STUDENTS BREAK THE MOLD TO ATTEND COLLEGE

BY JO ANN LLOYD

CAL POLY PRESIDENT WARREN J. BAKER is one. So is ASI President Tylor Middlestadt. As are former U.S. Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney and award-winning writer Joyce Carol Oates.

All are first-generation students – the first in their family to attend college – and all face unique obstacles.

First-generation students’ parents probably don’t expect them to go to college, creating early challenges to success that have nothing to do with the rigors of academia, says Susan Sparling, director of Cal Poly’s Student Academic Services.

Many of these students are coping with guilt, homesickness and loneliness because “they feel they don’t belong here” and might take longer to connect to Cal Poly.

Some feel guilty for not helping support the family, Sparling explains. Many work two or three jobs to send money home.

Aerospace engineering senior Carlos Hurtado sends what he can. He’s been helping support his single mom since he was a 15. “My mom worked two jobs. She’s the reason I’m here; she knows the importance of education.”

Some parents, though, don’t realize the value of higher education. Angelina Aviña, a fourth-year biology major who plans to become a doctor, said her parents didn’t know she was serious about college.

“I have eight siblings,” she explains. “I was expected to stay and help out.

“I had to plan for college secretly. It was hard to be selfish for once in my life.”

And while animal science senior Monica Ulloa’s parents were supportive of her plans, they couldn’t help with the application process or filling out papers for financial aid. During her first quarter, Ulloa was almost forced to drop out because of a financial aid error.

With the help of her Educational Opportunity Program advisor in Student Academic Services, the problem was rectified.
Ulloa graduates in June.

Up to 25 percent of Cal Poly students are first-generation college students, estimates Sparling. Getting here is their first challenge; succeeding once here is their next.

Student retention is a goal shared with the University Diversity Enhancement Council. The council is sponsoring an initiative aimed at increasing retention and graduation rates.

As part of the initiative, first-generation student panels are telling their stories to groups across campus to give faculty and staff a better understanding of the students’ unique needs. The UDEC is also focusing on establishing endowed scholarships for first-generation college students.

First Year Seminars – classes designed to help new students succeed – as well as the three-week residential Summer Institute for EOP students, help ease the transition from high school to college. And Sparling and her staff help students and families adjust.

"Families want to find that one person they can entrust ‘their jewel’ to," Ulloa says.

Students, too, need to find someone to connect with. "It wasn’t until I got involved in activities outside the classroom that I began to feel better," says Aviña, recalling her early feelings of isolation.

Ulloa, from San Diego, got involved with Latinos in Agriculture “right away.” Still, she feels the pangs of homesickness.

"I’m really close to my family," she said. "I was the first of five children to leave home. My brother lives two blocks from my mom; my sister lives five minutes away. Sometimes when we’re on the phone, I feel left out.”

All three students admit it’s a tough balancing act – school, work, extracurricular activities and a social life. But they’re convinced they took the right path.

“I almost gave up,” Aviña says. “My first ‘A’ was an affirmation that I am supposed to be here.”