For 40 years, Cal Poly’s Political Science Department has molded leaders as diverse as its slate of courses – which range from Chinese Politics and Ancient and Medieval Political Thought to World Food Systems and the California Constitution and government. Because Political Science majors develop a broad understanding of political concepts, institutions, behaviors and processes, they can step into a variety of jobs. Department alumni include lawyers, elected and appointed officials, lobbyists, union and business leaders, teachers and administrators.

“The sky is virtually the limit for Political Science graduates,” said Department Head Craig Arceneaux. Students can choose concentrations in global politics, American politics and pre-law, or they can design their own individualized course of study.

Here are the stories of the varying paths three alumni have taken.

The Lobbyist
Analyzing & Implementing Laws

Danielle Walters has her hands full implementing the Obama Administration’s healthcare reform in all 50 states for Sanofi-Aventis, the global healthcare company. Where she is an associate vice president of government healthcare programs, “I examine changes in health regulatory policy and prepare my company for those changes,” said Walters (B.A., Political Science, 1987). Her focus is making sure Sanofi complies with the new laws. “Then I figure out the best ways to deliver our products, understand how the law will change the marketplace, and help our business adapt.”

It is also her job to communicate, analyze and lobby on those issues to see how they are being implemented. She works with Sanofi’s legal teams, lobbyists and all parts of the business operation so they know what’s coming and how to adapt.

Cal Poly prepared her well, she said. “The culture fostered and encouraged critical thinking, engagement and personal involvement. The small classes allowed for one-on-one discussion. From my freshman year, I was debating and discussing issues – with a full professor.”

She learned to critically look at information, intellectualize it and communicate it. “I learned good communication skills, how to make and support my argument. That is huge in the environment I am in.”

The Legislative Director
Behind the Laws

AS A JUNIOR, Michael Madriaga (B.A., Political Science, 2008) fell in love with political science in Professor Bud Evans’ World Food Systems class. “Before that, I was going to go into city and regional planning,” he recalled.

He still loves politics, and he’s got a front row seat at the California State Assembly as legislative director for Assemblyman Katcho Achadjian, whose 33rd district covers the Central Coast from Santa Maria to San Simeon.

“I analyze policy coming before the Legislature for a vote,” Madriaga explained. “I make recommendations based on information and dialogue with appropriate district stakeholders.”

He got his first taste of politics as an intern in the private office of then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, and then landed a job as district representative with then-Assemblyman Sam Blakeslee.

“I’m indebted to Cal Poly,” he said. “It comes down to curricular diversity. The breadth of issues covered prepared me well for work in the Legislature, which deals with a variety of statewide issues.”

“Cal Poly challenged me to think outside the box, to think critically and strategically. We were encouraged to be persuasive in our writing. That is a key facet in my job working with lobbyists and community stakeholders.”

The Congressman
Making Laws

U.S. Representative Jeff Denham (B.A., Political Science, 1992) splits his time between his Merced County almond farm and the halls of Congress in Washington, D.C.

Denham is serving his first term in Congress, representing California’s 19th District, covering parts of Fresno, Madera, Mariposa, Tuolumne and Stanislaus counties.

His interest in politics was sparked when, as an almond farmer, he found himself growing frustrated with the laws and regulations blocking growth in the agriculture industry. When a local assembly seat opened up, “no one was running, and some friends suggested I run. I believe strongly in serving my community, so I ran. But I didn’t win.”

He later won two terms in the State Senate, though, serving from 2002 to 2010 before being elected to Congress. Denham enrolled at Cal Poly after serving in the U.S. Air Force. While still an undergraduate, he was called back to fight in Operation Desert Storm.

He credits Cal Poly for grounding him. “Political science opened up new doors and gave me a worldwide perspective. My senior project was on Desert Storm and the Middle East. Two decades later, as a congressman, I am still looking at the same things.”

The Political Science Department will celebrate its 40th anniversary with several initiatives and activities, beginning with an awards ceremony and banquet at the department’s Alumni Advisory Board meeting May 18. Additional events will follow through 2012-13. More information will be available on the department website at http://cla.calpoly.edu/pols.html. Or contact the department at 805-756-2964.