

Politics and American Higher Education

Caltech president Thomas Rosenbaum hosted presidents from Harvey Mudd College, Pomona College, and ArtCenter College of Design in Ramo Auditorium on January 24 for “Politics and American Higher Education,” a discussion about the roles and responsibilities of colleges and universities in America’s new political landscape.

Academic institutions traditionally do not take political stands, “and yet in another way we are manifestly political,” Rosenbaum told the audience. “Unless you pay attention to educating your students in a way that they will become good citizens of the country, that they will embrace the value of looking at data, seeking truth, then we as universities will fail and we as a country will fail.”

Moderator Terry McCarthy, president and CEO of the Los Angeles World Affairs Council, asked about the debate over safe spaces. Pomona president David Oxtoby said small groups wanting to meet in private are granted safe spaces on his campus. Publicly announced events, however, cannot be exclusionary. “That crosses a line, at least for Pomona, and we say no, you cannot discriminate for a public event.”

Instead of focusing on safe spaces, Oxtoby suggested academic institutions do more to encourage “daring spaces,” where groups from different backgrounds and opinions can come together to respectfully share their views and feel comfortable disagreeing with one another.

That diversity of thought, background, and experience is important in higher education, Rosenbaum said, and American universities are so successful because they have been able to attract talent from across the world.

The panel also agreed that selectivity in admissions is not a negative for any



Educating “good citizens”

Presidents from four Southern California institutions of higher education, including Caltech president Thomas Rosenbaum, came together on January 24 with moderator Terry McCarthy of the Los Angeles World Affairs Council to discuss their evolving role in the current political landscape.

institution, provided that it offers opportunities and access for qualified students in every community.

ArtCenter president Lorne Buchman noted that his institution has a responsibility “to reach into communities where students would never even dream of what it might mean to have a career in art design and create some kind of bridge for them to get there.”

Harvey Mudd president Maria Klawe said it’s important colleges and universities never limit where they look for the next Nobel laureate. “We have the opportunity to be an existence proof that [regardless of whether] you are female or transgender or Muslim or a football player or a poet...there is absolutely

nothing about any of those characteristics that has an implication about whether you can be a great physicist, biologist, engineer, computer scientist, or mathematician.”

In his concluding comments, Rosenbaum noted that teaching quantitative skills alongside the liberal arts equips students to surmount any challenge, political or otherwise, now and into the future.

“If we do our job right we will see, one student at a time, the effects of that,” he said. “One of the great things about being an academic is that each year you get another group of incredibly bright, wonderful students who are going to go out and change the world.”