

President David Oxtoby
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Charge to the Class of 2015

Over the last year, two words have been much on my mind: “daring” and “safe.” All over campus, you see signs that say “Campaign Pomona: Daring Minds.” This is indeed the theme of our campaign, which is aimed at raising resources for our many strategic goals, and which will conclude seven months from now at the end of December. The phrase speaks to the value of taking risks, of encouraging students (and faculty) to move out of their comfort zones, to dare to think big rather than settle for something easy. It connects to creativity and innovation, core values for Pomona College and liberal arts education. It recalls the spirit of adventure present in the very air of California, whether in the challenge of climbing the highest mountain in the Lower 48, the innovation present in countless Silicon Valley startups, or the inspiration found in Los Angeles, the creative capital of the world. Pomona College lives to foster this daring spirit, as exemplified by the plans that many of you in the Class of 2015 have after graduation.

At the same time, the word “safe” has entered our public vocabulary in ways that differ from the past. I am speaking here of the “safe spaces” that we try to create to foster community and communication. On campuses across the country there has been discussion of “trigger warnings,” recognizing the ways in which pain from the past can bring up difficult memories for some when encountering challenging or specific kinds of subjects inside and outside the classroom. Pomona College strives to create safe spaces in the best sense of that word, places where with community support and open dialog we can face difference and can talk about even the most difficult issues that are out there in the world around us.

In common language, the words “daring” and “safe” are sometimes imagined to be opposites. “Playing it safe” suggests avoiding risks and sticking with what is known, settling for something tried and true rather than taking chances and allowing ourselves the possibility of failing. And of course either of these directions can be taken too far. “Daring” can turn into “reckless,” in which we put ourselves and others at serious risk by taking chances without thinking of the consequences. “Safe” can turn into “comfortable,” where we are satisfied with the status quo and with our own privilege, and never challenge ourselves by looking at the perspective of others. Or it can imply

avoidance of difficult subjects and missing out on the growth that can result from confronting issues that challenge us.

But I believe that the best of “daring” and “safe” can be combined, and that this is the heart of what we strive for at Pomona College. Let me develop a metaphor to explain what I mean. For nineteen days in December and January the public was captivated by the efforts of two climbers to complete the first “free climb” of the Dawn Wall of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park. On January 14, Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgeson achieved their dream and reached the top. My first image when I heard the term “free climb” was to picture two young men with packs and without any equipment at all, just making their way up a wall, which of course would have been crazy. But then I learned that this expedition was planned for five years and fully supported by an entire team, who lowered supplies to the climbers and provided the logistics that helped them to succeed. Most important, each climber was attached to safety ropes, so that in the event of a fall they would be caught and not drop to the valley below. Jorgeson took seven days to complete just one particularly difficult section of the climb, falling 11 times, being caught by his safety ropes, and trying again. But on his 11th try he succeeded in crossing to the next safe site and was then able to continue to the top.

What a daring effort by the two climbers! Rather than be content to do easy climbs with likely success (the only kind I would ever try!) they took on an incredible challenge. And before they succeeded, they failed many times with each fall, picking themselves up and trying something a little different the next time. This was not a reckless effort, though, but one in which considerations of safety were paramount. The climbers did everything they could to support one another and to reduce the risk of death and physical harm through their planning and their safety measures.

Is there a lesson for us at Pomona College in this feat? I like to think of our education at its very best as a system in which students are encouraged to challenge themselves in new and difficult areas, but with a safety system in place to support them in those efforts. Part of that education is learning to fail, to make mistakes repeatedly but then to learn from them, try again, and eventually succeed. Like the Yosemite climbers looking back on their nineteen-day climb, as you reflect on your four years here on campus, think about chances you took and ways in which you failed and what you learned from those failures. You can all be proud of where you stand right now.

But of course a world awaits you after graduation. It is not a world that is separate from your life on campus, since the issues of the world have been very much present for you in your time on

campus. The recent earthquake in Nepal took place halfway around the world, but two students from Pomona and others from the Claremont Colleges were there at the time and thankfully have returned safe. Sexual violence is, sadly, not just something that takes place in dangerous locations that we have been warned to avoid, but it can intrude and damage lives on the most idyllic of campuses. Ferguson, Missouri, and Baltimore, Maryland, are not just places on the map but are the sites of events that have a direct bearing on the lives of members of this college community, and have inspired the powerful national message that Black Lives Matter.

At Pomona College, we strive to create a space in which members of the community can take chances and aim high, while being supported and kept safe. (Yes, we sometimes fall short of this goal, and at Pomona, we do not hesitate to say we can and must do better. And, so too, I ask of you, members of the class of 2015 that as you graduate and move out into the world, I hope that you will set high goals and help to build communities that will support others in reaching their own goals. Don't be comfortable, but stay safe! Don't be reckless, but be daring! Congratulations to the Class of 2015!