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Good morning students, faculty, staff, trustees, guests, and all members of the Pomona College community. To the incoming first-years, the Class of 2015, once again: welcome to Pomona College.

I want to begin by talking about bubbles. It’s a term that gets tossed around a lot in small colleges, particularly here in Claremont, and rightly so. Students here live in an insular, isolated environment, removed from many of the pressures of the outside world. Those of you who have been to convocation before might remember that one of the traditions of ASPC Presidents’ speeches is a discussion of the impact of Pomona students outside of our gates. These speeches asked students to avoid spending their time here shuffling from classes to dorms to dining halls. These speeches tended to present a challenge to students to break out of the Pomona bubble, to take action and enact change throughout the world.

I fully believe that Pomona students should seek to change the world, even before we graduate, but for these next few minutes, I’d like us to consider the impact we can have within the Pomona College community. I’d like us to consider our duty to think critically about and change the bubble that we live in now.

The first and most important thing to realize is that, as students, we have tremendous power here. We have power at Pomona that, as 18- to 22-year-olds, we are rarely afforded anywhere else. This is a small school, where faculty, administrators, and students function closely to one another. The influence that one driven student, not to mention a committed group, can have is tremendous.

At the 2007 Convocation, the year before I arrived at Pomona, ASPC President Elspeth Hilton challenged us to reexamine our relationship with Sodexho, then our food services provider. She asked us to think about the message we were sending by employing a company with questionable labor practices and a lack of local, sustainable options. She worried that, by employing Sodexho, Pomona wasn’t being true to its values and character. And last year, after a long dialogue about how we serve food, Pomona completed the move to in-house dining services.

Largely as a result of student activism, this important discussion has continued in recent debates over the unionization of dining hall workers--a discussion that has brought underrepresented and sometimes overlooked members of our community to the center of campus dialogue.

Student efforts were also a determining factor in securing Pomona’s commitment to the environment, ensuring the continued development of sustainable projects and practices. And it was two students, displeased with the one-sided discussion of the Iraq War, that created the Pomona Student Union to make sure that all sides of important issues can be heard on campus today.
So it was students--far more than any of us realize, I'm sure--that have made Pomona the institution we know and love. And just as students have shaped the College in the past, there are issues for us to think about now.

Pomona currently faces a choice about how to balance the need for a free-flowing and trusting residential life and the need to safeguard against trespassing and burglary. With student efforts and engagement, I believe we can do both.

There is already a massive effort underway to reshape our Career Development Office, and it is continued student, faculty, and alumni input that will help make Sagehens ready to engage with post-graduation life.

So, let me reiterate what I’ve said and what should be obvious by now: students have tremendous influence within the Pomona bubble. But I would also like to posit, contrary to what you may assume, that this influence is every bit as important as our impact outside this community. Pomona gives us the opportunity not only to study with a remarkable group of academics, but also to learn how to change our bubble, our community, for the better.

When we learn to use this kind of power, we receive one of the most important gifts that a small liberal arts school can give. Here at Pomona, we can learn to persuade and organize the people around us. The causes that we defend here will train us to defend them and others throughout life, in places that may not be as open and easy to change.

Pomona is unique, but I think we'll find that in many ways it's not so different from the “real world” either. If we're lucky, we will live our whole lives in one bubble or another, in communities that are both tight-knit and willing to listen to all of their members.

Pomona Class of 2015, your time here shouldn't be a “break from the real world.” It should be a model for the communities that you will shape and influence later in life: your business, your neighborhood, your world. You will get the most out of your Pomona education by treating it not as an isolated moment, but as a chance to learn how to use responsibly the power that many of you will later hold. This experience should train and inspire you, as both a student and a citizen.

So, good luck to all of you. As both your representative and your peer, I welcome you to Pomona College.