

MEET THE PRESIDENT

CAL POLY WELCOMES ITS NEW LEADER: JEFFREY D. ARMSTRONG

BY MATT LAZIER

THE MORNING SUN SHONE bluish-white over San Luis Obispo on Feb. 1. Literally and figuratively, a new day was dawning over Cal Poly as President Jeffrey Dyer Armstrong prepared for his first day on the job.

Agenda item No. 1: Meet with ASI President Sarah Storelli and the presidents of the campus's six college student councils for breakfast at Poly Canyon Village.

"The most important person on this campus is the student. The students are why we are all here," Armstrong said as he arrived for the gathering. "So, my first order of presidential business is to hear what these student leaders have to say."

Selected by the CSU Board of Trustees in December as the university's ninth permanent president, Armstrong takes the helm at a critical juncture in Cal Poly's history: The state's budget crisis is squeezing higher education funding, threatening the university's polytechnic programs and diminishing Cal Poly's ability to graduate well-prepared professionals into California's workforce.

That may sound daunting for a new president, but Armstrong is optimistic. In an interview with Cal Poly Magazine, he acknowledged the challenges the university faces but nonetheless expressed confidence about Cal Poly's ability not only to survive California's current fiscal turbulence, but also to thrive in the decades to come.

Q: GIVEN THE STATE'S RETREAT FROM FUNDING THE STATE UNIVERSITIES, ISN'T YOUR OPTIMISM A BIT UNREALISTIC?

A: Someone once told me that optimists and pessimists actually have one trait in common. They both think they're realists. Let's just say I prefer my brand of realism over the pessimist's.

I'm optimistic for many reasons. We continue to attract California's brightest, most motivated students – so many that we can only take a fraction of the demand every year.

It's no mystery why Cal Poly is in high demand. Our faculty

and staff are deeply committed to helping students succeed. That kind of nurturing environment is enticing.

And because of our polytechnic focus with our Learn by Doing approach at the core, our graduates are in high demand. They enter the workforce comfortable with science and technology, and they have more hands-on experience than most of their peers. California's key industries need employees who are ready to contribute on Day One, and Cal Poly graduates are ready to do that. Employers tell us that they save a year in training when they hire a Cal Poly grad. As a result, our graduates earn at the top tier and quickly become leaders in their professions and communities.

All of that results in alumni who cherish their Cal Poly experience – and are willing to give back with their time, talent and resources. We know from nationwide research that our alumni are exceptionally loyal, and I have no doubt they will help us however they can to ensure that Cal Poly remains a distinctive and highly respected institution.

Q: BUT GIVEN CALIFORNIA'S DESPERATE BUDGET SITUATION, HOW CAN CAL POLY MOVE FORWARD WHILE THE STATE RETREATS FROM ITS COMMITMENT TO HIGHER EDUCATION?

A: We need adequate state funding to keep our polytechnic programs operating. Legislators know that these programs, undergirded by our Learn by Doing philosophy, are relatively expensive to operate. So, part of my job will be to work with the CSU to try to persuade the relevant people in Sacramento to make sure Cal Poly is funded adequately.

That said, Cal Poly needs to rethink how we collect the resources to maintain and enrich our programs.

State funding simply won't play as large a role for Cal Poly in the future. Here's an example of why: The funding level the governor is proposing for the CSU this year is the same as in 1999 – only the CSU has 70,000 more students now. That gap

JEFFREY D. ARMSTRONG

Age: 51

Birthplace: Lyon County, Ky.

Family: Wife Sharon; daughter Jessica, a medical student at Michigan State University, and son Zack, a finance major at Michigan State

Education: B.S., Animal Science, Murray State University, 1981; M.S. Physiology, North Carolina State University, 1984; Ph.D., Physiology, North Carolina State University, 1986

Before Cal Poly: Dean and professor, College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Michigan State University, July 2001– January 2011; Department head and professor, Department of Animal Sciences, Purdue University, June 1997–June 2001; Professor and assorted administrative posts, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, North Carolina State University, July 1986–May 1997

Hobbies: Reading, running, golf, basketball, traveling with family

Favorite sports to watch: "Anything involving the Cal Poly Mustangs."

Favorite movie: The Shawshank Redemption "It's a great story about perseverance in the face of hostile odds."

Favorite musicians: Jack Johnson, The Eagles, Bob Seger

Favorite Book on Leadership: Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln "There's so much to admire about Lincoln, but his humility is especially inspiring. He was unafraid to surround himself with smart, strong-willed people, he shared credit easily, and he never got bogged down in petty grievances."

Favorite meal: "A cheeseburger with lettuce, tomato and mayo."

PC or Mac: "Both. I have an iMac and a Dell."





President Armstrong (center right) and his wife, Sharon (center left), speak with students on campus. (Photos by Aaron Lambert and Deborah Denker)

is only larger at Cal Poly, where the labs and state-of-the-art equipment in our engineering, architecture, science and math, and agricultural programs require higher funding levels.

That means we need to think creatively about how to bring in the resources our programs require.

Fortunately, the things I mentioned before – student initiative, faculty dedication, and alumni and industry commitment – exist for the most part independently of the state budget. So I believe we have an excellent foundation to begin re-imagining our financial approach, in spite of California's financial issues.

Q: HOW DOES THAT PLAY INTO THE CAMPUS' EFFORT TO UPDATE CAL POLY'S STRATEGIC PLAN?

A: It fits very closely. We need help from Cal Poly's alumni and industry friends, but we can't expect people to provide their support if we don't all have a clear vision for Cal Poly for the next decade or more.

Fortunately, excellent progress has been made on the Strategic Plan update. Everyone who has helped draft, review or comment on it deserves our collective appreciation and praise. Now we must quickly put the finishing touches on a plan that gives everyone a clear concept of Cal Poly's future. I know that the Academic Senate wants to see the plan reflect a bolder, more inspiring vision. I find that very encouraging and look forward to the faculty completing an expeditious review.

Thanks to Provost Bob Koob's excellent leadership the past two years, much of the heavy lifting has been done, and the core of the Strategic Plan update is sound. It's focused on the idea of the 21st Century Polytechnic, and I very much like the concept embedded in the current draft about our need to produce "whole system thinkers," graduates who are not only experts in their immediate discipline but are also resourceful professionals who can

think creatively across disciplines. They will be able to do that because they received a comprehensive polytechnic education at Cal Poly. As we put the finishing touches on the plan, I encourage everyone to read the current draft and comment (Download it at: www.academicaffairs.calpoly.edu/StrategicPlan/).

Q: WHAT AREAS OF THE PLAN DO YOU FEEL STILL NEED WORK?

A: It's an excellent draft in so many ways. I particularly like the vision statement's focus on our need "to help California meet future challenges in a global context." I want to see some expansion on that point, because I believe it's a critical part of our mission that we offer students a more global, multi-cultural experience. For our graduates to succeed in their professions, we have to enhance their awareness of the rest of the world. They need to understand different cultures if they're going to function well in an increasingly inter-connected global community. I want to be sure that we're preparing Cal Poly students exceptionally well for a future that will change rapidly in ways not yet imagined.

Q: DOES LEARN BY DOING REMAIN CENTRAL TO A CAL POLY EDUCATION IN THE FUTURE?

A: Absolutely. Learn by Doing is the heart of Cal Poly, and no one does it better.

I believe strongly in the power of hands-on learning. I grew up on a farm and had a lot of chores. My parents were good teachers. But my learning accelerated when I actually had to do the jobs, rather than just listen. I experienced this when I was in college, as well.

I also believe that Learn by Doing is the key to the professional success that Cal Poly alumni enjoy. I love the sentiment I've heard many times already: Employers love our graduates because they have two hands on the problem and two feet on the ground.

Q: HOW WILL WE KNOW IF CAL POLY IS DOING ITS JOB WELL?

A: My daily presidential compass is fixed on one guiding light: student success. Every decision I make as president will be based on the question "Will this help students succeed?"

The formula for success is straightforward: Put smart, motivated students together with caring and dedicated faculty and staff.

How to measure success? One way is graduation rates. Cal Poly does this well already; our graduation rates are the best in the CSU, and we've been on an upward trend for five years. I suspect that progress in the next couple of years will be harder to come by given the probable cutbacks in state funding – but over the long haul, we will make steady progress on graduation rates.

Another marker for student success is how well our alumni perform after they leave here. Are our graduates continuing to land good jobs? Are they moving on to prestigious graduate programs? Are they earning at the top of the pay scales? Are they quickly moving into leadership roles? If the answers are yes, then we're doing our job.

Of course, we can always improve. I won't be satisfied until we're graduating every one of our students on time and sending them off to long, productive lives.

Q: FACULTY AND STUDENTS SAY THEY HOPE YOU'LL BE VISIBLE ON CAMPUS AND CONNECTED WITH THEM AND THEIR ISSUES. HOW WILL YOU DO THAT, SINCE FUNDRAISING WILL REQUIRE YOU TO BE OFF CAMPUS A GREAT DEAL?

A: Fundraising is an important part of a president's job, now more than ever. The art of it is connecting donors' passions with the university's educational needs. I can't do that unless I'm genuinely connected to the students and faculty.

To do that well, I have to be a visible presence on campus, meeting regularly with student leaders and faculty and attending campus events.

These are all things I enjoy doing. In this first month, I've met with many students and faculty and staff leaders, and my wife and I have been to several arts events and athletic events. Sharon and I also have spent time off campus visiting with alumni. We've enjoyed all the events, and we can't wait to move into the President's Home on campus. That will make it even easier to be around students and faculty.

Q: WHAT HAS BEEN MOST INSPIRING TO YOU IN YOUR FIRST FEW WEEKS ON THE JOB?

A: That's easy: No matter who I talk to on campus, no one is satisfied with the status quo. Everyone believes that as great as Cal Poly is, we can make it better. That's why I know my optimism is realistic. □

CAL POLY'S NEWEST AMBASSADOR

SHARON ARMSTRONG LOOKS FORWARD TO REPRESENTING THE UNIVERSITY

MOTHER, WIFE, AGRICULTURALIST – all have described Sharon Armstrong in her life and career. As Cal Poly's new first lady, she now adds "ambassador" to the list.

She is enthusiastic about the rich and varied opportunities before her, both on and off campus, as she works with her husband, President Jeffrey D. Armstrong.

"The best way I can serve," she said, "is to help Jeff however I can, accompanying him on off-campus visits and hosting Cal Poly's friends and supporters in our home."

She also plans to become active with local nonprofit agencies. "I enjoy helping others," she said, "and I look forward to discovering how I can best do that here."

Born in Bridgeton, N.J., Armstrong spent summers working for Asgrow Seed Company, formerly a subsidiary of Upjohn. Her interest in agriculture led her to Murray State University and an agriculture degree with horticulture emphasis.

After graduating and getting married, Armstrong worked two jobs – as a florist and as a seed analyst for the State of North Carolina, inspecting products marketed by seed producers and distributors to ensure quality control.

When she and her husband moved to Purdue University in West Lafayette, she took a similar post with the State of Indiana. When the Armstrongs moved to Michigan in 2001, she went to work as an analyst for the nonprofit Michigan Crop Improvement Association, which promotes the production and use of improved seed stocks and serves as Michigan's official seed certification agency.



Her priority, while being in and out of the formal workforce, was her role as a mother to daughter Jessica, now 26, and son Zack, 21. "I thoroughly enjoyed my professional work," she said, "but raising our children is my proudest and most satisfying accomplishment."

Armstrong enjoys reading, gardening and knitting and has competed in distance running along with her husband. She looks forward to enjoying outdoor activities on the Central Coast.

She also said she is looking forward to living on campus in the President's Home.

"There is such positive vibrancy here," she said, "and Jeff and I are thrilled to make our home in the midst of it."

Of his wife, President Armstrong said, "I'm biased, of course, but I'm confident in saying the Cal Poly community is fortunate to have Sharon. I know I am. Sharon is my trusted confidante, my life coach and my best friend." □