

President David Oxtoby
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In these few minutes, I would like to frame three lessons from your Pomona education that I encourage you to take with you as you leave this campus.

The first is: “Facts matter.” There are some objective truths on which intelligent, unprejudiced observers can agree, such as “force equals mass times acceleration” or “Darwinian evolution connects humans to other species.” In the face of a simple fact such as “Barack Obama was born in Hawaii,” there is a disturbing tendency these days to state the opposite forcefully and publicly, in the hopes that others will not recognize a fact as a fact. Then such an issue can be presented as a subject on which different conclusions may be drawn and on which further study is needed.

But this denial of objective reality corrupts public discourse and is fundamentally contrary to the goals of education, which is aimed at discovering the truth, no matter how inconvenient that truth may be. This was brought home recently when a United States Senator made the statement on the floor of the Senate that abortion is “well over 90 percent of what Planned Parenthood does.” His office subsequently attempted to clarify this by saying that “his remark was not intended to be a factual statement.”

Perhaps we can chalk all this up to political posturing and acknowledge that throughout history politicians have told lies. But it has serious consequences because it paralyzes us from using objective facts to make decisions about the future. It cannot be proven that global climate change is directly responsible for the record flooding now taking place along the Mississippi River. But it is a fact that climate change is real, and that it will increase the probability of extreme weather events in the future. When others state that climate change is a hoax, it hinders us from taking timely action. Facts matter: they will shape our future world.

If “facts matter” is the first lesson for this morning, the second is “ideas matter.” Your Pomona education has not only involved learning objective facts about the world. A major part has focused on ideas and creativity. From philosophy to chemistry, from dance to economics, ideas matter. They take different forms, from the placement of strokes of paint on a canvas to the reasoning in a senior thesis.

Ken Burns recently produced a television series entitled “The National Parks: America’s Best Idea.” Influenced by one of Pomona’s fine faculty members, Professor of Environmental Analysis Char Miller, I have become fascinated with the individual who had the single largest effect on the establishment of these parks, President Theodore Roosevelt. Now I would be the first to acknowledge the many flaws of our 26th president, from his language of American jingoism to his embrace of “manifest destiny” to his role in the invasion of Cuba. But one thing that cannot be denied is that he had big ideas, and he put them into effect, including establishing five national parks and setting aside 234 million acres of land for conservation (one out of every ten in the United States).

In Char Miller's historical analysis, the beginning of the twentieth century was a time when there were big problems but also the confidence that new ideas could help the country to address them. We face an even larger set of problems at this point in our history, and I hope that your education has taught you that, now more than ever, we need big ideas and the commitment to make significant changes. A retreat into thinking small and reflecting wistfully on the past will not help us to move forward.

Over a century ago, in 1903, the third year of his presidency, Theodore Roosevelt spoke at Pomona College, on the steps of Pearsons Hall, north and west of where you sit. In his words, "if we are to count in the long run we must have built upon the material prosperity the power and desire to give to our lives other than a merely material side." He urged colleges like Pomona "to deal in so fresh a way that the net outcome shall be an addition to the world's stock of wisdom and knowledge." On that occasion he planted a tree using this shovel, the Roosevelt shovel, which we use today at Pomona for every groundbreaking celebration. As you leave this college, take with you the confidence that big ideas can plant trees, build buildings, and shape the world: ideas matter.

Facts and ideas are central to your Pomona College education, but they are not the entire story: people matter. Education is not just what you learn in the classroom; it is also the relationships that you build and the community to which you belong. In a world where on-line learning is touted as providing "just as good" an education to even more people in the future, Pomona remains committed to the goals of a residential liberal arts college experience. From our sponsor groups to our ID-1 discussions, from OA trips to senior seminars, education at Pomona is built on relationships.

Too often we do not realize how much people matter until they are no longer with us. This year has been a particularly tough one in this regard, with the deaths of staff members Connie Wilson and Kevin Unck, faculty members Motts Thomas, Bill Banks, and Corwin Hansch, and former President David Alexander. We need to appreciate how much people matter when they are with us here and now.

Our campus community begins with students, faculty, and staff, and it connects across the country and the world through parents, alumni, and friends. This community cannot and should not be one of conformity, where disagreement and controversy are suppressed. We need to find ways to encourage civil discourse on campus, because it is the foundation of our democracy. As you go out through the gates of the College, you will enter a world where such mutual respect, openness to difference, and civil discourse are in far too short supply. Take with you the model of your college, even with its flaws and need for improvement, and use it to build community in your future lives: people matter.

Thank you and best wishes!