A conversation

After 20 years of service to Cal Poly, the president and his wife take stock

When Warren J. Baker married Carly Fitzsimons in 1962, it was the beginning of a beautiful partnership.

Together they have lived in New Mexico, Michigan, Massachusetts, and California, raising four children (Carrie, Kristen [AG '92], Chris [BUS '97], and B.J.) and dedicating themselves to multiple academic, community, and legislative efforts.

And for the past 20 years these two exceptional people have guided Cal Poly through a remarkable period of growth, helping to create a university that has become unique in the CSU system for its application of scholarship to real-life problem-solving.

Carl Poly Magazine’s conversation with the Bakers follows.
Cal Poly Magazine [to Pres. Baker]: What were your first impressions of Cal Poly?

Pres. Baker: I had heard that Cal Poly’s goals were similar in many ways to work I’d done at the University of Detroit and to my vision for higher education. I also learned that Cal Poly was an institution in transition, founded with a focus on agriculture but expanding into a comprehensive polytechnic university. When I first stepped on campus I thought that labs and other facilities needed significant improvement if “learning by doing” was going to flourish in the 80s and 90s. It also seemed like a place where a president could have considerable influence and not just be a caretaker.

CPM [to Pres. Baker]: What were some of your first initiatives as president?

Pres. Baker: Cal Poly was perceived as not very accessible, so one of the first things that we did when we came here was to begin inviting people from the community and business onto the campus regularly.

Also, this was a polytechnic university. Although our faculty and programs were oriented toward industry needs, and students were involved in learning by doing, we had no formal structure to actually engage the people who hired our graduates. We were just beginning to think about raising private money for the university, and the idea to create advisory councils served both purposes.

We started with the President’s Cabinet [the universitywide advisory board], which includes leaders from business, industry, government and the arts, to provide advice and counsel to the university as we planned for our future. We also asked the cabinet to become advocates for Cal Poly at all levels — within the CSU system, with our board of trustees, with the legislature, with the governor, and within their own spheres of influence.

This effort helped to support cooperative education, senior projects, and internships so students could become directly involved in industry. And it opened up access to resources that brought faculty in applied research. This not only reinforced the educational value of this activity at Cal Poly, but it also engaged the university and our students in projects that have contributed to the state’s economic development.

Today there are about 45 people on the President’s Cabinet, and each college and many departments have very active advisory councils. This totals more than 800 people from outside the university who volunteer their time and expertise and provide access to industry — an enormous advocacy and fund-raising resource. We raised nearly $22 million last year. When we first started, raising $1 million was a struggle.

These groups have also helped us greatly with the legislature, being strong advocates for improvement of our instructional facilities and arguing on our behalf for funding for new buildings, new labs, and new classrooms. One of the first things we did was to propose a new engineering building. Much of our space was outdated and inadequate to house our expanding enrollment in the polytechnic programs.

CPM [to Pres. Baker]: How did your role evolve in terms of off-campus activities?

Pres. Baker: In 1983 I was appointed by President Reagan to serve on the Board for International Food and Agriculture. We met with the administrator for the Agency for International Development in Washington nearly every month to administer the Title XII programs, geared for land-grant universities. I thought Cal Poly could make significant contributions in agriculture to developing countries. We had done a lot of work in the 50s and 60s, but our
international activity had waned significantly. As a result of our re-involvement, we were engaged by the Kellogg Foundation and ultimately by A.I.D. to establish a college in Costa Rica to support agriculture in the humid tropics. Today that college is very successful and contributes significantly to countries in the humid tropics where agriculture is both economically important and carried out in such a way that it preserves fragile tropical land. The college is modeled after Cal Poly, and the contributions of our faculty and staff were vital in its establishment.

I was on the National Science Board (NSF) from 1985 to 1994, primarily as an advocate for undergraduate science, engineering, and technology education. Many of the programs we established focused on the renewal of science and engineering education. Cal Poly was, for instance, one of the prime movers in an NSF engineering coalition program. Our programs were being recognized nationally as models for renewal and effectiveness.

We also recognized that undergraduate institutions needed applied research facilities to capture the benefits of engaging undergraduates in research, and created a special program to develop funding for predominantly undergraduate institutions. This past October [1998] we broke ground for the first campus building — the Advanced Technology Laboratories — that is a beneficiary of that program [see sidebar, “Warren Baker: A profile,” below]. Half the money came from NSF and half from

Warren Baker: A profile

President Baker earned his B.S. and M.S. degrees in civil engineering from Notre Dame and his Ph.D. in geotechnical engineering from the University of New Mexico. He began his academic career at the University of Detroit, becoming dean of the College of Engineering within seven years, and then vice president for academic affairs. In 1979 he was chosen to lead Cal Poly.

Some of President Baker’s many honors as a teacher, scholar, and administrator include:
- The 1997 Cavanaugh Award, University of Notre Dame (the highest award bestowed on an alumnus for public service)
- Co-chair of California’s Joint Policy Council on Agriculture and Higher Education (to increase the state’s ability to deliver instruction, research, and public-service programs focusing on agriculture, natural resources, and the environment)
- Presidential appointee, National Science Board, governing board for the National Science Foundation (chairing the board’s Polar Research Committee and the Standing Committee on Programs and Plans)
- Presidential appointee, Board for International Food and Agricultural Development (U.S.A.I.D.) (assisting Cal Poly in becoming the prime architect and planner for the Agricultural College of Humid Tropical Regions in Costa Rica)
- Outstanding Alumnus Awards, Colleges of Engineering, Notre Dame and the University of New Mexico
- Charter appointee and member of the board of directors,

From San Luis Obispo to Antarctica . . .
President Baker has worked to expand Cal Poly’s sphere of influence. Here (photo left) he helps cut the cable on a new phone system in 1987 with (left to right) Pacific Bell Area Vice President Jack Black, Cal Poly Information Systems Vice President Arthur Glaster, and Pacific Bell Area Vice President-Priority Marketing Don Shupp [photo courtesy of Pacific Bell]. In 1991 (photo opposite page) he travels to Antarctica to take part in the dedication of NSF’s Science and Engineering Lab at McMurdo Station, designed by alum Christopher Smith (ARCH ’68).
California corporations represented on our advisory boards. This will be a unique facility to support "learning by doing."

All these efforts took me off campus, and of course I got a reputation as an invisible president. But my view is that if a president is spending all of his time on campus, then he is not doing his job for the institution. You have to be a strong advocate for your institution, in the board room, in Washington, and in Sacramento.

**CPM [to Mrs. Baker]:** How did you operate as the president's wife and also work independently to accomplish your own goals?

**Mrs. Baker:** Your identity as the president's wife comes with the territory. You move into a glass house — "This is the way we live, this is the way we are, this is the way we're going to be."

But I've always felt that I've had a separate identity. I think that's something you have inside you. I've always had very strong opinions, and quite often don't hesitate to express them, even though I've had to convince some people that if they were talking to me, it was my opinion, not ours.

That was one reason for getting the master's degree — a certain sense that I needed to do more for myself at that point. That was a good experience. I gave him [smiling at President Baker] a view from...
the trenches. And I could have coffee with the other students and we could talk about our classes —

**CPM:** You could be honest —

**Mrs. Baker:** Very honest. Of course, I couldn’t invite them here without blowing my cover [laughing]. . . . But it was a good experience and [turning to her husband] an awfully good experience for you, because there were things I saw and could tell you about.

**CPM:** You were sort of a Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s court —

**Mrs. Baker:** Exactly. The only problem I had with it, in looking back, was that I had to get a 4.0. I mean, what if I didn’t do well — I used to stay up until all hours writing papers.

**CPM:** But my guess is that you are probably a perfectionist and would have done the same thing regardless of whom you were married to.

**Pres. Baker:** Good guess. We host a lot of university guests on and off campus — our 800 advisory board members, community leaders, donors — and it takes an enormous amount of time. Every detail reflects Carly’s care and personal attention.

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*Two projects came to fruition in fall 1998 with special groundbreakings . . . (Above) The new sports complex event was held October 23 [see story under ‘SPORTS NEWS,’ page 22] (shown here are, left to right, ASI President Dan Geis, President Baker, Robin Baggett (BUS ’73), and Athletic Director John McCutcheon [photo by Marcia Wright]). And (opposite page) ceremonies for the Advanced Technology Laboratories, a landmark applied research facility funded entirely by non-state sources, took place October 26 (photo by Doug Allen). Due to open this fall, the ATL combines architectural elements necessary for industrial experiments with interdisciplinary lab space, computer workstations, multimedia innovation, and the latest technological equipment. Six labs are devoted to advanced transportation, aerospace, earthquake and geotechnical research, bioengineering, mechatronics, and engineering education research.*

*The public/private partnership that funded the ATL includes the National Science Foundation, the W.M. Keck Foundation, Litton Industries, St. Jude Pacesetter, Northrop Grumman, Parsons, IBM, Fluor Daniel, Tandem Computers, and Hewlett-Packard. Pictured are President Baker (center) and College of Engineering Dean Peter Lee (right) with (left to right) Al Brann from Litton, Gene Bornzin of St. Jude Pacesetter, Chuck Terhune of Parsons, and Bob Wulf of Northrop Grumman.*

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A development program requires a lot of care and personal attention to relationships with people. Good working relationships grow if you know what people are interested in and how to connect that interest to the university. And you don’t often find that out by sitting down with them in their offices — you learn those things in a more relaxed social atmosphere.

A lot of major contributions have come to the university as a result of the way Carly has made people feel at home here. Our view is, to raise support for the university, you raise friends first and encourage their interest in the university, and the rest is easy.

The Partners Program for the President’s Cabinet is a good example.

We start on Sunday with a short session, then have a dinner Sunday evening. The following day we have our plenary meeting and Carly coordinates the Partners Program. This special attention pays off — we get a very high turnout. If both partners have a good experience and learn something about the university and feel that they’re developing good relationships with their peers, it creates a synergism that works in a very beneficial way for the university.

We’ve been doing this for 20 years now. What we like to hear is, “We love to come back - you treat us both wonderfully - we remember it and pass it on to other people.”

During President Baker’s tenure the university’s faculty and staff have also been recognized for excellence in undergraduate education:

- For more than a decade, U.S. News & World Report has rated Cal Poly one of the top public, regional universities in the West.
- The College of Engineering was ranked the top public undergraduate program nationwide by U.S. News & World Report as of 1996.
- The College of Agriculture offers the largest non-land-grant agriculture program in the United States, and the third largest undergraduate agriculture program in the country.
- Cal Poly’s College of Architecture and Environmental Design produces one of every five architects in California and one of every 20 nationwide.

The university’s other colleges — Business, Liberal Arts, and Science and Mathematics — and its University Center for Teacher Education also have been recognized for their innovation, excellence, and quality of students and faculty.

One attribute particular to the campus is its dedication to the idea of a “learn-by-doing” approach to education, in which classroom instruction is reinforced with practical, hands-on learning in the laboratory, studio, or out in the field. “This approach provides Cal Poly with a special niche in California higher education,” says the president, “and is a significant reason our graduates are so heavily recruited upon graduation.”
**CPM:** When we first thought about doing this story, we wanted to focus on your partnership as well, rather than doing a piece solely on President Baker’s 20th anniversary.

**Pres. Baker:** University presidencies take an enormous amount of time. The marriage partnership is extremely important. Not only has Carly spent a lot of time helping to raise funds for the university, but she’s borne more than her share in raising our children during these 20 years. When we arrived here our youngest son was two years old, our oldest daughter 16, with two children in between. And I was away a lot. In this job you not only have campus responsibility for policies and operations, but also are expected to be at the board of trustees’ meetings and provide some leadership at the system executive level, as well as maintain external relationships with the community, the legislature, the private sector, and federal agencies.

So you spend lots of nights in hotel rooms, Carly and I belong to two national organizations — the Association of State Universities and Colleges, and the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges. Both of them have spouses’ programs where we find mutual support and an opportunity to share war stories [both laugh].

**CPM:** Which accomplishments give you the greatest sense of pride during your tenure at Cal Poly?

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**Carly Baker: A profile**

Mrs. Baker earned a B.A. in English, speech, and drama from St. Mary’s College, with postgraduate study in psychology at Northwestern University and the University of Michigan, in speech pathology at the University of New Mexico and Wayne State University, in teacher education at the University of Detroit, and in computer applications at Cuesta College and Cal Poly. She earned her master’s in education at Cal Poly. Her many accomplishments include working for the following organizations:

- Women in Philanthropy
- Children’s Center Task Force
- Foundation for the Performing Arts Center (FPAC) Board of Directors [see sidebar, “The Performing Arts Center: Staging a success story,” page 14]
- FPAC Advisory Board
- Performing Arts Center Art Advisory Board
- Organization of State Hospital Advisory Boards
- Chair, Atascadero State Hospital Advisory Board
- PCPA Theaterfest Advisory Board
- Children’s Protective Services Task Force
- Women’s Shelter Board of Directors
- County Justice System Subvention Program Advisory Group (state grant program administered by the California Dept. of Youth Authority appointed by the Board of Supervisors to recommend projects for funding)
- Chair/Commissioner, Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention commissions
- Member, League of Women Voters (conducted analyses for report on law enforcement priorities and juvenile justice study)
- Member, Focus Hope (organization formed by business, industry, government agencies, and charitable groups to promote equity and understanding between blacks and whites after the 1967 Detroit riots)
- Promotion/script editing/public relations at WGN TV in Chicago
- Case worker in Cook County, Ill., social worker in Albuquerque

As President and Mrs. Baker look toward the future, they envision more time spent traveling and with their family. Their oldest daughter, Carrie, and her husband live in Seattle with their four children: Kelly, 9; and three bright, special-needs youngsters adopted from an orphanage in Vladivostok, Russia: Irina, 6; Alex, 4; and Michael, 1. “Carrie makes up special books for each of the kids,” explains Mrs. Baker. “She took Alex’s to him in Russia. It had photos of the family here, and of his room in Seattle. When he spoke to me by phone he’d say [imitating her new grandson’s gruffly exuberant voice], ‘Hi, Nana — Airplane! Seattle! Space needle! Bye-bye!’ He has a charming personality, and that look of the devil in his eye. I think he’s going to be a handful for his mother, but great for his grandmother.”

The Bakers’ second daughter, Kristin, also married, is completing
**Pres. Baker:** Developing the advisory boards is certainly one, because it engaged the external community and also created a benefit I didn't expect — active engagement of expertise from business and industry in our strategic planning. These boards have been of enormous help in our planning process — it's something they're used to doing and we learn a lot from them.

Another was our success in improving and expanding instructional facilities. We still have work to do but our students today enjoy state-of-the-art facilities in many areas.

Our efforts to improve the quality of residential life on campus for the students has been both exciting and rewarding. In particular the two recreational facilities on campus will give us some of the best facilities in the West. Since our students are so heavily engaged in organized recreational sports, we had to find a way to provide facilities. It turned out that a partnership forged with students who supported a fee increase to share the costs was successful not only in building the facilities, but in operating and maintaining them. More "learn by doing."

And the Performing Arts Center was an exciting 12-year campaign to bring this important cultural center to the whole Central Coast community [see sidebar, “The Performing Arts Center: Staging a success story,” page 14]. It's been a concept and a vision of the community for 40 years, and the university has played a key role in making it happen.

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**Carly Baker**  (Photo by Karen McLain)
CPM [to Mrs. Baker]: You invested a great deal of work in the Performing Arts Center.

Mrs. Baker: Yes. It was very interesting for me to be on the board of directors. I think I helped keep things on an even keel. I could explain university positions, but I could also help interpret the desires of the community to the university. Participating in the fund-raising up and down the state weekend after weekend was a rewarding experience.

Pres. Baker: Unlike other CSU campuses, Cal Poly has never been a regional campus. It is very much a statewide institution with a statewide mission. We produce one in every five architects in California. We have the largest graduating class in engineering. We have the third-largest college of agriculture in the country.

Yet our community links are important, because we reside here and we have a significant impact.

Town and gown tensions will exist from time to time, and we work hard to have effective university liaison groups. And projects like the Performing Arts Center benefit the entire community and build a solid foundation for Cal Poly and the San Luis Obispo community to go forward together.

CPM: What do you see for your future?
Pres. Baker: The average tenure for a university president is about five years. I don’t think it would come as a surprise to anyone that over the next few years we’ll be ready to move on and do something else.

For the first time in 30 years, the university is undertaking a major review and revision of our master plan. This master plan revision will shape the future for Cal Poly as we enter the next millennium. It will bring together our Cal Poly Plan (shared responsibility for continued excellence), the University Strategic Plan, and the Centennial Capital Campaign, now under way. New programs need to be launched in biotechnology, which impacts biology, chemistry, agriculture, and engineering; computer graphics (a rapidly growing industry in California); and the environmental and biomedical sciences. These are examples of continuing program development.

In addition there are important cornerstone projects in the Centennial Capital Campaign. These include a student learning and resource center, a molecular sciences building, and new buildings to house labs and state-of-the-art instructional facilities for engineering, architecture, and agriculture. It will take both state and private funds to meet these needs, and we’d like to be sure everything is in place to make it happen.

Staging a success story

When the $30 million Performing Arts Center, San Luis Obispo, was just a twinkle in a planner’s eye, some members of the community felt that a campus building couldn’t be a community facility. But community consultants advised, “You can’t do it without the university.”

“Even though some people stood back, saying, ‘This will never work,’” recalls President Baker, “key people from the community — Ron Dunin, the mayor, and John Dunn, the city administrator, and Warren Sinsheimer — signed the original memorandum of understanding with me. The university put in two-thirds of the money, and we worked carefully through a set of operating principles, recognizing that each of the partners could bring something to this valuable effort.

“We went up to the legislature and testified, walking the halls, at a time that was extraordinarily difficult in the state of California. The legislative analyst testified against the [PAC Foundation] board, helping things go forward and not get bogged down in misunderstandings and rumors,” says President Baker.

Since its opening in fall 1996, the center has expanded cultural and entertainment activities on the Central Coast, attracting world-class performers and lecturers and providing an impressive venue for a variety of educational and cultural conferences.

“Originally we also faced criticism from some university constituencies,” says President Baker. “We were a polytechnic university — why were we looking at such a project in the performing arts?"

“But our view has been that essentially it was a step toward the perfection of a polytechnic university. It had the fundamental meaning of ‘polytechnos’ in the Greek sense — the arts and the sciences and technology coming together. The center's extraordinary acoustics, for example, could be a learning environment for architects.”

The whole concept of performance is also part of learning by doing. Cal Poly's signature educational motto, Baker points out. "We had done so much over the years in the performing arts with no majors in the performing arts. Now we've brought these majors on. The Performing Arts Center has been an extraordinary draw for very talented music students. We are the only CSU campus requiring an audition."

The center also attracts students who are studying in areas more traditionally associated with Cal Poly, such as engineering or architecture, enabling them to take advantage of a richer university environment.