Dear Faculty, Staff,
and Students:

As we begin a new year and the decade of the '90s, I want to share with you some of the issues and concerns which occupied my thinking during the last few days of 1989. Throughout the past year, the national media frequently included stories of problems on university campuses related to harassment, verbal abuse and discrimination resulting in confrontations among members of university communities. We, too, have had our share of attention focused on allegations and media attention to circumstances where interpersonal relationships have been a matter of concern.

While harassment and abuse are sadly facts of life in our society, the university has a special responsibility to defend both human dignity and freedom of thought and this responsibility should be reflected in our relationships with one another. Each of us in the university community, whether members of the faculty, student body, staff or administration, must address our responsibility to others; in particular, our sensitivity to ethnic, racial, gender and age-related issues. Sexual or racial harassment, verbal abuse, intolerance and even indifference on these issues are antithetical in a university community; and such abuses cannot be tolerated in a university.

There are in place and under review on our campus various policies and procedures to deal with flagrant abuses of human relationships, and when such abuses occur, the university will vigorously exercise its responsibility to pursue them. The policies and procedures to deal with harassment and abuse are based upon the need to protect individual rights to privacy and to assure due process. My hope, of course, is that none of the policies and procedures would ever have to be used, but the truth is that we are occasionally confronted with individual behavior that is not acceptable in a university.

If each of us in all our collegial and student relationships exhibit an attitude of tolerance and respect, and seek understanding, then I truly believe that the idea of a university community that fosters individual respect would be perfected. Perhaps the most fragile of these relationships are those between the faculty and students. We can be justly proud of the student-faculty relationship at Cal Poly. It is one of the characteristics that make this a very popular undergraduate institution. Yet, in many respects the student is in the most vulnerable of positions — bright young minds which come to us from many societal and cultural backgrounds, here with us for a few brief years and then on to their lifelong pursuits. During the time they are here, some have found themselves compromised and subject to arbitrary or inappropriate attitudes of individuals who may have some influence on their progress, if not their future.

Protecting freedom of thought and encouraging debate and exploration of new intellectual frontiers do not occur without controversy, and faculty members, too, frequently find themselves in a difficult position. We are charged with the responsibility of challenging developing minds, often through the teaching of controversial subject matter which can be, and is, from time to time interpreted as discriminatory or biased.

In spite of the controversies, and our differences — we are a university, a community of individuals who have the responsibility to treat each other with respect, with understanding and with a commonality of purpose — a university which must defend human dignity and promote freedom of expression.

During the Fall Commencement, which occurred just prior to the holiday period, I made the following statement to the Commencement participants:

"This is also the time of year when we contemplate the barriers which have separated us, when we try to make a conscious effort to repair, to forgive, to celebrate each other's values and to understand. This holiday season serves to remind us of the walls that exist between us — how unnecessary they are. It serves to remind us of the need to cross over and disassemble them."

Let each of us dedicate ourselves to making all of 1990 and the entire decade one in which we exhibit tolerance, understanding, and respect, and, indeed, commit ourselves to disassemble any walls of fear, separation and prejudice that may exist, individually or institutionally.

I would like to extend my best wishes for the new year and look forward to working with you to continually improve Cal Poly.

Sincerely,

Warren J. Baker