President David Oxtoby  
Pomona College Convocation 2011  
August 30, 2011

Welcome to the opening Convocation in the one hundred twenty fifth year of instruction at Pomona College. On this occasion I am pleased to welcome the Class of 2015 to our community, and to greet the returning students from the College, our faculty, staff, and members of the Board of Trustees. I’d also like to say “Eid Mubarak” to all of the Muslim members of the Pomona College community today.

I call your attention to the prizes and awards listed on the back of your program, as we join together to recognize the outstanding accomplishments of our students.

The purpose of today’s Convocation is to celebrate beginnings and to join together to explore the goals of a Pomona education. This exploration will last through your 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 taking risks.

Last month, my wife Claire and I visited Santa Barbara Island, one of the Channel Islands west of Los Angeles. On the island, we learned about a small seabird, the Xantus’s Murrelet, which nests on the island, laying its eggs in crevices in cliffs far above the ocean. After the birds hatch, they remain alone until the second night, when the parents return from feeding in the open ocean. The parents then call out to their hungry chicks and fly out to sea. The chicks, who are too young to fly, stumble forward as they try to follow their parents, and fall off the cliff into the ocean. There they begin their lives.

Could we take this as a light-hearted metaphor for your situation today, members of the Pomona College class of 2015? You have been dropped off by your parents, and now stand poised for your four years of college. Of course, it is not as scary as being stuck up on a cliff face; there are plenty of support systems in place to help you move forward— you are not alone. But still, the beginning of college is a bit of a plunge, and today I would like to encourage you to welcome that challenge and jump in with confidence.

Taking risks is a crucial part of your education. You have reached this point by being successful in many areas: writing essays, solving problems, taking tests, perhaps performing or creating art. You may feel tempted to stick with courses and activities that are familiar to you from your high school experience, where you know you can be successful. But you will not gain the full value of your Pomona education unless you step boldly out beyond your comfort zone, trying out new areas you have never thought of before. I’m sure that your faculty advisors gave you similar advice over the weekend.

Part of the job of college is to make you feel uncomfortable: uncomfortable with your previous assumptions, unsure even of your ability to succeed. This is one of the ways in which you stretch yourself, gaining confidence and developing new ways of thinking. Last fall, Pomona College launched a five-year comprehensive campaign with the theme of “Daring Minds.” This theme was chosen to emphasize the place of risk-taking for our students. By taking chances, by not settling for the easy choice, you will dare to achieve even more.
This is not always easy. Let me mention a personal experience along these lines. Throughout my school years, I convinced myself that I could not sing and so, although I enjoyed listening to vocal music, I spent my time in required school choirs mouthing the words so as not to reveal my lack of competence. Some 20 years ago, I decided to take voice lessons for a couple of years. I am by no means a great singer now, but I’m a better singer, and that experience—including the daunting task of singing solo in public recitals with other students—stretched and challenged me. More important, through the discipline and physical act of singing, of performing, I now understand and interpret music differently. I moved from observation and appreciation to taking part in the creation of art.

If you are comfortable in English and History courses, try your hand at Computer Science. If you have never learned to swim, why not try that as a Physical Education option? If you don’t have performance experience, think of exploring a course in modern dance or in Theatre. Join a student organization that is completely different from ones that you were part of in high school. Try rock climbing, or sign up to volunteer in a school in one of the surrounding communities. It is easy and comfortable to stay on campus and take advantage of all the opportunities here, but make sure you get out into your Los Angeles area surroundings—including places and experiences where you do not feel at home.

Recent research in neuroscience has shown that brains continue to develop in significant ways during the college years (that should be reassuring to you!), but to take full advantage of that growth you will need to stretch yourself and take risks. In the world of the 21st century, a premium for success is placed on creativity. That creativity is not something that you either have or do not have; it can be gained and developed by the experiences you undertake during your college years. By opening yourself to new opportunities you will grow in ways that may surprise you.

So don’t just stay stuck in a crevice on the cliff face, looking down at the water, afraid to jump. Dare to take those first clumsy steps forward even if you don’t know where they will lead; you will learn to fly soon enough. There is a big ocean out there to explore.