

President David Oxtoby
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Earlier this spring I had the opportunity to spend a weekend at a ranch in the Tehachapi Mountains north and west of here. The highlight of that visit was seeing a pair of California condors flying together, gracefully matching each other's movements as they soared high in the sky on the afternoon thermals. Have you heard of these incredible birds? With a wingspan of nine feet, they make the ravens and hawks up in the sky at the same time look as small as sparrows.

As you may know, the condor, a relic of the Pleistocene era, is one of the most highly endangered species in California; the two I saw were among the two hundred or so now in the wild, each with a number on its wing so the population can be monitored and protected. Some 25 years ago, all the remaining wild condors were taken into zoos to begin a captive breeding program that has resulted in the released birds that can be seen today. Some would say that this bird, at the same time ungainly and elegant, is just not equipped to survive in the world of the 21st century as habitat destruction and environmental change continue relentlessly.

I thought of the condor with some irony as I read recently several dire warnings about the future of higher education and, specifically, of liberal arts colleges like Pomona. Are we overly expensive and old-fashioned relics that cannot survive in the modern world? Now the talk is all about efficiency: reaching larger numbers of students inexpensively with massive open online courses, speeding up the delivery of content while we downsize and cut back. Will technology render us so obsolete that colleges like ours will only be found in history books, or whatever replaces books in the future?

I honestly do not know if the condor will survive in the wild. But I have great confidence that our colleges will survive and indeed thrive, ungainly and complex as we are. Cost pressures and new technology will certainly drive change, but the core mission of gathering students and faculty together, not remotely but face to face, to bounce ideas off each another, to learn in discussion based classes and through individual and group research projects, and to be part of a supportive residential community, is as timely as it has ever been. The most urgent need we have is for daring, creative minds, the products of a liberal education, to work to resolve the problems in our society today.

Confident as I am, I still feel that it is important to stop and take stock periodically about who we are and where we are headed. This year, the 125th since our founding in 1887, has been such a time. As we paused to reflect on our history, we also stepped back and commissioned a study, by Mark Neustadt, of how Pomona College is perceived by the outside world, and in particular by high school students who are considering attending.

This "branding" study has attracted considerable attention on campus in the last few months. Now I don't really like the term "brand" as it makes me think more about shampoo or fast food than about colleges. But it is still important to examine regularly whether our reputation in the world matches the reality on our campus and, even more importantly, whether it matches the aspirations we hold for our education. The Neustadt study revealed some misalignments:

areas where a message that we think is quite clear is not getting through. For example, most of us would describe the Pomona College experience as intense in a positive way, but what filters through to the outside world is sometimes one of relaxed ease in opulent surroundings.

I was surprised at the strong reactions of many students to this study, sometimes based on second or third hand information on what it really showed. Some felt that we were trying to use marketing concepts to change the fundamental nature of our college, to turn us into a cutthroat and competitive institution. Some saw this as an attack on happiness itself. As a TSL columnist argued, "A pleasant and cooperative undergraduate experience can be a better preparation for life than four years of grade-grubbing and backstabbing. Just like a five-year-old, I like being happy." I agree completely with her, and with one of my advisees who came to speak with me, concerned that we were trying to do away with the happiness that she also found at Pomona College.

Philosophers since Plato and Aristotle have been asking and trying to answer questions such as "What is happiness?" and "What is the good life?" I will not try to develop deep new answers in the few minutes available to me today. But I would like to make the simple observation that happiness at Pomona College (and I hope in your lives as Pomona alumni) is and must be an intense, even driven, kind of happiness. It is not a condition of being satisfied with things as they are; the world has too many challenges that cannot be ignored. At Pomona College, happiness is exemplified by Ranney Draper and those who work in the Draper Center: individuals who are not content to sit back and relax but who find joy and happiness by struggling with difficult issues, working in partnership with the communities around us to build ever deeper connections.

As you graduate today, it is an appropriate time for each of you to pause and reflect on the alignment between your aspirations and your future plans. Will you use your education to make a difference? Your lives will, I hope, be filled with happiness in its many dimensions, with fun and love and the satisfaction of attacking hard and even seemingly intractable problems.

Let me close not as I began with condors wheeling high in the sky, but with a down to earth image of happiness at Pomona College based on creativity, hard work, and community building from a member of your class of 2013, Juliette Walker. As part of her senior art project, Juliette made a series of 373 cups, one for each member of your class, and invited all of you to come together to pick out your own. I find this an inspiring project, and I encourage you to take your mugs with you and keep them as symbols of the creativity, the hard work, and the community building that exemplify the happiness that I hope that each of you has found in different ways at Pomona College.