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Cal Poly President Jeffrey D. Armstrong Outlines Broad Vision for University in Fall Conference Speech

SAN LUIS OBISPO – Cal Poly President Jeffrey D. Armstrong reiterated the university’s commitment to its Learn by Doing education, called for a greater reliance on private fundraising to offset state budget cuts and outlined his plans for providing greater support to student success during a speech to faculty and staff Tuesday at the 2011 Fall Conference, the traditional kickoff to the new academic year.

Saying he was looking at a horizon 10 to 15 years out, Armstrong, who became Cal Poly’s president in February, painted a picture of Cal Poly thriving “as a nationally recognized beacon of excellence.”

He praised the faculty members for their commitment to students’ success and urged them to be flexible in adapting the university’s curriculum to society’s changing times, specifically to find ways to enrich Cal Poly’s renowned Learn by Doing programs by requiring more complex, multi-disciplinary projects for students.

In Armstrong’s vision, the university itself would have a larger, more diverse student body, populated not only by more California students of color but also having more out-of-state students and more international students -- with more students living on campus.

“Our students cannot be truly successful in an increasingly diverse society and in an increasingly complex, global economy unless they experience, as students, what it takes to function in the real world,” Armstrong said. That means students need to be exposed to multiple academic disciplines in their Learn by Doing projects, and they need to be exposed to multiple cultures and be made more globally aware.

“Without a doubt, we need more California students of color; we also need more out-of-state students as well as more international students to bring in different perspectives,” Armstrong said.

To succeed over the long term, Armstrong said the university will need to improve its physical infrastructure and develop state-of-the-art facilities, including laboratories, a technologically advanced library and an events center to complement the cutting-edge buildings the campus already boasts.

Armstrong also reiterated his belief that Cal Poly must rethink its financial model to achieve fiscal stability as state funding for public higher education continues to decline.

“At this moment in our history, it’s tempting to lament the state’s retreat from its historic support for public education,” Armstrong said. “Twenty-five years ago, the state provided 90 percent of the investment to educate our students. Today, the state provides less than half.”

Cal Poly will continue to promote restoration of state funding, Armstrong said. But the university also must look to other funding sources.

To pay for expansion of enrollment and an upgrade of key facilities in an era of state budget cuts, Armstrong said, the university needs to rapidly improve its fundraising abilities in addition to asking students and parents to invest more in their education.

Donors as well as parents and students will be asked to help maintain Cal Poly’s excellence. The president announced that Cal Poly will consult with students this fall on a proposal to implement a quarterly Student Success Fee beginning in fall 2012. The revenue would be used to increase class sections and lab offerings, reduce students’ time to degree, improve graduation rates and enhance the university’s diversity and multicultural opportunities.

To augment this increased burden on students and parents, Armstrong also called for a greater focus on private funding for the university – specifically the need for Cal Poly to double its \$157 million endowment over the course of an eight-year capital campaign.

“Instead of coming from one dominant source, the state of California, our operating budget is going to have to come from multiple sources – from the state, from private philanthropy, from students and parents, from industry partners and foundations,” Armstrong said.

Even with the state’s recent cuts to higher education spending, Armstrong noted, California still funds higher education more generously than many other states. And even as California’s public universities raise fees to absorb these budget cuts, Cal Poly’s fees remains more than 40 percent lower than the average University of California campus and among the lowest in the nation.

“A Cal Poly education remains one of the best values in all of higher education,” Armstrong said.

Armstrong told the gathering that the university must navigate by four key principles: Learn by Doing, the success of its students, achieving excellence in all its endeavors and capitalizing on the value of its standing as one of the nation’s few comprehensive polytechnic universities.

“Over the long haul,” Armstrong said, “if we stay true to our bedrock principles and execute on well-conceived plans, I am confident that Cal Poly will thrive as a nationally recognized beacon of excellence.”

For more on Cal Poly’s Fall Conference, including excerpts of Armstrong’s speech, visit <http://president.calpoly.edu/fallconference/>.

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