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Journalism Workshop Continues Six-Decade Partnership with Cal Poly

SAN LUIS OBISPO – Cal Poly's Journalism Department recently hosted the California Scholastic Press Association (CSPA) journalism workshop for high school students for the 60th consecutive year.

It is the longest continuously running program of its kind in the nation, according to Journalism Department Head Harvey Levenson.

Coordinated for the past three years by Cal Poly Journalism Professor Bill Loving, the workshop aims to inspire talented high school students to pursue careers in journalism. This year 29 students took part.

"This program shows why journalism will always be a vital part of society," Loving said. "These young people are interested in the process of searching out the truth and presenting it to the public. That's the fundamental role of journalism: service to democracy."

Many workshop graduates have gone on to successful careers in journalism and have come back to teach – year after year, at their own expense – to continue the tradition and preserve the legacy of a strong press.

The program traces its beginnings to famed publisher William Randolph Hearst. Hearst wanted to improve high school sports coverage in his Los Angeles newspapers, and in 1951 he asked track and field writer Ralph Alexander to organize a group of high school writers to cover their schools' sports for the Examiner or the Herald Express in exchange for meal money and a byline in the paper.

As a bonus, Hearst arranged for the writers – all boys – to attend a journalism workshop that would be held at Cal Poly, not far from his legendary home, Hearst Castle in San Simeon.

The 1952 workshop was to be a one-time deal, but Alexander persuaded Hearst's editors to sponsor a second workshop in 1953. The program continues at Cal Poly today.

The Cal Poly Journalism Department now co-sponsors the workshop. When the 60th workshop wrapped up at the end of July, the group and its alumni marked the occasion with a reunion picnic attended by nearly 100 people.

Although the earliest workshops were for boys only and concentrated on sports, girls began attending the two-week program in 1965, and the curriculum was expanded to include all aspects of journalism.

In 1981, Alexander became so ill during the program that he had to be driven home and hospitalized. When he was told he had an advanced form of cancer with only days to live, he asked nine people who had been involved with the program to keep it running. He asked Larry Welborn, an Orange County Register courts reporter, to be chairman of the group.

Thirty years later Welborn and the committee have now conducted as many workshops as did the Alexanders, with no end in sight. "Ralph told us to keep it going, but he didn't say how long," Welborn joked at the reunion.

The typewriters students were once told to bring to Cal Poly have been replaced by state-of-the-art computers. Film is no longer developed, as it was for years in the university's darkroom, as the photo curriculum has gone digital.

Workshop attendees still learn how to write lead paragraphs, conduct an interview, and cover breaking news. Today they also learn how to write a public relations press release, how to operate a blog, and how to use online tools in reporting.

Students write, take photos, and produce a newspaper and a television news broadcast during their Learn by Doing journey at the workshop. In all, they complete 35 assignments, all on deadline. Classes are taught by volunteer instructors, many of whom are working journalists. No one is paid to participate.

This year shortly before the workshop ended, former Department Chairman George Ramos died. Ramos had been a CSPA student in the 1960s before graduating from Cal Poly. He was a longtime reporter for the Los Angeles Times, where he participated in three Pulitzer Prize winning projects.

The award for the top writer of 2011 was given in honor of Ramos, who enjoyed showing CSPA students around the department when he headed it.

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About Cal Poly's Journalism Department

The department (<http://cla.calpoly.edu/jour.html>) offers a professional program leading to a bachelor of science degree in journalism with emphases in broadcasting, multimedia, news-editorial and public relations. Journalism majors serve as staff members of departmental communications media, including the Mustang Daily, the student newspaper; CCPR, the student-run public relations firm; KCPR, the FM-stereo radio station; and the news and programming operations of CPTV, Cal Poly's TV station. The department also sponsors student chapters of the Society of Professional Journalists, Radio-Television News Directors Association, and the Public Relations Student Society of America. Founded in the 1920s, the department has thousands of alumni, many of whom hold high positions in print, broadcast, and public relations journalism for state and national organizations.

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