

LEADING THE WAY TO SUSTAINABILITY

BY GALEN RICARD

“WHAT COULD BE MORE polytechnic than sustainability?”

That’s not a question but a statement of fact in the minds of many at Cal Poly, including **Dennis Elliot (ME ’93)**, the new campus sustainability manager. “Our students learn how things work and learn how to do it better. It’s not only about knowledge but the application of knowledge through problem solving, collaboration and innovation,” he said.

Cal Poly, with little fanfare, is assuming a prominent leadership role in sustainability. Its stature is apparent in the long string of best practices awards received from its higher-education peers – displayed modestly in the back halls of the antiquated Quonset-style building that houses Facility Planning and Services. More important, go outside, and there’s no missing how the sustainability movement is transforming campus planning and architecture, along with student life and curricula. A “next generation” of buildings, infrastructure, operations and mindsets is reflected everywhere.

That leadership was on display in August when Cal Poly hosted a sustainability conference for higher education institutions throughout the state. With more than 1,000 participants from the UC, CSU and state community college systems, including 250 students, the conference was the largest-ever network of colleges collaborating on sustainability solutions. Elliot conducted tours of Cal Poly’s array of 14 cutting-edge, new-technology demonstration projects implemented in partnership with the California Energy Commission’s Public Interest Energy Research Program.

Ranging from energy regeneration models, digital and wireless control technologies to a variety of lighting, heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems, the tour was a microcosm of Cal Poly’s larger sustainability accomplishments and ambitions. “Some campuses have a few of these demonstration projects, some one or two, and some none. Cal Poly was able to showcase virtually every major technology that is being explored right now,” noted Elliot.

Similarly, said R. Thomas Jones, dean of the College of Architecture and Environmental Design, Cal Poly students were instrumental in organizing a “Focus the Nation” telecast in January on global warming solutions, which engaged more than a million students, faculty and staff from educational institutions around the world. The students also win state, national and international green design prizes on a regular basis. And, through clubs, organizations and individual action, they are influencing campus and CSU sustainability policies “constructively, collaboratively, respectfully – and they are getting results.”

Such successes are the culmination of what Elliot calls the “grassroots groundswell” and day-to-day efforts of a growing cross-section of student and faculty groups, which are spurring the university’s aggressive adoption of conservation and renewable energy pursuits.

With more than 25 years of experience in Cal Poly’s evolving energy and utility operations, Elliot has been selected by Larry Kelley, vice president of administration and finance, to define, shape and lead one of the campus’ – and CSU’s – newest and most demanding posts. Among Elliot’s goals: “To not only modernize our building and lighting systems but to develop on-site renewable energy generation projects – solar, wind power, biomass plants – to significantly reduce our carbon footprint.” And, throughout the process, involve and engage students.

“I am seeing a revolution take place in interdisciplinary and project-based learning,” said Elliot. “The issues of sustainability have become a catalyst for transforming the way we teach, the curriculum we offer, and the new standard for what makes a graduate literate. The language of sustainability is the language of the day.”

The challenges of climate change and sustainability are large, complex and time-sensitive.

“And all the horsepower needed to solve these problems is at Cal Poly,” said Elliot. □

