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Cal Poly Addresses Diversity in First Colloquium

SAN LUIS OBISPO – Cal Poly recently held a diversity colloquium intended to showcase the university and the city of San Luis Obispo as an inviting place for people of all ethnic backgrounds and sexual orientations.

Cal Poly, a comprehensive polytechnic university, is highly regarded nationally for its Learn by Doing approach and ranks among the nation's top 10 universities for producing graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics with a strong liberal arts foundation.

“Cal Poly recognizes there is work to do to increase diversity programming and improve the campus climate for all students, faculty and staff,” said Harvey Levenson, organizer of the colloquium. Levenson is head of Cal Poly's Graphic Communication Department, and interim chair of the Journalism Department.

The university is particularly focused on attracting students from historically underrepresented groups and helping them excel as part of the campus community.

During the Feb. 6 colloquium, “Celebrating Diversity – A Cal Poly and San Luis Obispo Community Colloquium Addressing the Virtues of Living and Learning in a Diverse Society,” the university and community publicly committed to being inviting and accepting of all people regardless of race, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation.

The program attracted about 800 students, faculty, staff, community residents and leaders. Cal Poly President Jeffrey D. Armstrong and Provost Kathleen Enz Finken were joined by San Luis Obispo Mayor Jan Marx and Betsy Umhofer, district representative for Congresswoman Lois Capps. They told the audience that the university and the community “unquestionably will make overtures within California and across the nation that they want a student body, faculty and staff, and community citizenry representative of the many races, ethnic groups, and cultures of the state and nation.”

In addition, the university and city revealed a unique connection to the Smithsonian Institution's newest museum, the National Museum



Cal Poly Provost Kathleen Enz Finken addresses the attendees at the university's first community colloquium on diversity Feb. 6, 2012.

of African American History and Culture. When it opens in 2015, the museum will house the first permanent collection of photographs by celebrated San Luis Obispo folk photographer Joe Schwartz.

Schwartz, now 98, documented in images the plight of the “have-nots” of America from the 1930s through the 1980s, focusing on the positive images of African Americans and whites living and working together. Cal Poly published Schwartz’s book, “Folk Photography – Poems I’ve Never Written,” in 2000.

Paul Gardullo, curator of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, gave the colloquium’s keynote address. James Miller, professor of English and American studies and director of the Center for the Study of Public History and Culture at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C., provided a national perspective on the virtues of diversity.

Levenson said the colloquium represents the beginning of an ongoing discussion on the virtues of living and learning in a diverse and inviting community through seminars, workshops, town meetings, discussion groups, and related events on- and off-campus that will take place throughout the year and will be capped off by an annual conference.

“To effectively prepare students to succeed in the real world, Cal Poly must reflect the real world,” Armstrong said. “That’s why we must keep working toward a more diverse campus and community. This colloquium was a tremendous opportunity to broadcast our aims. But it represents just one step in what will be a continuous effort by Cal Poly.”

About Cal Poly

Cal Poly is a nationally ranked, four-year, comprehensive public university located in San Luis Obispo, halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles on California’s Central Coast. It is a distinctive learning community offering academically focused students a hands-on educational experience that prepares them for today’s scientific and technical world. Colleges include Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences; Architecture and Environmental Design; Engineering; Liberal Arts; Science and Mathematics; and the Orfalea College of Business. Cal Poly is one of the 23 universities in the California State University system.

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