

Remarks by
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Performing Arts Center's Christopher Cohan Center
Harman Hall

Good morning and thank you all for joining us today. Congratulations to the award winners. And let me acknowledge the efforts of our Facilities Services staff -- the campus looks great -- inside and out -- including this beautiful facility.

This week we welcome another outstanding class of freshmen -- another record-breaking class -- the average GPA is 3.85 and the average ACT is 27. This class is also the most diverse student population for a first-year class in Cal Poly history. And I know that our friends Gil Stork and José Ortiz, the presidents of Cuesta and Allan Hancock community colleges, are delighted that we are projecting to enroll twice as many transfer students this year as last year. We also welcome back more than 90 percent of last year's freshman class, which is an outstanding retention number and a real credit to the faculty and staff. Our students like what you are doing on their behalf.

On a personal note, speaking for myself -- and my wife Sharon -- we couldn't be more excited to be part of Cal Poly. We can't thank everybody enough for how welcome you've made us feel. And I hope she doesn't object, but I'd like to acknowledge Sharon, who's sitting over here to my left, and thank her for being my best friend and my life coach.

I have a lot to cover with you this morning, but first things first. Let me thank you -- the faculty and the staff for all that you've done so remarkably well during some very tough, challenging times. You have been through a lot the past few years. The state's budgets have been -- and here's an understatement -- challenging. I appreciate the sacrifices that you, as faculty and staff, have made and continue to make -- from the furlough year, to the freeze in wages even as some basic prices have continued to rise, to the need to rethink your approach to serving our students as budgets have been reduced, and, in general, having to figure out how to do with less.

The scope of the state's budget cuts has indeed been breathtaking. Four years ago, Cal Poly received \$150 million for our academic operating budget. This year, the state will be providing less than \$90 million. In four short years, Cal Poly has suffered a 40 percent cut in state funds. And yet you -- our faculty and our staff -- have persevered and, in many cases, you've increased our remarkable excellence. You have pulled together to steadily improve graduation rates; you continue to be recognized for the quality of Cal Poly's programs. Just this morning U.S. News and World Report announced that Cal Poly is again the top rated public undergraduate institution in the West -- for the 19th consecutive year.

Yes, these have been tough times – but you have risen to the challenges, and I know the people on stage with me here are grateful for your resiliency, your dedication to our students’ success, and your thorough professionalism.

Speaking of my colleagues on the stage – I’d love to tell you a short story about each one and their valuable and eloquent efforts to represent your viewpoints and interests to me. But I believe they will forgive me if I single out just one person, Provost Robert Koob, for special mention.

Bob has provided stellar leadership across much of what we do every day. He has inspired us to improve in key areas that have led to increased student success, perhaps most importantly, increased graduation rates.

For the past year, he has also been wearing a second hat as interim Vice President for Advancement, and that division, under his leadership, has helped Cal Poly regain momentum in fundraising.

I can’t possibly do justice to all of Bob’s work, but suffice to say that Bob’s efforts have been a model of visionary leadership, cross-campus collaboration, and unselfish devotion to our students’ success. Thank you, Bob.

In preparing for my remarks today, I wrote out a long list of student, faculty, and staff accomplishments that I wanted to highlight, but I quickly realized that we would be here for a full 50-minute lecture just covering the many examples of your accomplishments.

While it is my nature to talk in 50-minute chunks, I thought it would be better for me to spend our time today focusing on the future.

I will get right to business.

I’m now in my eighth month as your president, and in that time I have learned a lot about Cal Poly, about you, about being president.

There are a few things I’m certain of.

Number One: There is no shortage of advice for a new president. But that’s a good thing! I have really enjoyed listening to an array of incredibly conflicting viewpoints. And while I kid a bit about hearing multiple conflicting views, in fact, I’ve heard a considerable amount of consensus about who we are and what we need to do. This is very reassuring to me. It gives me confidence about the direction I believe we should pursue, because it’s a direction that you have signaled that you are eager to pursue.

One very consistent sentiment is that as good as we are at Cal Poly, everyone believes we can do better. I’ll say that again: As good as we are at Cal Poly, everyone believes we can do better.

One person summarized Cal Poly to me this way: We have numerous peaks of excellence – and we need to fill the valleys in between. So today is a good day to share some thoughts with you about how we can sustain those peaks of excellence and fill the valleys between. Over the long haul – the next 10 to 15 years – if we stay true to our bedrock principles and we execute on well conceived plans – I am confident that Cal Poly will thrive as a nationally recognized beacon of excellence. I have no doubt.

But I confess to you that we have heavy lifting to do in the coming months and over the next couple of years. We are at a critical cross-road. We must meet the immediate challenges to preserve our level of excellence, while staying focused on our future. To do this, we must know where we are going and agree to go there together.

As a starting point, I believe there are four key principles we should be united around as a campus. These principles helped make Cal Poly what it is today.

The first key principle is: An unwavering focus on students' success.

Everything we do needs to support students' success. If it doesn't enhance student learning and student success, we shouldn't do it.

The second principle is: Learn by Doing.

We have to make sure Learn by Doing not only survives these tough budget times, but that it thrives.

The third is Excellence.

We must strive for continuous improvement and excellence in all that we do.

And the fourth is: Fully leveraging the immense value of being a comprehensive polytechnic university.

There are very few comprehensive polytechnics in the country, and with the strengths of our six distinctive colleges, we are in a great position to create new and innovative cross-disciplinary learning opportunities.

I look at these key principles as the four points on our compass. They are non-negotiable.

Our road map is our Strategic Plan: We have a well-conceived document that outlines an excellent path forward. It's the product of a couple of years of internal debate. In the past few months, it has benefited from spirited discussions in focus groups with faculty, students, staff, alumni, and industry partners. The Academic Senate has also given the plan thoughtful review and consideration. I appreciate the Senate's endorsement of the plan, as well as their helpful discussions on enhancing Learn by Doing and developing the Teacher-Scholar Model.

For me, our starting point is the vision as expressed in the Strategic Plan, and that is:

Cal Poly will be the nation's premier comprehensive polytechnic university, recognized as an innovative institution that develops and inspires resourceful professionals to serve California and help solve global challenges.

The Strategic Plan is broad and deep. My responsibility as president is to have us focus on a few key imperatives that will guide us for the next 10 to 15 years. The key principles and the six strategic imperatives are available on the Cal Poly website.

Let me emphasize that a good plan has to be dynamic, and we need to be ever flexible so that we can adjust to the realities around us. The precise metrics are not carved in stone. We need to decide as a university what we will use as appropriate measures of progress. But it is important that we do so expeditiously. What gets measured gets done, and I hope you will agree, virtually all of these indicators of progress have considerable merit.

I see these imperatives as excellent markers – guideposts – charting our path. Here's how they could play out over the next decade.

Let's start with the first imperative:

➤ Develop and Inspire Whole-System Thinkers

Our mission is to produce resourceful professionals who are comfortable working across multiple disciplines, who are so familiar with other disciplines that they can help discover solutions to society's grand challenges.

This imperative means that we will leverage the distinctive characteristics of our comprehensive polytechnic curriculum. That is, we will remain committed to our STEM and professional disciplines, while, at the same time, embracing the knowledge, values, and habits of mind fostered by the humanities, arts, and social sciences.

To succeed, we need to be working in true collaboration across the campus, drawing out the best across all of our colleges, across all of our disciplines. Our students need the best of all that we have to offer. After all, it is in the very uncommon richness of our polytechnic curriculum that we are so well equipped to educate whole-system thinkers, perhaps better equipped than any other university in California.

At the same time, our rapidly changing society requires us to become more flexible about our curricula.

We must find ways to adjust it more quickly. I leave those details to you, the faculty. Of course, it's imperative that, in addition to requiring our students to take appropriate courses, we require each student to develop a portfolio of increasingly demanding Learn by Doing projects, each with a multidisciplinary aspect.

Directly related to our academic mission is the need to substantially improve our graduation rates. Currently, our six-year graduation rate stands at 76 percent. You deserve great credit for having steadily improved that rate, particularly over the past five years. But we can and must do better. Given the high caliber of students that we attract, our goal should be to reach and exceed a 90 percent graduation rate.

As a first step toward improvement, we need to better understand why some students don't graduate, and in particular, how to narrow the graduation gaps, particularly in key STEM areas, as it is our STEM disciplines that distinguish Cal Poly's role in the state's system of higher education, and a critical shortage of STEM graduates is looming.

What are the barriers to student success? How can we reduce those barriers?

To answer those questions, Provost Koob and I have formed an action group with the admittedly unwieldy name of Pipeline, Yield, Retention and Graduation Program Action Group. (Perhaps their first task will be to come up with a catchier name.) We will announce details by early October.

The group will be charged with evaluating graduation rates of current Cal Poly students, evaluating the number of admitted Cal Poly students who do not enroll, and evaluating our prospective student pipeline and our partner school and outreach programs.

Related to educating the whole-system thinker, I strongly believe we need to embrace technology more fully in our instructional approach. Our students don't actually think about how they will use technology – it's instinctive to them, it's in their DNA. Therefore, technology needs to be part of our DNA.

Toward developing a greater use of technology to aid our instructional efforts, I have directed Information Services to create a new era of user-focused services specifically to support our academic mission. Information Services will reallocate existing resources to form a new Academic Technology group to directly support the technology needs of faculty, staff, and students. The team will soon be soliciting your ideas on how to better harness technology to support instructional efforts.

Let me turn now to our second imperative.

➤ Embrace the Teacher-Scholar Model

To implement this model more fully, we need to find ways to increase opportunities for faculty research and creative activity – but not just any activity. These must be activities that enhance student learning, for example, projects for the students and by the students, and, possibly, even some projects that will yield an increasingly direct impact on economic development and quality of life for the university, the city, and the region.

A key to success in this imperative is finding the appropriate student-to-faculty ratio and the right balance of tenured/tenure track-to-non-tenure track faculty that enhances the faculty's ability to spend more time with students. We shouldn't think about this as "buying time" away from

teaching. Rather, this provides additional time for more Learn by Doing activities. We need to think of this as creating new opportunities for student learning inside and outside of the traditional classroom.

Ideally, we will find ways to make it possible for faculty to engage in creative activities – whether it's an applied research project or a problem-solving project for an industry partner, or it's some other form of scholarship – with the understanding that if faculty are free to learn through their scholarship, students will benefit from that scholarship either directly or indirectly. This should lead to more sophisticated and challenging Learn by Doing opportunities for students.

Additional funds through foundation and corporate grants, contracts, philanthropy, and, yes, greater investment by our students and parents, will help pave the way for the teacher-scholar to spend more time with students in small group settings, thus enriching Learn by Doing and supporting the academic excellence that has been built previously.

Let me stress that implementation of this imperative should be driven by the faculty. Our faculty have demonstrated their commitment and dedication to our students' success.

The third imperative:

➤ Foster diversity and cultural competency in a global context

For some, this issue is complex. But for me, this imperative is simple. It's all about student success.

Our students cannot learn to succeed in today's multicultural society if they don't have some similar real-world experiences while on campus. Our students cannot be truly successful in an increasingly diverse society and in an increasingly complex, global economy unless they experience as students what it takes to function in the real world.

And let me be very clear: In my mind, this imperative is about more than just checking boxes on gender and ethnicity. Without a doubt, we need more California students of color; we also need more out-of-state students as well as more international students to bring in broader perspectives.

And in the interest of full transparency, let me point out that these non-resident students also help underwrite the cost of educating in-state students. These out-of-state students have contributed significantly to our ability to minimize loss of faculty and staff positions at Cal Poly. Similarly, the inclusion of out-of-state students helps offset the need to reduce in-state enrollment.

We also need enhanced study-abroad programs and international opportunities for corporate partnerships. I think of it this way: We need to bring more of the world to Cal Poly and take more of Cal Poly to the world.

This imperative also means we need greater ethnic diversity among our faculty and staff, as well as among our student population.

These are not just my opinions. Multiple industry partners of ours have stressed to me their belief that our relative lack of diversity is Cal Poly's Achilles heel.

Obviously, the campus community needs to be involved in discussions on how to move forward on improving the compositional diversity. At the same time, we need to take some steps fairly soon, and toward that, we will quickly involve the Inclusive Excellence Council on some appropriate initiatives over the next few weeks.

As a distinctly separate but complementary step toward progress on this imperative, I have formed an International Education Action Group, with a specific goal of evaluating a self-support model to attract more international students to Cal Poly. I have asked for a recommended action plan to be submitted to me by winter quarter, hoping that we might implement a pilot project as early as next summer.

Let me also introduce into the equation another factor that speaks to student success: We need to provide more on-campus housing. In the past four years, Cal Poly has come a long way on this front, more than doubling our on-campus housing. Poly Canyon Village is an excellent addition. But we need more. Substantially more. At a bare minimum, we need to have enough on-campus housing for all freshmen and sophomores as soon as feasible.

Why is this important?

Again, it is about student success. Research shows that students do better academically when they live on campus. More on-campus housing will also enable more students to be closer to campus activities, encouraging engagement in co-curricular activities so important to retention and Learn by Doing.

It's also important for student recruitment. We compete for prospective students who are comparing us to universities that provide a robust on-campus life, a campus life that is welcoming to all students – and if we are to successfully compete for the kinds of students who will continue to succeed in a polytechnic curriculum, we'll need to provide more campus-life programming, starting with more on-campus housing, but not ending there.

Toward that, I've appointed the 24/7 Campus action group. Their specific charge is to make recommendations that will enhance campus life to meet the academic and social needs of the students, whether the student is living on or off campus. The group is comprised of students, faculty, and staff. Details will follow in the coming weeks.

The fourth imperative:

➤ Promote a culture of support, philanthropy, and community engagement

I realize this is a mouthful – but there are related issues here. As a campus community, we need to provide better support not only to our students, but to each other, as well.

As a starting point, we are expanding our efforts to support our students with counseling and advising, with appropriate education on such issues as alcohol awareness and sexual assault. As last spring's sexual assault reports demonstrated, these are complex problems demanding our attention.

This week, University Housing, under the leadership of Vice President Cornel Morton and Associate VP Preston Allen, is launching a new alcohol awareness program that was created and generously sponsored by Scott and Julia Starkey, the parents of Carson Starkey. The program, which is called Aware, Awake, Alive, will be part of WOW's programming this year. Julia and Scott are with us today, by the way, and I would like them to stand and be acknowledged. Julia and Scott, I just want you to know how grateful we are for your generosity and commitment to Cal Poly. Your personal resolve in Carson's memory is truly inspirational.

Also related to these efforts, we will soon appoint a full-time SAFER coordinator.

As you will hear later in my remarks, we propose to increase the student counseling available through our Health and Counseling Services. I see this as a very important step to helping students navigate university life successfully.

I'd also like to pause here to express my gratitude to the work that Rachel Fernflores has done as chair of the alcohol and sexual assault task force that I appointed last spring in the wake of the sexual assault allegations. Rachel will shortly be sending me a formal report, but she has championed the appointment of a full-time SAFER coordinator, as well as increased education on alcohol abuse.

As to the idea of increased community engagement, there are two strands to this:

Ideally, everyone on campus would be motivated to involve themselves beyond the scope of their individual jobs to engage in our campus community – motivated to be engaged in the civic life of our region, our city, and beyond. The more we support each other and the more we are supportive of our region, the more support we'll get in return and the stronger we all will be.

The second strand is that as the county's single largest employer and given the entrepreneurial talents and energy of our students, faculty, and staff, I am eager for Cal Poly to play a stronger role in the region's economic development efforts through greater collaboration with the City of San Luis Obispo, the other cities, the county, and the business community. Through such engagement and collaboration, perhaps we can make progress on a vexing problem related to faculty and staff recruitment and retention – the need for a stronger partner/spousal accommodation program. For years, this issue has been a challenge in recruiting talent to Cal Poly and to companies throughout the region.

And, of course, creating a culture of philanthropy will be crucial to our financial future. This means discussing the importance of giving back at all times. More on that in a moment.

The fifth imperative:

- Achieve sustainable growth and support world-class facilities and equipment

Consistent with the growth and changes needed to achieve our vision, we have to plan targeted, sensible, and sustainable growth – in enrollment of bachelor's and master's students and also in infrastructure and facilities.

Let me talk about enrollment growth first. To achieve all that we want and to serve California, we need to increase enrollment. I am sure two questions immediately pop into your mind – how much and why? As to how much, we'll explore this together as part of having faculty, staff, and students engaged in figuring out the right paths for achieving our vision. As to why we need to increase enrollment, the major impetus is clear: We owe it to our state to educate more students.

Within the next decade, it's projected that California's industries will face a shortage of one million four-year college graduates – the kind of diverse, whole-system thinkers necessary to sustain the state's competitiveness in a global economy. The shortage will be particularly acute in STEM-related fields. Who better than Cal Poly, the premier comprehensive polytechnic university, to help close that gap?

As to the need to expand and upgrade our facilities, just think about this:

We are here today in the Christopher Cohen Performing Arts Center; Harman Hall is a fantastic venue, truly outstanding, a true partnership with the community. Not 400 feet away is our music building. It's an understatement to say that our music building is insufficient for the needs of an excellent university.

We have a state-of-the-art Rec Center and a state-of-the-art Center for Science and Mathematics building rising up out of the ground as I speak – and literally next door to us is a gymnasium that harkens back half a century – and not in a good way. And we also have only one half of a football stadium.

I purposely mention the arts and athletics together because I strongly believe that together they form a great front porch welcoming the community to the university. In addition, outstanding arts and athletics programs can be useful in attracting world-class talent for the benefit of our students. Moreover, arts and athletics are prime examples of Learn by Doing.

We have a long list of facilities needs.

We need state-of-the-art laboratories to expand and enhance Learn by Doing, a state-of-the-art library, additional student commons space, and I'm sure each of you has a suggestion.

I know many on campus and among our alumni believe strongly that we need a world-class, unifying events center – for graduation, for concerts, for certain athletic events, for bringing the campus and the community together much as the Performing Arts Center does for the arts. Our donors and industry partners have shown that they will step up and help us build world-class

facilities – just look at the Center for Science and Mathematics, the Meat Processing Center or the Bonderson Projects Center to name just three.

Precisely how we grow – in enrollment and in our physical plant – requires broad engagement by all of you. It is my intention to engage students, faculty, and staff, as well as representatives of all of Cal Poly's stakeholders in these discussions over the next several months. These discussions will help us formulate the priorities that will guide us in a comprehensive capital fundraising campaign will also include endowments. On that score, much planning is under way.

And that brings me to our sixth strategic imperative:

➤ Achieve Financial Stability

Without financial strength, the rest is just talk.

At this point in our history, it is tempting to lament the state's retreat from its historic support for public education. Twenty-five years ago, the state provided 90 percent of the investment to educate our students. Today, the state provides less than half. We can grieve for what was; we can wish today's realities were otherwise. But let's be honest: The state of California is no longer the major investor in Cal Poly – the students and parents, through tuition and fee, provide the majority of our operating funds. This is not to say that we won't continue to lobby the state for a restoration of funds – we certainly will. The state and the CSU are essential to our future. But this is also important to keep in mind: Even considering the cuts of the past four years, California still funds higher education more generously than many other states. State funding is a big reason our cost to students remains one of the best values in American higher education. Even in California, Cal Poly remains a great value. The average UC is 80 percent more expensive. [Cal Poly tuition and fees = \$7985; the average UC tuition and fees = \$14,369]

At the same time, we cannot rely on the state to support our standards of excellence. The burden for that will have to fall elsewhere, and bluntly, that means we have to rapidly expand our fundraising prowess.

To that end, our next capital campaign will be crucial. The internal work to prepare for a philanthropic campaign is well underway. We are mapping our individual unit, department, and college priorities to make sure they are in alignment with our strategic imperatives. Soon, we will be test marketing these priorities with some of our most important supporters.

In addition to improved fundraising, our financial stability also depends on asking students and their parents to pick up even more of the investment required for excellence. The good news is that our students have demonstrated time and again that they are willing to support excellence in the future. Rising out of the ground as we speak is a \$71 million dollar state-of-the-art Rec Center paid for by students. Our students recognize excellence, and they are willing to support it. Therefore, this fall we will be consulting with students on a proposal to implement a Student Success Fee.

The Student Success Fee, if and when it is fully implemented, would be earmarked to increase graduation rates, increase course sections and lab offerings, enhance diversity and multicultural competence, provide additional counseling to students through Health and Counseling Services, as well as provide for increased academic advising for all our students, including student-athletes. I recognize that this request comes on the heels of significant increases recently in tuition and fees. However, additional support is necessary to maintain a margin of excellence.

Now, as part of the compact with our students, we are duty bound – all of us in this room – we are duty bound to redouble our efforts to increase private philanthropy, to more aggressively pursue grants and contracts with foundations and our industry partners. We need to at least double our philanthropic endowment over the course of an eight-year capital campaign. To do that, we will have to invest more resources into fundraising.

We also need to tap into the entrepreneurial energy of our students and faculty, and we've taken several steps in the right direction with the programs in our Tech Park, the launching of our University Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, and new efforts under way in Continuing Education – all with Learn by Doing as a central focus.

What all of this adds up to is that our operating budget, instead of coming from one dominant source – the state of California – is going to have to come from multiple sources – from the state, from private philanthropy, from students and parents, from industry partners and foundations.

Before I close, I'd like to leave you with a final thought and ask for your personal commitment to our future.

In his book about what makes organizations great, Jim Collins, author of "Good to Great," makes the point that the people who make their organizations successful do so in part because they are brutally honest with each other about the realities of their situation. At the same time, they believe deeply in their ability to succeed despite daunting obstacles.

In other words, blind optimism can lead to crushing failure.

I know that I am naturally a glass-half full person. Some who know me say that I'm halfway to the next glass. I am an optimist, but I am realistic about what our challenges are, and I want us to understand those realities as fully as possible. Acknowledging those realities is important to considering our future. And when it comes to our future, each of us has a personal choice to make. We can choose to bemoan the state budget, we can long for the good old days when the state wrote a check for 90 percent of our support. Or we can choose for the future.

I am choosing for the future. I am choosing to believe that together we will work through the challenges and difficulties that are with us and will surely arise. I am choosing to believe that together we will blaze a path forward, that we will thrive as a comprehensive polytechnic, that we will strengthen Learn by Doing, that Cal Poly will shine brightly across the country and around the world as a beacon of excellence.

I ask you to make that same choice, to believe in our future and to work together to realize this vision. Please join me – it will be exhilarating.

Thank you so much for your attention.