

# the PROVOST

*Kathleen Enz Finken approaches a challenging role with a science mind and a humanities heart.*

BY LARRY PEÑA PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS LESCHINSKY

**K**athleen Enz Finken is constantly finding things to do. She quickly arranges her desk, fills out forms and signs paperwork while sitting for pictures. She never seems distracted, and when it's time to sit down for a focused interview, she's 100 percent there. She's just efficiently busy, seeking anything that needs to be done and taking care of it on the spot.

It's a natural characteristic that led her to her position as Cal Poly's provost — the official responsible for every academic area of the university and serving as the institution's chief operating officer.

"I'm a person who just can't stand to not get involved," she says. "I really see myself as a person who likes to solve problems." She describes the crucible through which she passed in her first experience in university administration: an institution with high faculty turnover, financial instability, and a curriculum in desperate need of an overhaul. The more challenges she took on, the more she achieved — and the more she accomplished, the more challenges she was given.

"I tend to have very high standards and be very idealistic. So I was always out there trying to figure it out and get it done well," she says. "When you do that, people start taking notice. People start to ask you to get involved in other activities."

Enz Finken joined Cal Poly at a time of significant turnover in the university administration. The same two-year period saw the appointment of President Jeffrey D. Armstrong, transitions in all university vice presidencies, and dean shifts in all but two of the colleges. It was a challenging situation to step into, she says, but also an opportunity to build an effective team from scratch.

"The conversations have been really exciting as you bring together all these people from different experiences, different backgrounds, different institutions," she says. "It's important to recognize that the only way we're successful as an institution is when all those areas are working in concert — student affairs, administration and finance, the advancement area. I'm very fortunate that I have many great colleagues in those areas."

Enz Finken arrived on campus in February of 2012 and is proud of the early signs of progress in many of the areas under her purview. In the last year and a half, she's guided revenues from the new Student Success Fee toward real improvements such as a boost in new faculty hires. She's helped oversee the creation of a new Office of Diversity and Inclusivity — a joint effort with Student Affairs — to enhance the sense of community on campus. And she is guiding the implementation phase of a long-term overhaul of the advising system to streamline students' paths to graduation.

While Enz Finken has clearly been busy, she's quick to acknowledge that in many areas the seeds of success were already in the ground before she arrived. She's grateful for the resources available to her at her new institution.

"What I really love about Cal Poly is that every single day there is something extraordinary happening here on campus — something that occurs because of

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Provost Kathleen Enz Finken in her office on campus.

Phil Quinn speaks to students in the Student Managed Portfolio Project.



Enz Finken talks with students on campus.

a student or a group of students or a staff or faculty member. We just have tremendous opportunities here, along with very talented people. It's fun and interesting and very exciting."

In many ways Enz Finken is a perfect fit for Cal Poly. Her mother is an artist and landscape architect, her father was a farmer and science educator, and the intersection of the sciences, arts and humanities has been a major theme throughout her life.

She was a bit of a dabbler in her own education, studying architecture at Syracuse University and civil engineering at Rutgers University before earning bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees in art history at Douglass College for Women and Rutgers. She speaks fondly of the artistic, humanistic and technical sides of her studies, but truly brightens when describing experiences that gave her a chance to combine them.

"One of the most wonderful opportunities in my life was to spend two summers working on archaeological excavations on the island of Cyprus," she says. "We were using scientific methods to excavate ancient Greek, Roman, early Christian and Byzantine sites: GPS technology, laser technology — all types of really high-end ways of looking at what's under the ground. All of this is very 'high-science,'" she says. "We were looking at buildings on a street; city plans; artifacts that are revealing about society. Artifacts that are of high artistic value, but also evidence of an ancient civilization and all the various aspects of that civilization: religion, economy, politics, social structures, health, welfare. It was just thrilling."

It's remarkable hearing her talk about these artifacts

as data points without losing her obvious reverence for them as objects of beauty and mystery. That very duality is what attracted her to study ancient art and architecture, she says. She speaks of her love of the Roman quality of imparting breathtaking beauty into objects that were both innovative and highly functional.

"I would love to see us in our modern contemporary world paying more attention to the intersection of exciting, creative engineering solutions and aesthetics," she says. "We can build huge and fantastic structures, but we don't always pay close enough attention to what they look like. And often we don't even pay close enough attention to how well they function. I think you can do all those things. You can create incredible works of architecture that are engineering marvels, that are beautiful, and that serve their function well."

One of the things she's most proud of at Cal Poly is her role in promoting exactly those kinds of multifaceted, interdisciplinary approaches. Enz Finken has been instrumental in supporting the development of several new interdisciplinary endeavors, including a new bachelor of science program in engineering and liberal arts offered jointly by the College of Engineering and the College of Liberal Arts, and three new minors within CLA that explore the intersections of science, technology and society.

"There has always been some of this activity going on," she says. "We're taking some of the things that were here and building them up to a new level."

For Enz Finken, that combination of the scientific, the humanistic and the aesthetic is the heart of a comprehensive polytechnic education — separately, those elements would be incomplete.

"I certainly don't believe you can consider yourself to be well-rounded if you haven't had some grounding in the arts and humanities and social sciences," she says. "On the other side, I also believe that students whose primary focus is on the humanities and the arts equally have to have a grounding in sciences and technological studies. For students to be successful today they really need a grounding in both areas."

"I think that Cal Poly really has the best approach to comprehensive higher education. I truly do," she says. "That is why I'm here — because I believe in the way we're trying to educate the next generation of students."