Welcome to the opening Convocation of the one hundred twenty sixth year of instruction at Pomona College. On this occasion I am pleased to welcome the Class of 2016 and new transfer and visiting students to our community, and to greet returning students, our faculty, staff, and members of the Board of Trustees.

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 throughout 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 not only looking forward—but also looking backward.

I trust that all of you in the Class of 2016 are looking forward to your four years here on campus and to the new experiences and new friends those years will bring, while you also look back on the family, friends, and teachers who helped shape you and encouraged you to seize this opportunity. In the English language, and in general in Western cultures, we think of a "journey" in which the future lies in front of us, and the past behind us.

But other cultures think of the past and future differently. The Aymara, a people in the Andes highlands with whom several of our faculty (Professors Williams and Bolton) have worked, think of the future as lying behind them and the past in front. When you think about it, there is some logic to that viewpoint. Since we don’t know what the future will bring, it is like something behind us, in back of us, so how can we see it? And the past is something laid out before us, something we can “see,” that is, remember, review, and reflect upon. Another group, the Yupno people of Papua New Guinea, describe the future as lying uphill and the past downhill. It’s a nice image: just think of your life as being all uphill from this point on!

While I encourage you to think of past and future in this time of personal transition, this is also such a moment in the life of Pomona College. Yes, we are planning, as we always do, for an ambitious future in which the education we offer will be even stronger and the opportunities for students even more daring. But in 2012 we also pause, as we do periodically, to think about our past. October 14, Founders Day, will mark the 125th anniversary of the founding of Pomona College in 1887. Along with the celebratory festivities we expect at such times, anniversaries provide a temporal focal point, a place to stop momentarily, to engage in retrospective observation and future imaginings. What can you, as students today, learn from Pomona’s history and heritage, and how can it shape your own four years on campus?

Let’s pause for a moment to think about what was here in 1887, and first, to clear up a puzzle. Why is our College called Pomona College when the City of Pomona is five miles away and we are located in Claremont? This is something that has caused endless confusion to taxi drivers and others since our earliest days. The site first anticipated to be the College’s
home was in north Pomona; while plans were under way for a building there, it was a few miles south, at the intersection of White Avenue and Mission Boulevard and closer to downtown Pomona that our first classes were held in a tiny cottage. A replica of that structure now stands near the entrance to the Wash, just over the right-field fence of our baseball field (but take a look quickly, as this replica will be moved soon in preparation for our new studio art building). The actual, original cottage has been moved, but still stands 125 years later in Pomona. And tomorrow I will be joining others for a burrito lunch at the restaurant that now sits at White Avenue and Mission Boulevard! One year later, in 1888, the College was offered a building in Claremont—now Sumner Hall, home of the Admissions Office—by a developer who had gone bankrupt, and the College then moved to Claremont. Despite the new home, the founders elected to retain the name Pomona in gratitude to that city, which had played such a central role in its founding. A certain amount of confusion has existed ever since, but so have the close ties that bind Pomona and Claremont.

The founders of Pomona College were visionary individuals, since at that time Pomona was a small town and Claremont barely existed. What was here was mostly granite and sagebrush, but the founders imagined a college “of the New England type.” Like 40 other well-known and preeminent liberal arts colleges in the country, Pomona College was founded by the Congregational Church.

Given that church and town were close partners in our founding, it is a particular pleasure to welcome to our opening Convocation several representatives from this Pomona—Claremont partnership here. We are joined on this occasion by Mayor Elliott Rothman of the City of Pomona and Mayor Larry Schroeder of the City of Claremont, by the minister of our founding church, Beth Bingham of Pilgrim Congregational Church in Pomona (who is also the mother of a Pomona alumnus from the Class of 2011), and by the minister of the Claremont United Church of Christ, Rob Patton. Thank you all for being with us to celebrate the beginning of our quasquicentennial year!

The overall, unifying theme of the 125th celebration will be “community,” a defining concept that we will explore in a variety of ways. Pomona College has always existed in relationship with the communities around it. Historically (and still in 1887), this region was home to members of the Tongva people, one of many Native American tribal groups that inhabited Southern California. Recognizing this heritage, we will celebrate our founding and the beginning of the school year tonight at 7 p.m. with a procession from Frank Dining Hall to the Sontag Greek Theatre and a traditional Native American fire ceremony, led by tribal elders. I urge you to take part in this extraordinary opportunity to recognize the primary and pivotal role Native Americans have played, and continue to play, in this region today.

Over time, our communities have changed and within a few miles of this campus, the full diversity of 21st-century American life can be found, including rich and varied contributions from Chicano-Latino, African American, and Asian American communities. Too often in the course of our history, Pomona College has tended to be disengaged from the challenges faced by those communities, creating a “bubble” for the four-year student experience, which could have been translated from the Midwest or New England. In recent years, led by our students and faculty, we have fostered closer relationships with our neighbors, in part through the leadership and programs of our Draper Center for Community Partnerships. Building strong relationships with the people and organizations of our surrounding communities is now
certainly one of the ongoing and central goals of the College and reflects our mission and values.

On Founders Day, October 14, we will open our doors and host an open house on campus for residents in the area, with particular emphasis on the schoolchildren who are our future. I hope you will all take part in what promises to be a memorable community party and celebration.

As you look forward (or, as the Aymara would say, look backward) toward the next four years on campus, I hope you will find time to reflect on the vision and values that led to the founding of this College, and to ways in which each and every one of you can contribute to building a stronger community both here on campus and in partnership with the neighbors around us. Welcome to Pomona College!