

Convocation Speech

ASPC President Christina Tong '17

August 30, 2016

Welcome, students, faculty, administrators, staff, trustees, and other members of the college community. To the Class of 2020 and transfer students, welcome to the start of your first academic year at Pomona.

At points of beginning like this, we look forward and try to envision how this coming year might play out. We hope to impose some kind of plan on an uncertain future. But to inform these projections, we must look back at all that has elapsed in the last year.

In Orlando, we saw the deadliest incident of violence against the queer community in US history. In Nice and in Munich, we saw frightening instances of global terror. In the bombings in Baghdad and Istanbul, we see the violence often ignored by Western-centric media. In the shootings of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling, in the public's treatment of Gabby Douglas, we see the bitter hand of racism. In Brexit and in the rhetoric of this presidential cycle, we see xenophobia embraced on a national level. Social media and the 24-hour news cycle bring an immediacy and intimacy to the pain, loss, and strife of this last year.

The Pomona community is not immune. We are not emotionally removed. These campuses are a microcosm of the world, and a part of it. Thankfully, we have not seen the same horrific loss of life. But we individual members of the Claremont community, as members of those communities affected worldwide, still feel that pain. We see it in the protests at CMC last year, and in the raw and emotional testimonies of students of color. We see it in the fear some international students feel for their families while their peers party around them, unaware.

The urgency of these events deserve acknowledgement. There will and should be conversations about them on campus, in and out of the classroom. It is Pomona's stated mission to educate the next generation of leaders, scholars, artists, and citizens. It is places like Pomona that help form the thoughts of future thought leaders. We cannot do this well without intentionality.

This year, ASPC is reflecting on how we frame conversations, along two dimensions. I share them with you today in the hope that together, we can bring these considerations to campus dialogues. First, ask: who is present? Then, ask: what is the mindset in which we approach the conversation?

We must be cognizant of who is at the table, and who is not. And when the conversation at hand includes making decisions without all stakeholders present, we must reflect on how that changes the quality of our decisions.

This concern - that of who is present - is one that we should be asking at all levels of this institution. Seven years ago, ASPC President Jed Cullen identified our “tradition of change driven by community discourse.” ASPC commends Pomona College for its use of a shared governance system. Students share voices and votes on committees with trustees, faculty, and administrators. But we at Pomona are increasingly a part of the broader Claremont Colleges community. Meaningful decisions, such as those on demonstration policy and negotiations around substance free openings dates, are happening at the consortial level. Students need to be present in these discussions.

Our second question considers the mindset with which we approach the conversation. It is tempting, and sometimes easier, to take polarized positions in discussions. Let’s explore one key example: the recent nationwide debate on safe spaces and academic freedom. Robust intellectual debate is framed as antithetical to students’ desires to feel safe. But these ideas are not mutually exclusive. We are capable of having compassion for our peers while rigorously debating ideas.

The Pomona student body has changed significantly over the years. Before, your typical Pomona student was insulated from the real implications of many discussions. Now, we admit more students of color, more low-income students, and more students from a variety of diverse backgrounds. A student’s experiences have real influence on how they experience discussions. If I were to discuss the theoretical implications of a Trump presidency for undocumented and DACAmented students, I would be able to do so with some form of academic distance. But for those students directly affected, the potential consequences are terrifying.

Global tragedies, campuswide events, and everyday discussions have real emotional effects on your friends and peers. On our campuses, we offer spaces for people to regroup with those who are similarly emotionally affected. We don’t do this to avoid hard

conversations, but so that the people we care about can process together. Such spaces are needed now not because students are more coddled, but because students are closer to the real life implications of academic discussions. Safe spaces are a tool in the service of education.

I understand there are some who think otherwise. When I speak with students who feel this way, I can see they are motivated by genuine concern for academic freedom. While I disagree with their conclusions, I respect their intentions: safe spaces should not inhibit healthy academic discourse.

In a debate like this one, I ask that you consider that the least empathetic, least helpful view is the needlessly polarized one. Consider adopting a mindset that searches for nuance and seeks to understand perspectives. Try to remember that for some, these discussions are steeped in pain and loss; for all, there is no clean separation of one's experiences from one's views.

There is tragedy in the world. The Claremont bubble does not protect us from it. Our responsibility on these campuses is to seek to understand, so that we may strive to do better. I urge you to do so by having conversations that challenge your views, and having them with intentionality. Ask yourself who is present. Consider where others are coming from. Strive to see the nuance even in the most polarized of debates.

This academic year, consider this: we have the opportunity, we have the responsibility, and we have the power to elevate campus dialogue.

Thank you.