

CAL POLY COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS

● *impact*

LEARN / LEAD / LIVE / FALL 2026

LEARN BY DOING ON DISPLAY

Nine student artists launched an independent collective to expand their learning beyond the studio.

INSIDE

Student Interns Spearhead Efforts to Reach Their Peers

Faculty Discuss AI and the Workplace

One Alum's Journey From Teacher to Tech Leader to Artist



CAL POLY

WELCOME

Message From the Dean

One of the joys of my new role has been meeting alumni from across the college. As a professor, I watched students grow over the course of a few years. As dean, I have the privilege of seeing where those journeys lead.



Again and again, I hear similar threads in their Cal Poly stories: learning through experience, tackling unfamiliar problems and connecting ideas with practice and with people. Together

they describe a liberal arts education shaped by Cal Poly's polytechnic identity.

In the pages that follow you'll meet Child Development alum Lynn Davis, who recounts responding to an unfamiliar opportunity by saying "I don't know, but I think I can figure it out." Davis carried that mindset through a career that took her from teaching to technology executive leadership. More than five decades later, you'll find that same spirit in nine graduating Art and Design students who didn't wait for an opportunity to exhibit their work: they formed a collective, raised funds and produced their own professional show. And you'll meet student designers who jumped into the complexities of semester conversion, translating dense advising information into messages that resonated with their peers. Different generations, yet the same habits of mind.

Learn by Doing does more than deepen learning. It changes our students' relationship with uncertainty, giving them the confidence to take initiative, learn from setbacks, seek out others and keep moving forward.

I've come to appreciate that the lasting gift of a Cal Poly education isn't simply what our graduates know. It's how they approach what they don't know *yet*.

Best wishes,

Kate Murphy
Dean, College of Liberal Arts



CAL POLY
College of Liberal Arts

impact

Fall 2026

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On the cover:

Big Artist Corporation:
A new generation of artists
Learn by Doing, exhibiting
a student-run group show.



Psychology and child development students present their research to the department's advisory board.

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Billy Bob Thornton Visits Screen Acting Class

In April, Billy Bob Thornton visited Cal Poly's campus to speak with students in industry professional Katy Dore's screen acting class. Thornton, an acclaimed actor, accomplished singer-songwriter and proud Cal Poly dad, discussed his experience in the industry and helped students navigate their own journeys as aspiring entertainment professionals.



Thornton (Left) shared stories and answered questions from students.



Mustang Band performing at the San Francisco ferry building

MUSTANG BAND PERFORMS AT SF CHINESE NEW YEAR PARADE

Cal Poly's Mustang Band performed at the Alaska Airlines Chinese New Year Parade in San Francisco for the 11th consecutive year. They received their official acceptance during fall quarter, with planning and preparation beginning immediately after. Mustang Band added extra rehearsals to their usual practice schedule, ensuring that they had the stamina and perfected setlist needed for the nearly two-mile-long route. More than 200 students, staff and faculty traveled to San Francisco for the parade performance.



A.J. Nicholson Awarded NSF Graduate Research Fellowship

A.J. Nicholson (Anthropology and Geography, '25) was awarded the highly prestigious and nationally competitive National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship for 2026. Nicholson, who is currently pursuing a graduate degree in medical anthropology at Southern Methodist University, was recognized alongside a small fraction of applicants for his exceptional promise as a future scientific leader. This award highlights both Nicholson's individual academic excellence and the strength of the Social Sciences Department's unique Learn by Doing research training.

Students Place in Spanish-Language Civic Debate

Students from universities in Mexico and the United States gathered in Mexicali for Legados, a Spanish-language civic debate event exploring policies, cultural trends and ideologies that affect Californians, using binational collaboration to evaluate and elevate these issues. Addison Fowkes, a second-year psychology student, Nico Julia (Anthropology and Geography, Political Science and Spanish, '26) and Hunter Larson (Communication Studies, '26) placed second, representing Cal Poly's Spanish Debate Team.

STUDENT FILM SHOWN AT MULTIPLE FILM FESTIVALS

“Sticky,” a student film created by the Mustang Film Society, was selected for the 2025 Portland Film Festival and the 2026 Pasadena Film Festival, where it was nominated for Best Student Film. “Sticky,” a short romantic comedy, was a collaboration between students from multiple colleges, including lead actress Ava Romano, a fifth-year anthropology and geography and computer science double major. The film was written and produced by Zach Berston (Journalism, '25) and directed by Natalie Venable (City and Regional Planning, '25).



Behind the scenes with the cast and crew of “Sticky.”



Kula (left) and Pallemmaerts (right) celebrated their accomplishments together at the CSU Research Competition.

ISLA Students Selected for CSU Student Research Competition

Sarah Kula (Interdisciplinary Studies, '26) and Kate Pallemmaerts (Interdisciplinary Studies, '26) were among ten students selected through an internal competition to represent Cal Poly at the 2026 CSU Student Research Competition, hosted by San José State University. Kula's project, “My Little White Savior: Purity and Saviorism in My Little Pony: The Movie,” won first place in the Humanities and Letters category. Pallemmaerts' project, “Analyzing the Behavioral Impact of Educational Shifts Due to COVID-19 in a Public High School in Washington,” was completed as her senior project and included several interviews of high school teachers regarding their pandemic experiences.

Ethics Bowl Team Competes at Regional Semi-Finals

The Ethics Bowl Team competed in the Western Regional Bioethics Bowl at San José State University, with one of two teams finishing with a top record and qualifying for the semi-finals. Guided by philosophy assistant professors Daniel Story and Jacob Sparks, the team discussed cases involving shield laws, xenotransplantation, algorithmic bias, artificial wombs and gender-affirming care.

DAVID ASKAY SELECTED AS FULBRIGHT SCHOLAR

Communication studies professor David Askay received a Fulbright U.S. Scholar Award to Japan, hosted by Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto. His research explores how embracing ambiguity – known in Japanese as *yuragi* – can enhance creative team collaboration. Askay will conduct research with student and professional teams, designing and testing collaborative frameworks that encourage flexible thinking and experimentation. He will also teach courses in design thinking and learning from failure, and work with institutional partners to build infrastructure supporting future student exchange and collaborative research opportunities between Cal Poly and Ritsumeikan University.





The introduction wall greeted exhibit visitors.

"MAWTINI: ARAB AMERICAN NARRATIVES OF HOME AND BELONGING" EXHIBIT AT KENNEDY LIBRARY

Mawtini, which means "my homeland" in Arabic, is a community-centered oral history and archiving project documenting the lives, contributions, and enduring legacy of Arab Americans in California's Central Coast. Through recorded interviews, collected artifacts, and digital storytelling, the project preserves these stories for future generations. Curated by history assistant professor Farah Al-Nakib, theatre and dance lecturer Sandra Sarrouf, community members Vicki Tamoush and Noha Kolkailah, this ongoing project aims to not only uncover and amplify the histories of Arab Americans, but also to explore the many ways Arab American experiences intersect and entwine with those of other immigrant, BIPOC, and marginalized groups in San Luis Obispo.



Jasper Burgard Awarded 2026 Critical Language Scholarship

Jasper Burgard, a third-year international strategy and security student at Cal Poly Maritime Academy, was awarded a Critical Language

Scholarship (CLS) to study advanced Russian in Daugavpils, Latvia. Burgard is Cal Poly Maritime Academy's first-ever CLS recipient and the fifth recipient from Cal Poly overall. He plans to apply his language and analytical skills to security research on the Baltic region and to a future career as a United States Marine Corps officer.



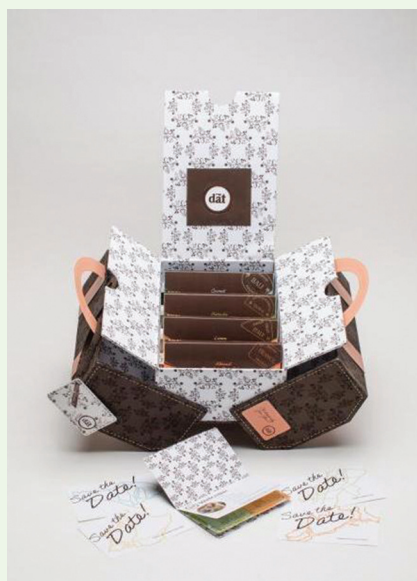
Tabitha Lee Chon Receives 2025 CSU University Trustee's Scholar Award for Outstanding Achievement

Tabitha Lee Chon, a third-year international strategy and security student at Cal Poly Maritime Academy,

received a 2025 California State University Trustees' scholar award for outstanding achievement and a scholarship of \$7,000. Like the other honorees, Lee Chon was selected for her superior academic performance, personal accomplishments and community service. After graduation, she plans to continue her career as a Marine officer and eventually work in federal law enforcement.

INTER-COLLEGE STUDENT TEAMS PLACE IN INTERNATIONAL PACKAGING DESIGN CHALLENGE

Two student design teams, PAWSH and Teef Story, placed second and third respectively in the 2025 Paperboard Packaging Alliance Student Design Challenge. This annual competition invites students from across North America to design and innovate creative approaches to paper-based packaging in response to customer needs and marketing scenarios. Art and design students teamed up with students from the Orfalea College of Business to solve these unique industry and real-world problems with original and sustainable packaging solutions.



Graphic Communication Students Place in Phoenix Challenge

The Phoenix Challenge Team placed in the 2026 Phoenix Challenge Competition, receiving awards in both the conception and execution categories. The group of graphic communication students worked with client Baby Bear Biscuits, a SLO-based cafe specializing in Southern comfort food. The Phoenix Challenge Team designed and created three flexographically-printed products for the small business: a biscuit box, a cup label and a container wrap.



Graphic Communications students printed all Phoenix Challenge materials in the department's printing lab.



Ramsey won the women's collegiate downhill mountain bike national championship.

GWEN RAMSEY HONORED BY STATE LAWMAKERS ON THE FLOORS OF THE ASSEMBLY AND SENATE IN SACRAMENTO

Gwen Ramsey (Anthropology and Geography '26) was one of twenty-six Cal Poly students honored by state lawmakers on the floors of the Assembly and Senate in February (Among the group, six students represented the CLA.) Each student recognized had achieved a variety of awards and accolades. Ramsey is passionate about environmental sustainability, geospatial science and human-environment interactions, and has been honored for her academic achievements nine times. Outside of the classroom, she is a member of Cal Poly Cycling and has helped the team win 24 medals at the last two national mountain biking championships.



Jackson Martinez Appointed as CSU Board of Trustees Student Representative

Gov. Gavin Newsom appointed third-year political science student Jackson Martinez as one of two student representatives on the CSU Board of Trustees. Martinez will contribute to policy decisions and the fiscal, academic and administrative governance of the CSU. Through this opportunity, he will help represent the voices and interests of students at the entire CSU system while gaining invaluable leadership and governance experience. Martinez brings significant public service and policy experience from his current position as secretary of accessibility for Associated Students Inc. and previous internships with the Service Employees International Union, the Office of U.S. Representative Salud Carbajal and the Office of California Assemblymember Gregg Hart.

History Alumnus Jack Martin Selected as IATPP Visiting Scholar

Jack Martin (History, '23 and History M.A., '25) was selected as a visiting scholar at Cal

Poly's Institute for Advanced Technology and Public Policy (IATPP), an interdisciplinary research center promoting solutions to real-world problems by driving public policy through advanced technology. Martin's research focuses on the history of race in Latin America, the United States and the Southwest Borderlands/California. He is a primary contributor to the African Californios Project, which explores the history of California's African-descended population.





First Sociology Pathway Program Cohort Graduates

At 2026 Commencement, President Armstrong recognized the first student cohort to graduate from Cal Poly's first pathway program. This milestone is part of Cal Poly's broader mission to increase access to bachelor's degrees for local students by partnering with community colleges. Pathway programs allow students to complete their associate's degree at a community college, transfer to Cal Poly and complete a bachelor's degree in two additional years by taking courses from Cal Poly faculty at their community college campus. The sociology pathway program, in partnership with Allan Hancock College in Santa Maria, CA, offers courses in formats designed to support students balancing education, work, family and other responsibilities. This inaugural cohort is already demonstrating pathway programs' impact through academic excellence and contributions to the community.

Kylie Parrotta Awarded Social Sciences Continuing Excellence in Undergraduate Mentorship Award

Kylie Parrotta, associate professor of criminology and sociology, was awarded the 2025-26 Social Sciences Continuing Excellence in Undergraduate Mentorship Award. The award, presented by the Council on Undergraduate Research, celebrates faculty members who provide consistent, meaningful mentorship that supports undergraduate growth, learning and engagement in the social sciences.



CAL POLY LIBERAL ARTS + BIRMINGHAM CITY UNIVERSITY WORKSHOP

As part of an ongoing collaborative partnership between Cal Poly and Birmingham City University (BCU), several students from the Liberal Arts and Engineering Studies Program took part in the BCU x Cal Poly STEAM Sprint, a four-day interdisciplinary design workshop that challenged participants to share ideas and push creative boundaries. Students worked in global teams on six interdisciplinary projects, with tasks ranging from the reimagining of immersive educational experiences for the Santa Barbara Zoo to the reprogramming of a Star Wars droid named Frida.



Cal Poly and BCU students collaborated on interdisciplinary projects.

FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

This year, four CLA faculty reached major scholarly milestones for work that centers Latinx/e histories, identities and communities across disciplines. Their achievements reflect the culturally enriching scholarship that defines Cal Poly's commitment to becoming a Hispanic-Serving Institution.

By Yari Valverde

G. ARON RAMIREZ | ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, HISTORY | Uncovering the American Dream



G. Aron Ramirez's doctoral dissertation, "The Death of the American Dream, en Español: The Problem of Latine Homeownership in the Late Twentieth Century," earned the Edwin W. Small Prize from the Yale Department of History, the Theron Rockwell Field Prize from the Yale Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and a 2026 fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies to develop the work into a book.

Completed at Yale in 2024, the dissertation draws on national archives, presidential libraries and community repositories to trace three decades of housing policy. "The problem of Latine homeownership was really a problem of low-income home-

ownership," Ramirez writes, using Latine history as a lens to reveal how the entire political economy of housing was remade: the federal government retreated from public investment, nonprofits tried but couldn't fill the gap alone, policymakers shifted from building new homes to bundling existing mortgages into securities for Wall Street investors and homeownership itself was redefined as high-risk debt on older properties in segregated neighborhoods.

Ramirez brings that same commitment to recovering overlooked histories in the classroom, teaching courses in American history that challenge students to see how policy decisions of the past continue to shape communities today.

RAMÓN ESQUIVEL | ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, THEATRE AND DANCE | A Play Almost Twenty Years in the Making



Ramón Esquivel's play "Dulce," won the 2025 Distinguished Play Award from the American Alliance for Theatre and Education. The play, which Esquivel first wrote for a playwriting class in 2005, went through more than 10 drafts over nearly two decades before reaching its current form.

"Dulce" tells the story of Memo, a 10-year-old boy who returns from a family trip to discover that his abuelita has died. When his grandmother appears to him with an uncanny mission to find her most precious treasure, what follows is a story full of magical realism, physical comedy and the pain

of a first- and second-generation immigrant family holding onto its roots. The treasure turns out to be a quinceañera dress connecting three generations of women.

"The whole story of the play is really about how family is a treasure," Esquivel said, "and we remember those we've lost in the faces of those who are still with us."

Esquivel teaches playwriting, script analysis and Latinx theater, assigning Latino playwrights while encouraging students of all backgrounds to find connections to their own family histories and identities.

IVAN A. HERNANDEZ | ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, PSYCHOLOGY AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT | The Science of Unique Identities



Ivan A. Hernandez earned the 2025 SAGE Emerging Scholar Award from the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP), recognizing an early-career body of work that includes 18 publications, more than 400 citations and over \$1 million in research funding.

Hernandez investigates how social environments shape people's life trajectories through identity and motivation. His research challenges traditional frameworks of academic achievement by exploring what students bring to the classroom rather than what they lack. As his nomination for the SAGE award describes, "Students exhibit positive identity development, persistence and performance when educational environments acknowledge the unique strengths that they have acquired from their otherwise stigmatized experiences."

Hernandez's work has influenced youth development programs, educational interventions and policies designed to support positive student outcomes. A recently awarded \$999,292 National Science Foundation grant is extending Hernandez's efforts even further, to investigating how students' access to opportunities is shaped by interactions with educators.

As a first-generation Latinx scholar from a working-class immigrant family, Hernandez draws on personal experience in his commitment to broadening participation in higher education. He teaches Multi-cultural Psychology and Advanced Social Psychology and serves on the department's diversity committee.

MARTHA GALVÁN-MANDUJANO | ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF SPANISH, WORLD LANGUAGES AND CULTURES | Bearing Witness in Guatemala



Martha Galván-Mandujano co-authored "Women and Genocide in Guatemala: Justice and the Politics of Memorialization" with JoAnn DiGeorgio-Lutz, published by Bloomsbury Academic in 2026. The book examines the post-genocide memorialization process in Guatemala, where more than 200,000 people were killed or disappeared — including some 45,000 victims of forced disappearance — during the country's 36-year internal armed conflict, which ended in 1996.

"At many memory and genocide conferences I attended, Guatemala was rarely mentioned or even known," Galván-Mandujano said. "We felt it was urgent to highlight the efforts of survivors, activists and organizations working to preserve historical memory, pursue

justice and educate future generations so that such atrocities are never repeated."

Part of the book is dedicated to the Abuelas of Sepur Zarco, Indigenous Maya Q'eqchi' women who survived domestic slavery and systematic rape during the conflict. Galván-Mandujano was invited to accompany these women as they celebrated the first anniversary of a landmark legal victory: In 2016 a national court prosecuted military leaders for wartime sexual slavery for the first time.

Galván-Mandujano's research informs her teaching in Spanish language, culture and Latin American studies, connecting students to histories that remain underrepresented in global scholarship.

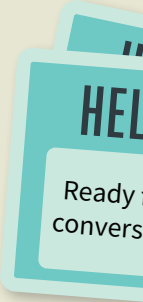


making sense of semesters

By Ava Adarkar

As multimedia student interns for the CLA Advising team, Priscilla Cheung (Graphic Communications, '26) and Jillian Noel (Art and Design, '26) translated complex information into engaging visuals to help students understand Cal Poly's semester conversion.

After more than four years of university wide planning to convert every academic program from quarters to semesters, Cal Poly was on track to begin the 2026-27 academic year with the new term structure. But first, continuing students needed to understand key changes to make informed decisions about registering for fall 2026 and continuing their studies with semester-based courses. Hoping to more effectively reach students, the CLA Advising team hired two student-intern designers.



Cheung and Noel's paid internships gave them valuable Learn by Doing experience, while providing the college with clear, engaging student-focused messaging.

"Priscilla and I created a really great touchpoint for advising staff to understand the students' needs from our perspective," Noel said. "The advisors knew the information students need, and we helped them find the best ways to deliver that information for our peers to resonate with it."

The pair spent six months creating accurate but clear equivalency guides for the CLA's 18 majors, with all required details unique to each program. Noel, a graphic designer in the art and design program, developed the overall layout. Meanwhile, Cheung, a digital content creator in the graphic communication program, designed banner graphics for each individual version of the guide. On completing the guides, the interns shifted to a variety of other projects with new challenges.

"I had expected to mostly create graphics, but every project was completely different," Cheung said. "It was really rewarding to see my designs out across campus. It was the first time I had worked on a project that reached such a large audience."

According to Associate Dean for Student Success Lauren Kolodziejski, the designs were so effective that Cal Poly leadership used them across the entire university. "We are even using some of their designs during the fall semester to help students continue navigating the transition," Kolodziejski said.

Both designers expanded their portfolios with projects including social media assets, informational handouts, large signage, and promotional "swag" items for the university wide, student-focused campaign.

"I got to see a 3x6-foot poster I designed hanging in the dining halls and watch people around campus



Priscilla Cheung (Left) and Jillian Noel (Right)

“...you’re always going to learn new things, make mistakes and improve as you go. It’s a lesson I’ll carry with me throughout my career.”

pick up handouts I created,” Noel said. “Stuff like that is just the coolest thing ever. Not only is it really validating as a designer, but you know the work you’re doing is being received and hopefully resonating with students.”

While Cheung and Noel thoroughly enjoyed the design process itself, their favorite part of the internship was working alongside each other. They quickly learned that their styles and modes of thinking were different but complementary. Noel often worked on projects that required a strong eye for layout and design principles, while Cheung

focused on social media graphics and swag.

“Our different perspectives made every project stronger,” Cheung said. “Since Jillian and I come from different majors, we each brought different knowledge and strengths to the table. We were always sharing ideas, giving feedback and catching things the other person didn’t notice.”

Through this iterative, collaborative process, they learned how to navigate client relationships while creating engaging designs in alignment with Cal Poly’s branding.

“This internship gave me a ton of experience

in settings I’ll be working in as a designer, where a client knows what information they need to share but might not know how to do that visually,” Noel said. “It’s one thing for your professors to explain that, but it’s a whole other thing to experience navigating projects for yourself. I learned that I love the process of discussing a design brief and ideating how to fit the project within the client’s confines while making it super eye catching and fun.”

Cheung and Noel graduated in June 2026, but they will carry these experiences with them.

“My internship reminded me that you’re always going to learn new things, make mistakes and improve as you go. It’s a lesson I’ll carry with me throughout my career,” Cheung said. “I’m hoping to pursue a career in graphic design and/or social media management, and everything I’ve learned during this experience has made me even more excited to continue down that path.”

Faculty Sound Off

AI in the Workplace and the Enduring Value of *Human Work*

By Yari Valverde

CLA faculty bring ethical, human and historical perspectives to the AI conversation that the technology industry alone cannot. Learn how five CLA faculty are preparing students to navigate an AI-shaped workforce with sound judgment, not just AI skills.



Andrew Fricker

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF GEOGRAPHY, SOCIAL SCIENCES

Automating Drudgery Without Outsourcing Understanding

Andrew Fricker applies AI to satellite imagery, machine learning models and computer vision. His lab built custom models for post-wildfire building damage assessment and uses pre-trained models to analyze tree canopy data at scale.

For Fricker, some uses of AI are easy to defend. When a task is repetitive and draining, automation frees people to do more meaningful work. One of his students has been working with the City of San José to geo-reference thousands of legacy engineering maps, aligning old paper diagrams with geographic space. AI makes a real difference there, not because it replaces expertise but because it removes the kind of repetition that makes people resent the work.

Still, Fricker draws a clear line between automating a process and outsourcing understanding. AI can generate code, run analysis and sort through large datasets, but it cannot decide what question is worth asking. It cannot replace the judgment needed to know whether a result is real, useful or misleading.

That is where he sees the risk for students. A student can use AI to produce a project proposal that looks impressive without understanding the work. The document may pass at first glance, but the learning has been bypassed. The same problem follows graduates into the workplace. “You think you have an answer, but you don’t know how to fact-check it,” Fricker said.

He believes that in an AI-assisted workplace, the low-level technical task may become easier to automate, while knowing what questions to ask will become more important, a shift that may favor liberal arts students with strong critical thinking skills.



Kim Bisheff

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, JOURNALISM

The work that requires a human in the room

Kim Bisheff's perspective on AI is shaped by her field's ongoing need to ask, "What can computers do, and what can only humans do?"

Her answer is precise. AI is well-suited to tasks the user can verify: aggregating research, organizing source materials, parsing dense documents. She uses it that way herself to make source documents searchable and to build custom draft-assessment tools trained on her department's rubric. That tool flags sourcing issues, bias and narrative problems but deliberately withholds corrections. Students must decide how to fix what it finds. The design is intentional: AI surfaces the problem; the human solves it.

What AI can't do, in her field, is the most important part of the job. Journalism runs on relationships with sources, presence in a room and the kind of trust that makes a family agree to talk about something difficult with a stranger. "AI can summarize a City Council meeting transcript, but it can't describe the mood in the room or talk with community members about how government decisions affect their lives," Bisheff said.

Bisheff also raises the issue of data privacy. Most large language models incorporate user input into their training data, and most users do not read the privacy policies. In a journalism context, that risk is especially acute. Source information, unpublished notes and sensitive interviews can all be absorbed into a system the journalist does not control.

She points to a cultural countertrend she finds encouraging. Students in her media innovation courses have been turning toward in-person, analog solutions: news quizzes played in real rooms, moderated community dinners, direct conversation. In a media environment saturated with AI-generated content, proof of human origin is becoming its own form of value.



Krista Speicher Sarraf

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, ENGLISH

DIRECTOR, TECHNICAL AND PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION PROGRAM

Writing is Not Just Output. It is Thinking.

For Krista Speicher Sarraf, writing is thinking. Drafting a memo, composing a difficult email or working through a proposal forces a person to clarify their own reasoning. It makes them slow down, confront ambiguity and decide what they mean. If AI takes over that process, it removes the cognitive work that produces understanding.

When writers approach these tools as creative collaborators, Sarraf sees useful applications, especially when the task is predictable or pattern-based — or when the reader is a large language model, as is increasingly the case on the job market. AI can show someone what a familiar professional genre looks like. For a student who has never written a formal memo, seeing a standard example can be helpful. For those learning a language, AI tools may ease the technical aspects of writing so the writer can focus on ideas.

However, these tools can also erase the writer's unique voice. And when the stakes involve tone, relationship or judgment — as is often the case — she would still ask a human colleague for feedback

Faculty Sound Off

over a chatbot. A sensitive message is not successful because it is grammatically correct. It is successful because it resonates with another person.

“AI can generate clean content with few grammatical errors, but we risk equating convention with effectiveness and connection,” Sarraf said.

She is especially concerned about what over-reliance does to a writer's relationship with their own voice. When people constantly compare their drafts to polished AI output, they may begin to assume the machine's version is better, simply because the text looks polished. Over time, that weakens not only confidence and judgment but authenticity and language diversity.

The solution, she argues, looks a lot like a CLA-style education: ethical judgment to weigh the implications of using AI tools, critical thinking to evaluate AI output, creative thinking to interpret ideas in new ways and enough trust in one's own memories, stories and lived experiences to communicate with other humans in ways a large language model cannot.

In an AI-focused workplace, knowing whether and how to use generative AI tools is a skill in itself. One challenge for writers is continuing to trust their own perspectives, experiences and problem-solving abilities. Another is relying on intuition and judgment while remaining vulnerable and creative enough to connect with readers in new ways.



Matt Harsh

PROFESSOR, INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES IN LIBERAL ARTS (ISLA) AND SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY

Asking What AI Costs Before Asking What it Can Do

Matt Harsh sees the rise of generative AI as providing a powerful teaching moment. In his classes, historical examples of technology and power feel immediately relevant. When students encounter the case of Robert Moses, the New York city planner whose parkway bridges were built too low for public buses, effectively blocking Black and low-income residents from reaching the beaches, they connect it instantly to how algorithms can produce discriminatory outcomes by design or by training.

Harsh worries that colleges, companies and the public repeat the language of tech firms without questioning it. When every new release is described as inevitable, people end up building the future that tech companies predicted simply by echoing it with their choices of how they use, or do not use, those products.

His deeper concern is what remains hidden behind the clean interface. AI depends on enormous amounts of energy, water, mining and human labor, including content moderators in East Africa who are exposed to disturbing material so the rest of the internet feels safe. AI may feel weightless to the user, but it carries real costs that are rarely part of the conversation.

For students entering the workforce, Harsh sees real opportunity. Small and mid-size organizations are often trying to figure out what to do with AI, and young employees may be asked to lead that conversation. “If our graduates come out with a real critical, nuanced understanding of the benefits and harms of AI, I think they could have a lot of power within those kinds of organizations,” Harsh said.

The first question, he argues, is not what task to hand off to AI. It is whether AI should be used at all. If the benefit is high enough, such as in cancer research, the answer may be yes. If the goal is only to save an hour summarizing a document, it deserves more scrutiny.



Keith Abney

LECTURER, PHILOSOPHY

Protecting the Work Where the Process is the Point

Keith Abney, co-editor of “Robot Ethics” and “Robot Ethics 2.0,” has been thinking about artificial intelligence and machine ethics long before generative AI became a topic of daily conversation.

The question he thinks is most often missed is distribution. AI may increase productivity, but the benefits are rarely shared equally. A small number of companies may capture enormous gains while workers, smaller firms and communities lose out. In that sense, AI is not only a technical development. It is an economic and political one.

He is also concerned about what AI does to the information environment. Even if AI produces more accurate information, it can also produce far more inaccurate information. The result is not necessarily more knowledge. It may be more confusion, more noise and a harder time understanding what is true.

Abney pushes back on assumptions about which jobs are most vulnerable. Work people once considered safe because it required education, including legal discovery, radiology and copywriting, can be easier to automate than physical labor. If a job is measured primarily by its output, AI can compete with it.

What remains more deeply human, he argues, is work where the process matters as much as the product. That distinction matters in education. If students ask AI to produce the draft, they end up with something that looks like thinking without having done the thinking.

“The kind of jobs best suited for humans in the near future are those where the process of doing the work is the point, not just the output,” Abney said.

Abney argues that AI has specific beneficial applications. He has used it himself to ask for critical feedback on a draft and received useful insights, “but if I just asked the AI to produce the draft itself, I wouldn’t have learned anything at all.”

This feature represents individual faculty members' current opinions, as part of a continuing AI discussion series. Hear from other faculty experts about how they used AI in the classroom in the 2025 Impact Magazine issue:

cla.calpoly.edu/faculty-sound-off-2025



Learning Her Way Forward

By Cara King

Lynn Davis (Child Development, '71) grew up surrounded by strong women who owned businesses, made decisions and charted their own paths. Only later did she recognize how unusual it was to have worked in her parents' Santa Barbara bakery, originally founded by her grandmother in 1939. Davis's family instilled a confidence that would serve her well throughout a career defined by curiosity, resilience and a willingness to venture into the unknown.

Davis enrolled as a home economics major when she arrived at Cal Poly in the late 1960s but changed course when the university launched its new child development program. She became part of the program's first graduating class in 1971.

"Child development was multidisciplinary," Davis said. "Beyond child development, I was exposed to art, science, music, psychology, genetics and more. It taught me to think from many different perspectives."

Just as important, the program immersed students in hands-on experiences beyond the traditional classroom. Working directly with children challenged Davis to think on her feet and develop confidence in her own judgment.

"Cal Poly changed my trajectory," she said. "It connected me with a way of being that I hadn't experienced before." At the heart of that transformation was Learn by Doing.

Though Davis earned a teaching credential and taught for three years, the difficulty finding adequately paid positions prompted her to reconsider what came next. Rather than a setback, she saw this uncertainty as an opportunity.



She accepted an entry-level position at Bechtel Corporation, where she was hired as a typist. The role wasn't glamorous, but it gave her a foothold. Before long, she was looking for the next challenge. "It took guts, but I don't like being bored," Davis said.

That outlook became a recurring theme throughout her career. When an opportunity arose to move into cost engineering, she applied despite having little knowledge of the field. "They asked me if I knew what a cost code was," she recalled. "I said, 'No, but I think I can figure it out.'" She got the job. Years later, when technology transformed the workplace, Davis applied for a programming position, trusting again that she could learn.

Over the next several decades, Davis built a successful career spanning technology, consulting and executive leadership. She worked for major firms, traveled to more than 40 countries and spent time living abroad. Yet despite the dramatic shifts in industry and responsibility, she sees her adaptability and flexible thinking as common threads interwoven throughout her story.

"I never boxed myself into thinking, 'This is what my degree is in, so this is what I have to do,'" she said. "I just kept learning."

Her child development background proved very valuable in the corporate world. While many colleagues excelled at technical work, Davis developed additional strengths in understanding how people communicate, collaborate and navigate change.

"I understood the user requirements and was able to translate this to the language of the developers," she said. "The leadership skills I developed became my greatest strength and set me apart."

Eventually, those strengths led her to executive leadership roles managing global technology teams. Later, they led her into yet another reinvention: executive coaching.

Today, Davis helps leaders develop character-driven leadership styles while also pursuing a lifelong creative passion as a textile artist. Her fabric collages and portrait pieces represent another expression of the curiosity that has guided her life since her days at Cal Poly.

"It feels like I've come full circle," she said.

As she reflects on her journey, Davis hopes current students will embrace uncertainty rather than fear it. "Be open to trying new things and putting yourself out there," she said. "You never know where your life's going to go."

That belief also motivates her commitment to Cal Poly. A longtime volunteer and advisory council member, Davis is establishing the Lynn E. Davis Student Success in Child Development Endowment. She hopes her gift will help remove barriers that prevent students from fully participating in the kinds of transformative experiences that shaped her own future.

"Cal Poly changed my life," Davis said. "I strongly believe in the university's mission. I never imagined I'd be in a position to give back at this scale, but that's the difference Cal Poly made for me."

More than five decades after graduating, Davis still sees herself as a learner, following her curiosity, embracing new challenges and trusting that the next opportunity will reveal itself through action.

Learn by Doing is a lesson she first learned at Cal Poly and one she continues to practice every day.

Thinking About Your Cal Poly Legacy?

Planned gifts transform lives and are a powerful way to honor your Cal Poly experience while helping students shape their own paths. Whether you have already made plans to support Cal Poly or are simply considering the possibilities, we would love to hear from you.

Contact Erica Nordby, assistant dean of development, at nordby@calpoly.edu or 805-305-4567 to share your plans or start a conversation.

the art of MAKING IT HAPPEN



NINE GRADUATING ART AND DESIGN STUDENT ARTISTS Banded TOGETHER TO CREATE THEIR OWN SENIOR ART EXHIBITION. THEIR SUCCESS HAS REACHED FAR BEYOND THE SHOW ITSELF.

By Cara King

As students, locals, commencement-weekend visitors and local media entered a formerly vacant gallery space, they were met with a clear demonstration of hands-on career preparation in the visual arts. Large-scale paintings and sculptures were the main subjects of the show, but the student artists' hard work, collaboration and ingenuity were equally on display.

Months earlier, nine graduating art and design students had formed a collective, Big Artist Corp., to ideate, plan and execute their own art exhibition in downtown San Luis Obispo: Lillie Turinsky, Liliana Monge, Tilman Stoppler, Maya Benham, Owen Isachsen, Cailin Nicolich, Sarah Tarquin, Olivia Pye and Alexa Lopez.

"We tossed around the idea of putting on a small show during grad weekend that would allow our works to be shown to loved ones and any other visitors coming for commencement," said Turinsky, who helped lead the project with Monge and Benham. "That talk evolved into starting a group collective and larger group show to encourage collaboration, professional 'art world' experience and relationship building with our other classmates."

Monge and Benham handled much of the organizing by reaching out to property owners, scouting vacant venues, assigning roles and keeping the group moving. Tarquin and Pye worked on marketing, including printing logistics and outreach. The rest of the group contributed to fundraising, production, installation and the steady work of creating new pieces.

A successful Cal Poly crowdfunding campaign in March garnered broad support, building the student artists' marketing skills while demonstrating the broader community's desire to engage with student artists. Bolstered by these early successes, the artists set out to tackle one of their biggest

challenges, finding a suitable gallery space with enough wall surface, floor space and flexibility for large works ranging from oil paintings to wood and metal sculpture. In doing so, they navigated the kinds of logistics that are usually invisible to gallery visitors, including insurance, promotion, sales, installation and the timing of a short-term rental.

Pye said the project revealed "so many little things required to put on a show at this scale that might not be so obvious." That hidden labor further embodied Learn by Doing. As the artists produced their own exhibition, every obstacle became part of learning the entrepreneurial skills necessary to bring their art to the public: persuading a landlord, making a budget, launching a crowdfunding campaign, designing merchandise, preparing work for sale and coordinating press coverage.

By the opening reception on June 12, the artists' initial plan to showcase their work had grown into so much more. The final exhibition, "This is Not a Couch," was named for the art studio's well-loved light blue couch, where artists rested between long hours of work, talked through ideas and critiques and supported each other's progress. A worn piece of furniture became a soft anchor for their community. The



Tarquin uses VR Goggles to layout and paint signage



Maya Benham adds a coat of varnish during final touches



Sarah Tarquin's gallery display



Artists help each other during installation



Top Left: Artwork by Cailin Nicolich
 Bottom Left: Pye meticulously hangs work
 Bottom Right: Artwork by Olivia Pye
 Right: Nicolich builds display with industrial materials



tongue-in-cheek title pairs that symbol with a nod to René Magritte's "The Treachery of Images," a painting better known for the phrase "This is not a pipe." The exhibition poster features each artist's illustration of the couch in their own style, showcasing their individual voices within the unified collective.

The work itself reflected that range. Turinsky's paintings and sculptures draw from religious objects, marine landscapes and the impulse to preserve what feels precious. Monge's paintings create dreamlike inner worlds shaped by diaspora, cultural liminality and ancestral grief. Stoppler moved from two-dimensional geometric pattern work into larger hand-built wood sculpture. Benham's paintings examine femininity, objectification and discomfort. Isachsen's abstract paintings are shaped by ocean photography and nature's rhythms. Nicolich's landscapes ask how memory, place and climate change alter what people think they know. Tarquin's paintings and sculptures explore inadequacy, performance and femininity through forms that feel personal and unsettling. Pye's closely cropped oil paintings focus on sensual depictions of the female form. Lopez's mixed media work grows from personal experiences and emotionally difficult memories.

"This experience gives us some insight into the real-world applications of our major," Benham said. "We get to experience what it is like to be professional artists, but also what it is like curating and advertising a public art show."

These experiences are invaluable in a highly competitive field where the path forward requires a willingness to begin before every question is answered. Several artists are planning for graduate school. Others hope to work in galleries, studios, teaching, design, commissions or local art jobs. Their plans are varied, but the exhibition gave them a shared artistic practice.

Benham encouraged students, "If you have the fight in you, go for it." Turinsky said the show helped open new possibilities, including curation, teaching and leadership. For Lopez, the experience was her first art show outside of school, and she was impressed by the group's determination. "Even if this is our first time doing this," she said, "I have seen how they take matters into their own hands."

For CLA students, adaptability is central to the curriculum and Big Artist Corp. was never just about one show in one storefront. "This is Not a Couch" demonstrated students' preparation for an evolving workforce. Turinsky said she hopes the collective will "grow and take off" even after the artists leave Cal Poly and San Luis Obispo, while Monge said the project has already sparked conversations about becoming an official artist collective and putting on more shows after graduation.

According to Monge "We are showing ourselves that as artists we have the power to make space for ourselves."

Meet the New CLA Development Team

GIVING BACK



Erica Nordby
ASSISTANT DEAN
OF DEVELOPMENT

While Erica is new to the CLA, she is no stranger to Cal Poly, having spent the past six years building meaningful relationships with alumni and donors in the College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences. As someone whose own liberal arts education shaped her career, Erica believes there is no better place to earn a liberal arts degree than Cal Poly, where Learn by Doing, small class sizes and close faculty mentorship prepare students to think critically, communicate effectively and make a difference in the world.

“Whether you’re passionate about scholarships, faculty excellence, innovative programs or creating a lasting legacy through a planned gift, I would love to learn what inspires you and the difference you’d like to make,” Nordby said. “I enjoy helping alumni, parents and friends turn their values into meaningful opportunities that benefit today’s students and generations to come.”

To start a conversation, contact Erica anytime at 805-305-4567 or nordby@calpoly.edu.



Chrissy Ybarra
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR
OF DEVELOPMENT

Chrissy partners with alumni, parents and donors to advance the college’s mission through meaningful philanthropy and engagement. Building on more than 15 years of experience in education-focused nonprofit organizations and project management, Chrissy brings a collaborative, detail-oriented approach to relationship building, strategic communication and fundraising. She is passionate about connecting donors’ personal values and legacy goals with opportunities that expand student access, strengthen academic programs, and create lasting impact through a liberal arts education. Committed to continuous professional growth, Chrissy is dedicated to fostering meaningful partnerships that support student success, faculty excellence, and the long-term future of the CLA.

Jordan Chesnut
DEVELOPMENT COORDINATOR

Shape the future
of the Liberal Arts

Your support fuels
student success,
innovative teaching
and hands-on learning
experiences across the
College of Liberal Arts.



Scan this code with
your smartphone
camera to donate online.
Make a one-time or
recurring gift online at
cla.calpoly.edu/giving

Dean's Advisory Council

Special thanks to members of the Dean’s Advisory Council for their contributions to the College of Liberal Arts.

• **Sarah Carvalho Khan**
(English, '98)
Global Head of People,
Pulmonx Corporation

• **Laura Diaz**
(English, '80)
News Anchor,
KTTV Fox 11 News

• **Matt Edling**
(Political Science, '02)
Partner & Co-Founder,
Sher Edling LLP

• **Melissa Figueroa**
(Journalism, '02)
Director of Communications
and Public Affairs, Shaw Yoder
Antwih Schmelzer & Lange

• **Megan Lester**
(Graphic Communication, '00)

• **Roger Reedy**
(English, '86)
CEO, Reedy Consulting
Team Inc.

• **Dan Rivoire**
(Philosophy, '07)
Interim Executive Director,
Bike SLO County

• **Samantha Schneider**
(Speech Communication, '98)
CEO and Principal,
AmpersandPeople, Inc.

• **Junior Tauvaa**
(Political Science, '96)
Chief Business Officer, PCMA

• **Christopher Trapani**
(Political Science, '90)
Founder and CEO, Christie’s
International Real Estate
Serenio

CONNECTIONS THAT COUNT

Dean's Advisory Council Member – Samantha Schneider

By Cara King

Samantha Schneider (Speech Communication, '98) founded AmpersandPeople, Inc., a human resources and talent consulting firm. As a CEO, entrepreneur and mentorship expert, she enthusiastically shares her industry experience on the Dean's Advisory Council. Now, Schneider is partnering with the CLA to launch a new Industry and Innovation Fund as a founding donor.

The Industry and Innovation Fund supports forward-thinking opportunities like AI, innovation, entrepreneurship, internships, industry visits and conference participation. "I was privileged to have the support and ability to participate during my education, and those moments continue to stand out years later," said Schneider. "I wanted to help launch this fund to ensure that students have equal access to these life-changing experiences."

From her experiences being raised by business-owner parents to celebrating ten years as a CEO, Schneider feels strongly committed to the "founder path." "It is crucial to support entrepreneurship as a viable career option for students," Schneider said. "Providing a mechanism for students to interact with founders and leaders through real-world opportunities is incredibly important."

Reflecting on her time at Cal Poly, Schneider learned "the critical importance of professional networking and seeking mentorship, and the skills to reach out and genuinely listen to professional advice" from her senior project and the individualized faculty guidance afforded by small class sizes. She credits this experience for her confidence approaching prospective employers. "People are willing to help if I put in the effort."

As an alumna and an expert recruiter, Schneider has witnessed how Learn by Doing distinguishes Cal Poly graduates, from both sides of the interview table. "Our curriculum moves beyond memorization and theory. Our students have actively applied their knowledge, learned from direct experience and are prepared to contribute immediately," Schneider said. "Consequently, leaders recognize that Cal Poly graduates arrive with practical expertise, fostering a powerful and tangible bond among our Mustang alumni throughout the professional world."

Her innate passion for people was the driving force behind Schneider's career in recruiting and leadership across major companies like EA Sports, Shutterfly and Google. Now, she finds fulfillment in helping new entrepreneurs and founders find the best talent to grow their business.

Schneider advises Cal Poly students and alumni to "take the initiative to connect earnestly."

"Differentiating yourself often comes down to simply showing up prepared," Schneider said. "Invest five minutes researching the person before reaching out. Do the heavy lifting by providing the necessary context, defining your specific request and knowing exactly what you hope to achieve. Furthermore, remember to express gratitude. Embracing the risk of being present, even when it feels uncomfortable, is a gamechanger among a field of high achievers."



Samantha Schneider at commencement with her roommate Kelly Castro (Microbiology, '97)



Freemont Dorm, 1994

Shape the future of Learn by Doing



Your gift to the CLA Industry and Innovation Fund will help students explore entrepreneurship and emerging technologies, engage with industry leaders, attend conferences and pursue internships.

CLASS NOTES

Share your recent news in the next Impact magazine at cla.calpoly.edu/update.

1990s

Ceci Johnson (Art and Design, '99) is the founder and creative director of Ceci New York, a couture invitation and graphic design studio. Johnson recently returned to campus as the keynote speaker for the Cal Poly Women in Business Association's conference, Defining Her Future.

Christine Moore (English and Philosophy, '96) is celebrating the fall 2026 publication of her new poetry collection, "Never a Name Given." The collection features poems that explore family, memory, faith, and the stories that shape us.

2010s

Cassie Herzog (Sociology, '18) is the development director of Food Recovery Network, a national non-profit working to end food waste and hunger with data-driven solutions. Food Recovery Network unites over 8,000 college students, food suppliers, farmers and local businesses across the U.S. in the fight against climate change and hunger by recovering surplus food from across the supply chain and donating it to local nonprofit organizations that feed people experiencing hunger.

Clarissa Morales (Philosophy, '10) is the first Chief Operating Officer (COO) at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

(the Modern). Morales oversees operations of the 53,000 square foot museum. Her role on the leadership team includes developing a long-term strategic and financial plan, directing information technology and security policies, coordinating museum finances and implementing her strategic plan.

2020s

Allie Holveck (Psychology, '22) joined Cal Poly's staff as a financial aid advisor in May 2026. "Financial aid was the reason I was able to graduate from Cal Poly myself, and I can't wait to learn and support students in their own educational journeys moving forward," said Holveck. "Thanks to the Financial Aid Office for this opportunity to grow in my higher education journey."

Rob Moore (Political Science, '21) was sworn in as mayor of Los Gatos in December 2025. At 27, Moore became the youngest mayor in the town's history. Moore previously served on the Los Gatos Town Council since 2022 and is also a health policy aide to a Santa Clara County supervisor, where he oversees policy for the county's hospitals and clinics.

A.J. Nicholson (Anthropology and Geography, '25) has been awarded the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship (NSF GRFP) for 2026.

Nicholson is currently pursuing graduate study in medical anthropology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. The NSF GRFP recognizes only a small fraction of applicants nationwide and supports individuals with exceptional promise as future scientific leaders.

Sophie Klitgaard (Anthropology and Geography, '22) was awarded the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship (NSF GRFP) in 2023 and is now pursuing her Ph.D. in anthropology at UCLA.

Alex Nishida (Graphic Communication, '25) joined WPP Production as a packaging program manager for Apple in February 2026. As a student, Nishida helped lead his team to a "Best in Show" win at the AICC student packaging design competition and a third-place finish for best concept in the DIELINE global packaging awards. He also served as advertisement design manager for Mustang Media Group.

Bryanna Gay (Communication Studies, '22; MPP, '25) joined the U.S. Department of Agriculture in November 2025 as a program analyst serving the Central Coast. She received the College of Liberal Arts' Outstanding Graduate Student Award for the Master of Public Policy program and wrote her thesis on Cal Poly's Hispanic-Serving Institution

initiatives. She also worked as an intern for Congressman Salud Carbajal in Washington, D.C.

Christine Mastromonaco (History, '13) was elevated to counsel at Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman LLP in San Francisco in January 2026. Mastromonaco earned her law degree from UC Law San Francisco in 2017 and previously served as seconded privacy counsel at Instagram.

An Huynh (Psychology, '24, and M.S. Business Analytics, '25) joined Amazon in February 2026 as an agentic AI teacher on the company's Frontier AI team in Boston. Huynh is a former BEACoN Research Scholar and recently co-presented "Demystifying AI," a public workshop on AI and cybersecurity hosted by ISACA San Diego.

Career Readiness in the CLA

CLA STUDENTS CAN BUILD TANGIBLE SKILLS AND GAIN PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE FOR WHAT LIES AHEAD. WHETHER THEY PURSUE IMMEDIATE EMPLOYMENT OR GRADUATE STUDIES, CLA GRADUATES HAVE THE TOOLS TO BE READY DAY ONE.

CLA 3000: CAREER READINESS FOR CLA MAJORS

This new 2-unit course is designed for second and third-year liberal arts students looking to boost career readiness. The class is open to all CLA students and will count as a free elective.

THIS INTERACTIVE COURSE HELPS STUDENTS

- Identify career options where CLA majors shine
- Create an individualized career development plan
- Develop workplace skills like negotiation and conflict resolution
- Craft resumes and cover letters that highlight the strengths of a liberal arts degree
- Explore options for pursuing graduate studies
- Hear from CLA Alumni about their professional journeys
- Learn strategies to expand professional networks

ACCESS | COMMUNITY | EQUITY

The Access, Community and Equity (ACE) Program helps students participate in the Learn by Doing experiences that prepare them for future careers by providing up to \$1,000 in support. In the 2025-26 academic year, the CLA awarded 53 stipends, up from 15 in 2024-25.

ACE funding supports students' undergraduate research, global learning, service learning, internships and special projects. These experiences are shown to improve a student's overall success, including career readiness and the likelihood of graduating. Students receive mentoring and a community of support to help them take full advantage of their experience.

cla.calpoly.edu/research-innovation/ace



Courtesy of Ana Leon



Courtesy of Laurita Marcial Palo

CAL POLY CAREER CONNECTIONS

Cal Poly Career Connections is Cal Poly's unique networking platform where alumni can connect with current students and each other.

From resume critique and mock interviews to insights on company culture and tips for success, alumni can help prepare Cal Poly students to graduate Ready Day One. Alumni can provide advice on work-life balance, changing careers, professional development and more by joining groups related to major, special interest or community.

Whether you are a current student, recent graduate navigating post-university life, established in your career or recently retired, your insight and experience can help fellow Mustangs.

careerconnections.calpoly.edu