Regional Philanthropy: Building New Leaders

Mechanical Engineering student Katie Ruhm at work in the Mustang ‘60 Lab.

down to fund a student tech position, the interest will pay the annual salary indefinitely.
Other companies have joined in: Haas Machining and Miller Welding “lease” equipment to the shop for free – and then replace it with ever-more advanced machinery every two years.

“I’m really excited about the commitment from industry and the surrounding community,” said Nielsen.
Nielsen retired from General Mills after designing, building and managing the engineering functions in plants throughout the U.S. He attributes his success to the hands-on education he got at Cal Poly and says that of all the engineers he has hired, the most successful were those who could relate to the people making the products the engineers designed. He believes the Mustang ‘60 shop and its aging counterpart, the AERO Hangar, position Cal Poly students for just that kind of success.

A member of the Industrial Advisory Board, Nielsen is adamant about the breadth of learning experiences the Mustang ‘60 shop and the AERO Hangar provide but maintains they are only a launch-pad to the Student Project Center, the next step of student fabrication labs now in the planning phase.

“The hangar was dated in 1980 and it’s slated to become a parking lot,” said Nielsen. “We need the new facility to be a viable operation – expanding capabilities and ensuring it’s available to everyone – before we lose the hangar. The learning experiences these shops provide are just too important.”

Since senior projects have become more complicated, many programs have incorporated industry-sponsored, team-based projects and those require more complex space to house them. The concept for the Student Fabrication Center is a 35,000-square-foot building equipped with traditional and emerging technologies and an emphasis on peer teaching and cross-pollination between majors from artists to biologists to engineers. Nielsen said, “It’ll be the hangar on steroids.”

Building New Leaders

Robby Nielsen (no relation) was a mechanical engineering major before his experiences in the shop helped him find a fit in a more systems- or process-oriented major: industrial and manufacturing engineering. He worked as a shop technician for about a year before asking if he could redesign the shop for greater efficiency and presented his plan to management. Leone said he considered it for about a second before agreeing. “If they’re up for the challenge, we’re willing to support them in any way we can,” he said, explaining that those opportunities foster initiative and entrepreneurialism. “We want them to be adaptable and have exposure to different things so when they are out in the workforce, they have a bigger toolbox in their brain.”

Robby Nielsen said the opportunity started the supervision and project management side of his career. One of the things he assessed was staffing, realizing that student demand grows as the quarter and school year progresses. He re-engineered the student shop technician’s work shifts to align with the demand curve, saving labor costs.

He also recommended increasing the number of student shop technicians and creating designated specialties to serve a growing demand for the shop. He wrote job descriptions for all the positions including scheduling, maintenance, inventory, CNC and lead technician. He is now working with a group of faculty, staff, students and alumni to design the new Student Fabrication Center. The concept was provided to the College of Architecture and Environmental Design, where 12 teams developed renderings for the new facility – already an interdisciplinary Learn by Doing experience.

For his outstanding contributions, he was recognized in 2010-11 as Student Employee of the Year (SEOTY) at the county’s high-tech firms. According to the newspaper, Pereira manages the King City Nursery, serving the vegetable industry with starter plants. He is a native of King City and has served as mayor and councilman there in the past.

Russell Fenton receives his Bronze Star.

Civil Engineering Grad Ears Bronze Star in Afghanistan

Army 1st Lt. Russell Fenton (B.S., Civil Engineering, 2008) received the bronze star for his work overseeing construction of combat bases in Afghanistan, the Modesto Bee reported. Fenton lives in Modesto and works as a project manager at Disneyland Resorts as a civilian. He served on the ASI Board of Directors and Poly Reps while on campus. According to the Bee, he earned his medal serving as construction section officer in charge with the Army’s 578th Engineer Battalion, Joint Task Force Empire, managing the largest construction effort in theater and in Regional Command East history. The bronze star is awarded for acts of heroism, merit or meritorious service in a combat zone.

RPTA Grad Honored as State Tourism Leader

Krista Rupp (B.S., Recreation, Parks and Tourism Administration, 2008) was named a “new leader” in tourism by the California Travel Association, the San Luis Obispo Tribune reported. Rupp is the sales and marketing manager for the Santa Cruz County Conference and Visors Council.

Aerospace Engineering Grads Profiled for Business Success

The San Luis Obispo Tribune in September highlighted grads Trevor Foster, Andrew Gibson and Benjamin Schiltgen – founders of ES Airo Inc. – in a series on the county’s high-tech firms. According to its website, the company provides the engineering community with cutting-edge system designs, development, testing and demonstration solutions through entrepreneurial concept development, aircraft modifications, military and commercial conceptual air vehicle designs, sub-scale technology demonstrations, hybrid propulsion system research and development, and niche engineering support. Foster (B.S./M.S., Aerospace Engineering, 2008), Gibson (B.S., Aerospace Engineering, 2004) and Schiltgen (B.S., Aerospace Engineering, 2004) launched the company in 2003 out of a garage in Arroyo Grande. The Tribune reported. The company is now based at the Oceano Airport.

Ag Business Grad Elected Interior Design Society President

Robin Wilson Carrier (B.S., Agricultural Business, 1986) was elected president of the American Society of Interior Designers’ San Diego Chapter, Examiner.com reported. Carrier is principal with Robin Wilson Interior Design in San Diego. According to the report, Carrier established her firm in 1995 and specializes in custom residences, restaurants and clubhouses. She also earned a bachelor’s degree from the Design Institute of San Diego.

Ag Management Grad to Lead Monterey County Farm Bureau

The Salinas Californian reported that Jeff Pereira (B.S., Agricultural Management, 1990) has been elected president of the Monterey County Farm Bureau for a two-year term. According to the newspaper, Pereira manages the King City Nursery, serving the vegetable industry with starter plants. He is a native of King City and has served as mayor and councilman there in the past.

Col. Kelly Fisher (B.S., Home Economics, 1989, M.S., Architecture, 1996), was named the first female commander of the California National Guard’s 49th Military Police Brigade in September, the Fairfield Daily Republic reported. The brigade serves as the headquarters for FEMA Region’s IX Homeland Response Force and represents the Western U.S. and territories ready to support civil authorities in chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear events. Fisher served in ROTC at Cal Poly and was a member of the ASI Board of Directors in 1987-88.