Annie Holmes, Cal Poly’s new executive director for university diversity and inclusivity, wants to set up everyone on campus for success

BY LARRY PEÑA  |  PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRITTANY APP

In a variety of ways, this year’s incoming freshman class is the most diverse in Cal Poly’s history. In terms of race, ethnicity, regional and national origin, socioeconomic status—as well as many other factors—the newest generation is expanding the definition of what it means to be a Mustang.

Annie Holmes is Cal Poly’s first executive director for university diversity and inclusivity. She has been involved in diversity issues in all levels of education, most recently as the coordinator for diversity education at Penn State University. She holds a doctorate in adult education and master’s degrees in higher education and college student affairs from that institution. She met with Cal Poly Magazine to discuss diversity issues and her goals for fostering a more inclusive community at Cal Poly.

What is the value of developing a diverse and inclusive culture in an academic setting?

We all benefit by creating an environment where differences are recognized, where uniqueness is valued, and where we can actually leverage our differences to benefit from diversity. When we recognize diverse experiences and backgrounds, then we start to find ways to view things a little bit differently. It gives students a better way to engage with others and with society, so that they can become active global citizens.

Your background is more generally in education. Tell me about the work you’ve done before this.

My first career was in K-12. I was a first-grade teacher in North Philadelphia. I started to recognize barriers these children were facing just to have access to educa-
tion. I had students who didn’t come to school because they didn’t have clean clothes, or because their parents were selling crack cocaine out of the kitchen windows. And so what I learned early on in my career is to identify the barriers that are holding students back.

After that I started to work at Penn State University working in Student Affairs, then as the assistant director with the Upward Bound Math & Science program, engaging with the inner city youth in Pennsylvania in college readiness. Then I moved more into the faculty-staff development side, making sure that people were welcomed and comfortable on campus. Now it’s all coming together where I’m looking at faculty, staff and student experiences.

Diversity isn’t just about race. What are some of those other factors of diversity that people might not be aware of?

For me, it’s an ever-changing definition. Disability, religion, spirituality, socioeconomic status, first-generation experiences, gender, gender expression, sexual orientation, place of origin, the list really does go on and on. It is recognizing and acknowledging all those things that make us different—experiences that have shaped the way in which we approach the world.

Cal Poly has historically tended to be a less diverse community. Does that make your job more challenging?

There is a lot of relationship building to do, communicating what the situation is and what the plans are for the near future. The conversations that I’m having with external constituents, including alumni, are that they’re very intrigued by these changes and they want to be involved in the shift. They’re just looking for guidance on how to make Cal Poly better.

What are some of the practical things you’re implementing here?

We started with a networking reception in the fall. It’s an opportunity for our new students to engage with all our diverse faculty and staff—to come and see the diversity on campus and communicate with folks that are from diverse backgrounds. We’re also developing a faculty mentoring program, where there will be faculty mentors specifically to work with some of our underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities. We’re communicating with some of our diverse alumni, seeing if they want to develop a special interest group alumni association. And we want those alumni to be a presence on campus, mentoring some of our current students, providing internships, hopefully scholarships at some point. We will also engage in a campus climate assessment this year to identify what the issues are on campus, and for whom. The survey will go to all current faculty, staff and students.

Do you have any other goals you want to accomplish this year or in the next few years?

This first year I see us being visible and communicating that to the entire campus community so that next year we can really follow up with the work that we need to do here on campus.

How will it feel to be a part of a more diverse and inclusive Cal Poly?

I think for students, they will just feel successful. The way I would love to see Cal Poly in just a few years is that all students will implicitly receive messages that they are qualified, that they deserve to be here, and that they will enjoy every bit of their Cal Poly experience both inside and outside of the classroom.

For a more in-depth Q&A with Annie Holmes, visit Cal Poly Magazine online at www.magazine.calpoly.edu.