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Good morning students, staff, faculty, trustees, guests, and all other members of our Pomona College community. And again, a warm welcome to the Class of 2016. Congratulations on your first day of classes at Pomona College.

At some point during our time at Pomona, we may find ourselves reflecting on how we got here. One major reason is that at some point-- probably at several points-- in our lives, we have challenged ourselves intellectually. We've been encouraged to take risks in the classroom, and we've learned to think in original, bold, and creative ways. You are all here today in part because you are daring thinkers, and hopefully Pomona will help you continue to develop this ability. In your classes, you will learn to question, to challenge and deconstruct, to develop, imagine, and build.

These are some of the skills and values that Campaign Pomona espouses, under the banner of “Daring Minds.” Campaign Pomona, a fundraising campaign for the college, describes how Pomona encourages us to "dream boldly," "think broadly and deeply," "stretch [our] creative muscles" and "take intellectual risks." But while these are all valuable pursuits, they hardly require you to travel outside of your mind, much less the classroom. In order to truly challenge ourselves here at Pomona, we can't simply be daring in our thoughts... we must also be daring in our actions.

Since I came to this college, I’ve been deeply grateful for how often I find myself among people who aim to bridge theory and practice in their everyday lives, people who are daring in both thinking and in doing. I encountered this at the Queer Resource Center, where my fellow student staffers seamlessly blended complex queer theory with their experiences of identity on a daily basis. I encountered this in various classrooms where we connected academic thought to engagement with surrounding communities in ways that were mutually beneficial. I encountered this in my work with the Pomona Academy for Youth Success, or PAYS, a program run through the Draper Center, which addresses the reality of unequal educational access by working with high school students from low-income backgrounds who will be the first in their families to go to college, while also providing the college students involved with transformative and meaningful experiences. And not least of all, I encountered this in front of Alexander Hall last December, where some fellow students and I spent over two weeks living and sleeping in tents, writing letters, holding discussions, and having countless conversations with students, staff, faculty, and Claremont residents as they stopped by to talk with us. We did all of this to highlight our contention with the firing of 17 Pomona College workers and to petition for improved communication between students and trustees. These were all moments when I had the opportunity to be daring -- in both my thoughts and my actions. I could not imagine what my education at Pomona College would be like without them.

Being daring in our minds and in our deeds can mean many things. What it doesn’t mean is always voicing our opinions the loudest and taking up the most space. When I think of daring thoughts and actions, I think of challenging our assumptions-- questioning what we’ve been
told is possible, what we think we know, what we’ve easily accepted as true. Real daring is working towards what could be, instead of accepting the way things are. It is questioning injustice when and where it occurs, making an effort to understand its implications and impact, and doing our utmost to fight it— not silently observing the injustices from our ivory towers. True daring means deepening our capacity for empathy, as opposed to simply extending the patronizing hand of sympathy, or, worse, the casual dismissal of apathy.

Crucial to all of this is collaboration. Many of us have, at some point in our educational careers, experienced school environments that ran on competition. But when it comes to being daring, we ought to challenge ourselves to work collaboratively and depend on each other. Daring to work together and rely on each other for support is vital if we hope to grow as a community and bring about positive change.

Not surprisingly, daring actions are not always easy ones. They can be uncomfortable or difficult. Sometimes, they’ll violate social niceties. They can even alienate the people in our lives. In other words, daring actions can be risky. But without them, our intellectual risks become a little less meaningful, a little less striking. We should certainly continue to take the intellectual risks that the “Daring Minds” campaign urges us towards, but we must also follow through and push ourselves, as the cliché goes, to practice what we preach.

A professor at Pomona once described injustice and oppression as a moving walkway at an airport. Some people choose to walk on the walkway even as it rolls along; they are the ones actively involved in perpetuating current inequities. Others choose to remain stationary and let the walkway move them. In a way, this is where merely taking intellectual risks leaves us. Our minds may be daring, but our bodies don’t resist the flow of the walkway. As this professor then told us, in order to fight against injustice, we must be willing to turn around and walk against the direction of the conveyor belt. If you’ve ever tried doing this on an actual moving walkway, as I once did in middle school, you know how unnatural and exhausting it feels, not to mention how unpopular a decision it can be among the people who are just trying to get somewhere quickly and without interruption. But when inaction and complicity are often synonymous, turning around is the only way that we can oppose inequality.

This decision to pause, consider your present direction, and turn around, is what can come about when daring actions are paired with daring thoughts. This is what’s possible if we broaden the reach of intellectual risk and carry it outside of the classroom and into the rest of our lives. So, the next time you find yourself on the symbolic moving walkway, as we all inevitably will (and do), pause. Look at where you’re headed. Look behind you and observe the other direction. And maybe, if you’re feeling really daring, turn around and start moving.

Thank you.