

**President Soraya M. Coley
State of the University Address
2021 Convocation
Wednesday, August 18, 2021**

Hello again my friends and colleagues. Welcome to the Cal Poly Pomona 2021 Convocation. Each year, we come together before fall classes begin to unify as a university community, celebrate our collective progress over the course of the past year, and launch into the next history-making year of our institution.

We had hoped for, and were planning for, an in-person event in Kellogg Arena. The unfortunate rise of Covid cases and hospitalizations — not only in Southern California but across the state and nation — obliged us to move to a completely virtual format. I am again grateful to our colleagues in Facilities, Information Technology, and MediaVision for their expertise in producing this broadcast. I'm also grateful to my good friend Billy Bronco for doing such an amazing job helping to get the campus ready!

The Land Acknowledgement that opened today's event was offered by Wildflower Robles-Ontiveros, a Gabrielino and Cal Poly Pomona Class of 2021 alum. I thank her for inspiring us with her sentiments and in making us proud as her alma mater.

I also thank and recognize all those offering words of welcome from units that represent our faculty, staff, and students. Your advocacy on behalf of those who make Cal Poly Pomona great is essential to our mission. I thank you for your leadership and commitment.

I'd like to begin my remarks by introducing you to a friend of mine. Please say hello to Oreo the lamb.

Oreo was one of scores of lambs, goats, piglets, calves, and, of course, Arabian horses born on our campus in the spring of 2020, just as the pandemic was taking hold.

A year later, we celebrated Oreo's first birthday at Discovery Farm, complete with special cake and festive hats.

Little Oreo serves as a symbol that even in the midst of unprecedented adversity, the cherished legacies and traditions of this university have continued to move forward.

Convocation is just such a tradition. Whether virtual or in-person, these shared experiences unite us and foster the collective vision of student success and academic excellence that defines us.

I thank you for joining this event today, carrying on this legacy, and strengthening this collective vision.

As is customary, we take time near the beginning of each Convocation to acknowledge and formally welcome all those who have joined the Cal Poly Pomona community in the past year. We lead with this feature because welcoming our newest faculty and staff into our campus community and letting you know how honored we are to be your colleagues is fundamental to nurturing the culture of excellence that distinguishes us.

To all the faculty and staff that have joined our university in the past year, I offer my most sincere welcome. Cal Poly Pomona changes lives, and I am pleased to be a part of this work with you.

And as we welcome the newest members of our community, our thoughts also turn to those we've lost. With thousands of faculty and staff and tens of thousands of students, it is inevitable that we experience loss over the course of a year. But such a reality could never assuage the despair. We mourn for all those who have passed and offer condolences to all those mourning.

To demonstrate the impact of those we've lost, allow me to bring just two such individuals to the fore.

It was barely two months ago that we lost Dr. Jill Adler-Moore.

She served as a member of our faculty for 47 years. And if you want to see how education can transform lives, just look at Jill's life and work. A celebrated scientist, she saved and improved countless lives through her research. But above all, she dedicated herself to expanding opportunities for students and mentored generations of scientists over the course of her career.

And in December, we lost U'Pal King who had spent more than two decades supporting faculty and staff in human resources before retiring in 2009. While she is remembered for the scores of colleagues she mentored, most recall first her amazing singing ability.

Like Jill and U'Pal, each loss tells a story of someone whose impact and legacy lives on through the lives they have touched. We honor them best by emulating their example.

In remembrance of those who have died, I ask that you join me in a moment of silence in their honor.

Our Shared Journey

Each year at Convocation I return to the theme I shared at my very first talk to the Cal Poly Pomona community back in January of 2015. As part of my installation ceremony as president, I titled my remarks: "My Journey to You, Our Journey Together."

I chose this approach because I wanted you to know my journey and how it guides my work as an educator and administrator. But more importantly, I wanted you to feel my unmitigated belief that our success as an institution depends on our collective effort to travel this journey together.

I could never have known that five years later we would be in the midst of an historic pandemic, with our regular operations completely upended and our campus virtually empty. Never before has it been more important that we take this journey together.

When I spoke to you at this time last year, we had been in a primarily virtual mode for five months. Many of those early challenges rose from the massive transition from in-person to virtual and preparing for an on-line spring semester that lived up to our standards as a world-class university.

We have now added a year that featured unique challenges of its own. Zoom fatigue is real.

But there has been a constant over the past year and a half that has continued to drive our university forward. And that is the resiliency and commitment of each of you.

I've said it in every message to campus and every opportunity I get to join with you in your meetings and events, but it can't be said enough. You have made the difference. You've been resourceful and efficient. You've shown patience and practiced empathy. You've accepted the challenges and truly risen to the test. In other words, during perhaps the most forceful disruption of our operations in the history of this campus, you have kept the work and the legacy of Cal Poly Pomona alive and thriving. Even in the midst of extreme hardship, we have been One Team, with One Goal. Student Success.

The highlight video at the beginning of our program only begins to scratch the surface. Through achievements large and small, you have demonstrated why we continue to be an institution that changes lives.

Consider that in a historically difficult moment for higher education:

- Last fall, we enrolled our largest-ever student body, a six percent increase compared to the previous year.

- In spring, we celebrated our largest-ever graduating class at commencement.
- And thanks to an amazing campus-wide effort, we received more than 58,000 applications for this fall, a five percent increase compared to last year and a new record for our campus.

And — to be sure — we're not the only ones to notice the transformative work happening on our campus.

Last fall, Money Magazine released their annual report "The Best Colleges in America." This report signifies how the higher education landscape is changing in our favor.

As considerations around value, expanding opportunity, and preparing students for the future of work become more and more prominent, we have come to a point of broad reassessment of how we popularly evaluate the quality of colleges and universities.

Less relevant are the "prestige rankings" that prioritize factors like the size of an institution's endowment or which schools reject the most students. The higher education discussion right now consists of students, families, communities, and policy makers wanting to know who is making a difference in the trajectory of students

The Money Magazine assessment focuses on just that.

Each year, they consider 750 schools nationwide and crunch 20,000 data points to determine which colleges and universities provide the greatest return on investment. Among a host of factors, they look at the professional success of alumni, graduation rates, and student debt, as well as which schools provide the most "added value" in relation to the economic and academic backgrounds of their students.

They analyzed the data and came up with a top 20.

For the most part, the schools that end up in the top 20 come as no surprise. MIT, Stanford, and Princeton are all there. Five of the University of California campuses made the list. Yale was No. 7, and Harvard came in at No. 14.

But one university made the list that maybe some aren't accustomed to seeing in such lofty company.

The No. 15 best value in the country, just after Harvard — and *ahead* of UC Berkeley, UCLA, and CalTech — was Cal Poly Pomona.

When you measure the most impactful variables, Cal Poly Pomona competes with any college in the country.

This result is not some fluke. It is the collective effort of faculty and staff across our campus community each doing their best and doing their part to create world-class scholarship and transformative opportunities for our students.

Keeping this vision alive during the pandemic has not been easy. I particularly want to mention the work of Victoria Bhavsar and her team at the Center for the Advancement of Faculty Excellence and Kimberly Allain and everyone at Employee and Organizational Development and Advancement for leading the professional development efforts so critical to our ongoing success.

For each of us, the past year and a half has taken its toll to one degree or another. I hope and implore that you take advantage of the many campus resources to support you in life and in work.

The Welcome Back Fair held earlier today and safely spaced in University Park featured just a fraction of these support services for the campus community. Also, please know that our Employee Assistance Program includes confidential assessment and counseling services.

As we look to the year ahead, the institutional priorities that have guided our entire response to the pandemic remain paramount above all other considerations.

First and foremost, we will take all necessary measures to protect the health and safety of our campus community and all those who visit our campus. And while being safe, we will harness the full effort of Cal Poly Pomona to keep our students on the path to their goals.

Please make a regular habit of reviewing our comprehensive Health and Safety Plan found on the Safer Return website. The plan includes a breadth of strategies to keep you, our campus, and our communities safe, with each strategy reflecting the evolving public health orders and state requirements, scientific recommendations, best practices and local conditions.

We will also continue to demonstrate flexibility in our phased repopulation of campus. You will recall that as Covid transmissions increased last month, we reconsidered our planning and scaled back the pace of repopulation for staff. I am confident that we can ensure full access to the services our students and campus need while keeping our community safe.

Fall 2021 will be a transitional time for our campus to adjust to this new environment. There is much to learn about working and collaborating effectively in this hybrid environment, and we look forward to using the fall term to understand and assess these changes.

Likewise, 91 of our colleagues took advantage of the Early Exit Program, which provided state-side employees incentives to voluntarily separate from the campus as part of a number of measures to respond to the state's serious budget challenges in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic.

While providing significant recurring savings to the campus budget in light of the cuts, it also meant that we were losing a host of experienced and talented staff. One outcome of the Early Exit Program is that many units across campus are incentivized to work differently by leveraging shared services and using technology in new ways. We will need to continue with similar measures. Likewise, our hiring will, by necessity, look for expanded or different skills to accomplish the new work ahead.

And as we go forward together, there is another critical consideration we must address — the strengthening and rebuilding of our sense of community.

“Community” is not a destination but rather an ongoing process. Having spent the last year and a half working in locations far and wide, our gradual return to campus must include deliberate and intentional efforts to rebuild the sense of community so indicative of the Cal Poly Pomona experience.

Of course, we aren't — and never will be — going back to way things were pre-pandemic. We live in a new world of work now. So, we need to include in our considerations how we foster and maintain this sense of community amid different work modes. As we've said in various forums, the fall semester is going to be a transitional period — not only in moving forward with in-person instruction but also in how we work. We will need to engage in this discussion in a post-pandemic environment.

But all told, we absolutely must make the effort to strengthen our campus community, to rethink and renew.

One surefire strategy to reinvigorating our sense of community is to unify around our shared legacies. These are the practices and programs that define our university, that serve as sources of tremendous pride, and allow us all to be a part.

Consider this year's commencement ceremony. The importance of celebrating the culmination of one's degree goes so far beyond the individual student. It touches

their families, supporters, friends, mentors, faculty, staff, and more. It is a time for our entire community to unite and commemorate all our hard work and effort.

I deeply regretted that we had to cancel the 2020 ceremony due to health concerns, but I was so joyful that we were able to include those graduates as well in this year's event. And what a celebration it was!

In 20 ceremonies, over the course of 4 days — let me repeat that: 20 ceremonies in 4 days — more than 5,000 Broncos received their diploma. The venue may have been different, but the significance — to the graduates and to our entire community — was just the same and just as lasting.

I want to thank the scores of individuals who made this special event a reality and carried on this crucial legacy.

Perhaps no Cal Poly Pomona legacy is better suited to strengthen our sense of community than our Rose Float Program. Indeed, the Rose Float Program boasts in full effect the central pillars of our university: Learn by Doing — creativity, discovery, and innovation — interdisciplinary learning — preparing for the future of work, and more. In fact, my first Cal Poly Pomona experience was spent in a chilly warehouse in Pasadena, cutting and gluing flowers.

For more than 70 years, we have partnered with our sister campus on the Central Coast to create the only student-designed and student-built entry in the Tournament of Roses Parade. Competing with the most heavily subsidized, professionally manufactured floats in the parade, we've won 60 awards.

And, we've done it all while working in an open-air facility that — while filled with charm and history, to put it kindly — simply is not adequate for a world-class program such as this.

That changes this year. The new state-of-the-art Rose Float Lab — after three years of construction — is finished and up and running. A limited number of students began working at the Lab last month as part of a safe pilot program. The nearly \$4 million facility was made possible by a generous donation from alumnus Butch Lindley and his wife Vivien. It is named in honor of Don Miller and Ron Simons, alumni who jumpstarted and carried on the campus' legacy in the Tournament of Roses Parade.

But instead of just talking about it, our colleagues in MediaVision created a virtual tour so that we can begin to experience this new resource immediately.

It is my pleasure to introduce to you, the Don Miller and Ron Simons Rose Float Lab.

Thank you to the Rose Float Program students and leaders and to MediaVision for that video.

After canceling the parade last January, the Tournament of Roses is preparing to go forward with the 2022 parade. The theme for this year is: “Dream. Believe. Achieve. – A celebration of education’s ability to open doors, open minds, and change lives.” Truly fitting for us!

And just as the students and volunteers with the Rose Float Program look ahead, so must we as a campus. The struggles and challenges of the past year won’t disappear overnight. The road ahead is clear, but as always, there’s an incline. If we will look to each other and foster inspiration from our shared legacies — like Commencement and the Rose Float Program — our momentum will continue to build, taking us to ever greater heights.

Such is the power of our shared vision, shared commitment, and shared legacies.

The Strategic Plan: A Clear Path Forward

I mentioned that the road ahead is clear. That is due to the efficacy of our Strategic Plan.

Of course, the realities of the pandemic weren’t even figments of our imagination when we launched our strategic planning process in 2016. But even in these unprecedented times, the Strategic Plan remains just as relevant and essential both for our post-pandemic recovery and ongoing progress.

This is so because the mission, vision, and values found in the Strategic Plan were garnered as part of a broadly collaborative effort of those who know how to reach the full potential of this university — in other words, “you.”

With that kind of collective force, expertise, and commitment behind it, our Strategic Plan allows us to push forward, even in the most challenging of times.

And while the specific aims of the plan reside in the scores of outcomes, goals, and objectives delineated in the five strategic initiatives. The proof of progress lies in the campus-wide achievements that mark the past year and beyond.

We see the Strategic Plan in our massively successful accreditation process.

As you will recall, last year, Cal Poly Pomona received reaffirmation of our accreditation for a period 10 years — the maximum length of time offered by the WASC Senior College and University Commission.

This achievement was years in the making, involving determination across all divisions, the Academic Senate, and scores of faculty, staff, and students engaged in creating the institutional report and participating in the site visit. Altogether, we again demonstrated our campus-wide commitment to student success and to being an institution that strives for excellence and continual improvement.

We see the Strategic Plan in Our Commitment to Action.

Creating and sustaining an inclusive, diverse, equitable, and accessible campus represents a core Cal Poly Pomona value and a fundamental component of our success as an institution of higher learning. Our Commitment to Action comprises a series of tangible efforts and initiatives intently focused on just that work. In little more than a year since its launch, Our Commitment to Action has already seen meaningful results, including the creation of an Inclusive Excellence Council, the Inclusive Campus Survey, and the formation of a Police Advisory Task Force.

In addition, I have asked each member of my cabinet to identify concrete approaches to discussing these essential matters in each of our divisions and colleges. We've also started a reading circle among the cabinet to educate ourselves and shape our thinking and approaches to building on our commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Our first reading will be Ibram X. Kendi's "How to be an Antiracist."

We see the Strategic Plan in our efforts to meet our Graduation Initiative 2025 goals.

The CSU launched the initiative in 2015 as part of a historic effort to improve graduation rates across the university system and completely eliminate gaps across ethnicity and income considerations. Each campus developed their own specific goals to account for the range of differing variables for each campus.

Thanks to innovative leadership from Dr. Terri Gomez and the Office of Student Success in partnership with Academic Affairs, the colleges, and more, we sprang out of the gate and were one of just a few campuses to meet all of our early target goals.

The pandemic reversed many of these trends, but we're now completely if not nearly back on course for just about all the relevant metrics. The one glaring exception concerns the equity gap between URM and non-URM students.

To continue our progress and quickly remedy where we are lagging, we are investing significantly in tools and systems that allow us to be more intentional in our strategies and to intervene at the earliest signs of students being off track. We

will also be making additional investments in advising, which we know is where we will have the greatest impact in reaching students.

This effort will require us all to play a role. Dr. Gomez leads the Office of Student Success – but we all bear a significant responsibility for assuring focused attention on our student success goals. The Deans are critical leaders in setting expectations within their colleges and it is critical that faculty and professional staff understand our roles in the advising ecosystem and how the various stakeholders contribute collectively to student success.

Progress on Graduation Initiative is also critical for making the CSU case to lawmakers and the general public.

We all remember where things stood this time last year in terms of the state budget.

With the onset of the pandemic, state budget leaders predicted a \$54 billion deficit. As a result, what was going to be a \$199 million increase in state funding to the CSU was transformed into a \$299 million decrease. We were expecting years of diminished funding for higher education in California.

But thanks to the resiliency of our great state, this scenario has been completely flipped around. When Governor Newsom announced the May Revision to the state budget, the \$54 billion budget deficit had been transformed into a \$76 billion surplus. With the surplus came the opportunity to reinvest in higher education.

All told, the CSU is receiving a \$550 million recurring increase with a large portion of the increase attributable to a funding restoration that offsets the budget cut from last year. One-time funding will reach nearly \$1 billion. Most of the funding is dedicated to one-time facilities and infrastructure improvements throughout the university as well as projects at specific campuses, including the conversion of Humboldt State University to a polytechnic.

This investment in the state's engine of social mobility is good news for higher education in California. But the significance of this development goes beyond the numbers. This funding demonstrates recognition of the importance of public higher education to our state. The premise and the reality are that when you invest in the CSU, you invest in California. We have a unique opportunity now to build on this consideration through our student success efforts.

We see the Strategic Plan in our uniquely polytechnic student success efforts.

As important as graduation rates are, we of course view student success much more broadly. We want so much more for our students than the honor of collecting

a diploma at commencement. As clearly laid out in our Strategic Plan, we want to equip students for a lifetime of success in their careers and as leaders in their communities.

This ambition underlies all our curricular and co-curricular activities. It is why we're a national leader in promoting social mobility.

But it doesn't happen by accident. We are intentional in realizing these goals for our students. A perfect case in point is our Learn Through Discovery Initiative (LTD). Led by Drs. Kemi Sawyerr and Winny Dong, LTD engages with faculty and staff from across campus to ensure that every Cal Poly Pomona student on our campus participate in at least one Signature Polytechnic Experience. We're calling these experiences "PolyX," and they are defined by collaborative learning, intense mentoring, and serious engagement beyond the classroom.

One such PolyX is our hugely successful National Model United Nations team. Open to undergraduate and graduate students from any major, the program has been on our campus for two decades, and year after year they compete with colleges and universities across the nation and win high honors. This year was no different when they won the Distinguished Delegation Award at this year's virtual simulation.

To give us a sense of how PolyX put students on the path to a lifetime of success, I've asked Marc Scarcelli, associate professor of Political Science and faculty advisor to the National Model United Nations team to talk a little about his experience working with these students. Prof. Scarcelli . . .

Thank you. These kinds of opportunities are lifechanging for our students, and they're happening in every college, every department, and across a range of programs and initiatives. I invite you all to visit the Learn Through Discovery website and look into what it takes to create a PolyX.

Lastly, we see the Strategic Plan in our new One Team Award.

The fifth initiative in our Strategic Plan is dedicated to advancing professional development and employee excellence. As a new tradition added to our annual Convocation, I have the honor of announcing the winner of the inaugural One Team Award.

We created this award as a way to recognize and celebrate cross-divisional collaboration that closely aligns with the core university values delineated in the Strategic Plan. The nominated teams exemplify the creativity and innovation so central to our success and provide the meaning behind our ambition: One Team. One Goal. Student Success.

I'm pleased to report that the first year of the award has been a resounding success with a host of highly commendable nominations. I want to thank Jesús Ávalos for chairing the award committee and all those who served with him.

We will be creating a plaque to commemorate the winner each year, and also, each member of the winning team receives a certificate for \$50 in Bronco Bucks.

So, without further delay, the winner of the inaugural Cal Poly Pomona One Team Award is: Project CAMINOS!

Located specifically in the Office of Student Success, CAMINOS stands for **C**ultivating **A**ccess and **M**entoring through **I**nstitutional **N**etworks and **O**pportunities for **S**uccess. They focus on helping prospective students and families with their college selection and transition.

They were selected for the award based on their strong focus on CPP's values (particularly Student Learning and Success), their extensive collaboration across many departments on campus, and their ability to have a significant impact on student success with a relatively small core team.

I want to congratulate each member of this team on your achievements and on making Cal Poly Pomona history as the inaugural honorees of this award.

As I mentioned, the committee received a crowd of deserving nominees, including Fearless Classroom who is going to extraordinary lengths to create a more inclusive and psychologically safe environment for all members of the CPP Community.

All the work happening through our Strategic Plan has been critical in keeping our students on track. I truly believe this is a watershed moment for our university. With the Strategic Plan as a guide, we can accelerate our progress in ways that would not have been possible in different scenarios.

Closing

Classes start tomorrow. Without a doubt, we will again need to muster the courage, commitment, and resilience that has been the hallmark of our efforts during this trying time.

The reality though is that you've always exemplified those characteristics. The campus has been doing great things long before the pandemic hit, and that greatness was only possible through the same efforts that have become only more obvious during the pandemic.

Usually, one of the highlights of Convocation is the annual Service Awards held immediately afterwards to honor faculty and staff for their years of service. The Staff Council handed out the service pins yesterday on campus, including a 30-year pin for our recently appointed interim Provost Iris Levine.

For our finale, we have a particularly special surprise. Professor of Music and 2020 Grammy Award winner Dr. Nadia Shpachenko will perform two pieces on the piano in the Cal Poly Pomona recital hall. Music Department Chair David Kopplin will briefly introduce the pieces, and I want to express my gratitude to Dr. Shpachenko for her willingness to share her talent and passion with us today.

Please take care of yourselves and others and thank you for making Cal Poly Pomona a truly unique institution. I wish you all the best for a healthy and successful year and I so look forward to seeing and greeting you in person!