

Investiture Speech

Dr. Soraya M. Coley, President of Cal Poly Pomona

Friday, February 5, 2016

Chair Monville, members of the CSU Board of Trustees, Chancellor White, Fellow Presidents, CSU system and campus administrators, community members and government officials, colleagues from my prior and other higher education institutions, my Cal Poly Pomona students, faculty, and staff; my mentors and support system; my long-term and new-found friends; and my dear family and beloved husband, Ron. I am both honored and humbled by your being here this afternoon.

I am honored because your joining me today is a reflection and affirmation of your support, your confidence in my ability to lead, and ultimately in my commitment to make a significant and lasting contribution to the advancement of this outstanding, legacy-rich university.

I am humbled, because as reflected in my theme for today, *"The Impossible Made Possible,"* I did not grow up believing that an occasion like this was even in the realm of possibility.

The messages I received growing up in the legally segregated South said, "You are relegated to the racial, gender, geographic, social, and work boundaries prescribed by law and society." But my parents, family, and community fought to override those notions and assumptions and filled me with messages of hope, high expectations, resiliency, pride, and success. That, coupled with our great country's conscious efforts in the 1960's and 1970's toward achieving its ideals of freedom, justice, and equal opportunity, led to greater access and options which resulted in increased social and professional mobility for myself and others.

Through the strength, sacrifice, and support of so many who have gone before me, and because of those who have guided my personal and professional life (including many of you in this room today), the doors of opportunity were pried wide open, so that I could proudly walk through and achieve the improbable dream of standing before you today as Cal Poly Pomona's sixth

president. My journey compels me to continue keeping the doors open for all who aspire to enter, regardless of background and circumstances.

The State of Impossibility

While many of society's *overt* signs of "opportunity-prohibited" have been removed, far too many in our society today live in a "state of *impossibility*." Often they hear numerous external voices proclaiming "You can't," "You won't" or simply ... "Stop dreaming," which overwhelm and overpower that inner spark in all of us that says, "*Maybe I can.*"

The internal messaging of impossibility, coupled with societal messages and barriers can affect one's resolve and belief that the impossible is, indeed, possible. Too many of our children face an uncertain and bleak future. They come from impoverished communities with underperforming schools that leave students ill prepared for college and for life.

Our current economic climate reflects a decline in upward mobility into the middle class; middle-income Americans are no longer the majority as in years past. Hans Johnson, a senior fellow at the Public Policy Institute, reports that:

- By 2030, there will be a need for more workers with bachelor-degrees, but California is expected to face a 1.1 million-worker shortfall in meeting that requirement.
- State support for higher education has steadily declined from approximately \$11,000 per student in the early 1980's to an average of \$6,500 per student in 2014.

When you consider these circumstances, college can appear "impossible." Let me echo the cautionary words of Ted Mitchell, Undersecretary of the U.S. Department of Education: "*College, the ticket to the middle class, must not become a luxury good.*"

The Impossible Made Possible

So yes, the challenges are real and the climb to achieve a degree in higher education in today's world is evermore steep. The question us is: ***How can the seemingly impossible be made possible?***

I am proud to stand with our CSU Chancellor and my fellow CSU presidents as we grapple daily, across our 23-campus system, with that challenge and we strive to make significant inroads into addressing this very question. We will continue to make the best use of our resources, while advocating for increased support.

Let me briefly describe to you the mindset or tenets that we employ here at Cal Poly Pomona and to share with you a few examples of the great work we're doing to change the improbable to possible.

Encourage and Enable

First and foremost, our focus is ***on our students***. We **encourage and enable the possible** by establishing high expectations and providing a multitude of programs, and over 300 clubs and organizations, and award-winning athletic programs, and other opportunities in support of their studies, development, dreams and aspirations. We foster a culture of optimism and belief in a student's intrinsic value and their potential as individuals in order to prepare them for their role in society.

Matt's story is just one example. Born in Compton, and as a little boy, he watched helplessly as a stranger shot his father nine times. As a young man, he and his family were homeless, living in and out motels. These raw realities caused him to struggle academically. But fortunately, he had a "turn-the-page" moment when he committed himself to finishing high school and improving his life.

Matt wasn't sure college was for him or even possible. But he told me that he kept getting calls from Tameka Alexander, one of our admissions counselors, who told him about our summer R.I.S.E pre-college program ... which Matt now describes as *unique and highly supportive ... "where you arrive knowing no one ... but leave feeling like you belonged."*

Matt successfully made it to our campus, but faced yet another set of challenges. He was a first-generation college student and didn't know how to study. I'd like to share some of his own words.

"As much as I tried and stayed up late studying every night, I was failing my classes. At first, I was too prideful to get tutoring, but I reached a breaking point and decided that my toxic pride was not worth being sent home, so I went to tutoring that you provided. From that point forward, I never looked back and have excelled."

As Matt reflected on his pride in having graduated from Cal Poly Pomona, he told me that while it may take a village to raise a child; you need a village to help students graduate from college!

He was thankful for "his village" in Admissions & Outreach where they became his moms and taught him about life and the gifts living inside him; or on the academic side – Professors like Dr. Renford Reese who took him under his wing, gently demanded accountability and demonstrated regularly the meaning of *"walking the talk."*

Fortunately, we have many, many stories at Cal Poly Pomona like Matt's, and I'm proud of the team of faculty, staff and administrators who make these stories of success and potential possible.

Educate and Enrich

The second tenet of our possibility-making at Cal Poly Pomona is to **educate and enrich**. As one of two polytechnic universities in the state and only about a dozen in the country, our

outstanding faculty provide a quality education that is shaped by a combination of theory, experimentation, and practice that engender confidence in our students as we ready them for the world beyond Cal Poly Pomona. For example:

- Professor Emeritus Dr. Jill Adler Moore, our Investiture Mace Bearer and Grand Marshal, invented AmBisome, a breakthrough antifungal drug that has generated nearly \$1 billion in sales and saved countless lives worldwide.
- Students creating *runway-ready* fashion and everyday clothing in real time using a 3D body scanner
- Students having access to exceptional musical instruction through our designation as an All-Steinway institution
- Dr. Shelton Murinda and his students in Animal Science creating a new generation DNA-based method for the rapid detection of major foodborne pathogens such as E-coli.
- Engineering students who designed an affordable, solar-powered desalination unit for water-scarce and drought-stricken communities that can fit in a family kitchen. The prototype is under review by the federal government
- Our student-operated and managed restaurant is part of the largest undergraduate and graduate hospitality management program in the state
- Two of our veterans, Bret and Ryan, who turned two cargo crates into hydroponic plant labs that help to regulate growth conditions and have implications for urban planting.
- Our cybersecurity education program, designated as a National Center of Academic Excellence in Information Assurance and Cyber Defense education by the NSA and Department of Homeland Security
- The Lyle Center's regenerative studies program, widely recognized for its leadership in sustainable environmental practices
- Our Student Innovation Idea Lab that provides seed money and assistance to students in developing innovative ideas and bringing them to market

- Our faculty and students joining 14 other universities nationwide to work with NASA in assessing its newest technologies for commercial application.

These are just a few examples of our dynamic approach to education that combines theory and knowledge with experience within a context of social responsibility, societal advancement, ethical accountability, and achievement.

Engage and Extend

The third tenet of our *“it’s possible”* culture is to **engage and extend**. As a public institution, our mission extends beyond classrooms, laboratories, and campus boundaries. Our highly successful alumni and industry partners, working hand in hand with our faculty, staff, and students, have created a network of engagement that impacts surrounding cities, counties, our nation, and internationally.

One business executive recently referred to Cal Poly Pomona as the ***epicenter of change for Southern California*** because of our location, our cutting edge work, and as well as untold collaborations across private sector businesses and industries, and communities.

Our guiding quest is to continue exploring how we, as a campus, can collectively enhance our value and contribution toward innovative solutions. We also seek to engage with local children, at-risk youth, adults, and families. For example, last year, through our Center for Community Engagement, more than 7,400 of our students contributed nearly 155,000 hours in service learning and volunteer activities.

But engagement is a two-way street. For as we work externally, we have alumni who are looking inward and finding ways to “give back” and “pay it forward.” Our alumni understand – perhaps better than most – the reality of how the impossible was made possible in their own lives through attending Cal Poly Pomona.

Not only have they given of their time, but also they have joined with other stakeholders in giving of their resources. Last year, more than 8200 gifts from alumni, parents, students, friends, companies, organizations, and current and former faculty and staff helped to enhance the university's resources.

And in that very spirit of giving and support, I am pleased to announce that my husband Ron and I will join these *possibility-makers* by establishing the Ron and Soraya Coley Endowment Fund for the benefit of our students, faculty, and staff and to mark this special opportunity in our lives.

Our Imperative for Achieving the Impossible

But as rich as our legacy is, we cannot afford to rest on our achievements. We recognize that the work we do here matters. I believe we have an imperative to help others see the possibility of achieving the impossible, through our renewed commitment to excellence in all areas, through our reexamination of our polytechnic identity in a 21st century global environment where we ask how best can students learn, what must they learn, and what applications, experiments, or experiences are best suited for achieving our educational goals.

Lastly, I'd like to give you a glimpse into my vision for the Cal Poly Pomona future. Over the past year, I have engaged in Listening Tours that entailed meeting with more than 600 faculty, staff, and students across 60 programs and units – and with still more to go! Several themes have emerged which align with my vision: expanding as **a latent talent magnet**; becoming **a national model for collaborative and experiential learning and STTEAAM Education**; and being **a leader in Operational Excellence**.

A Latent Talent Magnet

First, Cal Poly Pomona will be a magnet for hidden talent and unrealized potential. Our society is often challenged by an inability to identify latent talent or to recognize nontraditional sources of talent that is not obviously demonstrated or shown in expected, norm-based ways.

I am reminded of another Cal Poly Pomona graduate, Martha, who was told by a community college advisor that since her mathematical aptitude was sub-standard because she did not have access to the proper courses in high school, and her SAT/ACT scores were low, that she should reconsider selecting Computer Science as a major. But Martha challenged that decision and enrolled in a series of math courses at the community college where she received the prerequisite knowledge. She excelled in the computer science program, receiving an A in every course she took, and completed her two-year program with a 3.8 GPA.

Following a two-year stint in the Navy and receiving training in cryptology, she enrolled at Cal Poly Pomona and completed her undergraduate degree with a 3.5 GPA in Computer Information Systems. Today, she is the President and CEO of a multi-million dollar company in international technology, cybersecurity and engineering and has successfully implemented \$98 million in contracts from private companies and the federal government.

How many more Marthas or Matts are discouraged from their interest and passion because there has been little exposure and investment in bringing their talents to the surface? It is that very journey of exploration that foretells the excitement that lies ahead for us as an organization focused on being a “Geiger counter” for talent. We will work to identify, cultivate, and illuminate the talent, strengths, and untapped potential of our students.

We will craft dynamic strategies of support incorporated into a comprehensive multi-year talent development and leadership program. Today, Cal Poly Pomona has been ranked as the 10th most diverse university in the nation, and we will expand that reputation.

We will also deepen our focus on the diversification of faculty and staff, for we know that excellence requires inclusiveness and diversity. We will recommit our campus to the recruitment and advancement of our talented faculty and staff through increased support for research, professional development, collaborative multi-disciplinary teaching and applied learning, faculty fellowships and staff internships that cluster around innovative themes.

Becoming a National Model in Collaborative and Experiential Learning, and STTEAAM Education

Second, we will reexamine our educational philosophy and approach and the value of interrelated learning and research, and become the national model for collaborative and experiential education. We will support joint faculty work and connect the next generation of problem solvers to partners in business and industry, non-profits, government, communities, and education, both here and abroad.

We will work intentionally to remain a leader in preparing a diverse profile of undergraduates for the **STTEAAM** fields of Science, Technology, Tourism, Engineering, Agriculture, the Arts, and Mathematics; and we will expand our applied research pursuits that engage both undergraduates and graduate students.

And – importantly – we will increase public-private collaborations that support the academic mission and student development.

Being a Leader in Operational Excellence

Finally, we will employ technology to streamline operations and improve administrative processes. Through an initiative on “process redesign and creative solutions,” Cal Poly Pomona will, itself, become a laboratory in which our expert faculty and staff will join with students to

identify ineffective, inefficient, and costly processes and explore creative approaches to the way we operate. We will deliver personalized real-time information that will help students progress toward graduation. This will necessarily mean an ongoing commitment to management and staff development.

Closing

An ambitious agenda indeed ... but not impossible for Cal Poly Pomona!

On this very special day, I pledge to you, the faculty, staff, students of Cal Poly Pomona and to our alumni, valued friends and supporters that we will **boldly** take our rightful place **as a preeminent “metro-urban” polytechnic university with a global reach**; where *learn by doing* is translated to mean...

- **Reflection** about one’s self,
- **Collaboration** across disciplinary, demographic, and cultural boundaries,
- And **Discovery** where students will be imaginative, innovative, and creative problem-solvers.

Today is indeed yet another historic day in the life of this great institution and it reaffirms both the legacy of W.K. Kellogg’s gift of this campus to the people of California, and the rich heritage that belongs to Cal Poly Pomona.

So I proudly say, as adapted from the song, “The Impossible Dream”:

“This is our quest to follow that star...no matter how far...
And we know that if we [will]...only be true to this glorious quest,
That the world will be better for this.”

Thank you Cal Poly Pomona for allowing me to join you in this quest!