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.

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 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...
Q: How will we know if Cal Poly is doing its job well?
A: My daily presidential campus 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 cuts 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. 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 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.

Becky strongly upholds the power of hands-on learning. She 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 job, 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 professional success. I have 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.