicit career-related intentions. Push aside the “But what will you do with that’s” and know that the specific titles of your degrees will say relatively little about what you as individuals really know and are really capable of; know that pursuing what you love regardless of its perceived relevance is not selfish, but one of the best ways that you can help yourself while contributing to this community, to the evolution of an institution far from disconnected to the greater world. Dig and go beneath the surfaces of facts and ideas… Go beneath the surfaces of this institution and your places within it. Seek to understand Pomona’s mechanisms and contradictions and really engage with them rather than sailing over them to reach some predetermined destination, to fit into some orderly progression. Above all, go beneath the surfaces of each other, of yourselves. Break down those surfaces so that you can build a strong community with one other and build a strong sense of self. Do this, and all the rest will follow.