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Cal Poly Dedicates Unique Undergraduate Mechanical Engineering Controls Laboratory

With the words, "You won't see another laboratory like this at any university in the country," Cal Poly's Mechanical Engineering Department Chair Bill Clark cut the ribbon May 10 to the university's newest laboratory facility, the Parker Hannifin Controls Laboratory.

Numerous representatives of Parker Hannifin attended the dedication ceremony on campus. The Cleveland-based company, one of the world's leading suppliers of hydraulic and pneumatic actuation systems, donated $100,000 toward the facility.

Mechanical Engineering Professor Frank Owen oversaw development of the laboratory, which was two years in the making. The facility includes systems designed and built by staff members and students, including an electro-hydraulic positioning system, a plumbing structure and a pneumatic actuation system.

"Our department technician, Jim Gerhardt, deserves a lot of credit for putting the lab together, along with students who also had a hand in completely redesigning the laboratory with cutting-edge industrial-grade equipment and benches," Owen said. "Our undergraduates will now be working with equipment and in an environment that rivals anything they'll see in the real world."

Owens emphasized the importance of the lab to undergraduate engineering education and to U.S. industry.

"Hydraulic and pneumatic actuation systems are fluid- and air-power systems used to control and move large objects such as airplane steering systems, large cranes, big agriculture equipment, factory automation equipment or the rides at Disneyland," Owens said. "Obviously, American industry needs a strong expertise in fluid power and controls systems, but many universities no longer teach these areas. In fact, most of the professional experts are over 50 years old. With this new facility and the enhanced curriculum we can now offer, Cal Poly is positioned as the nation's educational leader in the field, and companies like Parker Hannifin are waiting to grab up our graduates."

"We're facing a shortage of engineers with a strong background in controls," said Larry Schrader, Parker Hannifin's global motion and control training manager. "So we see our partnership with Cal Poly as vital to the future of the industry. We couldn't be more pleased with the educational initiatives taken by the university's Mechanical Engineering Department in developing this facility, which we see as unique in the country."

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