

BY MATT LAZIER

# WHERE WE LEARN

THE 2010 HONORED ALUMNI SHARE THE  
CORE LESSONS OF A CAL POLY EDUCATION

# HOW TO LEARN

HONORED ALUMNI

WITH SIX COLLEGES AND DOZENS of degree programs, it's no surprise that alumni have a variety of stories about how Cal Poly's learn-by-doing experience launched them on their successful careers.

Nonetheless, through all of those stories, there run common themes, each deeper than any one discipline. These are the core lessons of learn-by-doing – the fundamental skills Cal Poly imparts that help alumni succeed. As they returned to campus for Homecoming, we asked this year's six honored alumni about these deeper impacts. Here's what they said:

## COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

**Kenneth Q. Volk, III (B.S., Fruit Science, 1983)**

I got tremendous hands-on experience in agriculture at Cal Poly. I experienced a very nurturing environment where it was easy to bounce ideas off professors and have immediate feedback. It's why I've embraced learn-by-doing my entire life, and it's why I'm committed to developing a Center of Excellence for the Wine and Viticulture students at Cal Poly. I want future students to experience learn-by-doing with the latest technology, in the same way I did.

## COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN

**James E. Grant (B.S., Construction Engineering, 1980)**

Cal Poly taught me the importance of time management and not being a procrastinator. Being organized is in my DNA, but the challenge of juggling a schedule and the importance of timing was something that I now see Cal Poly prepared me for, in all aspects of my life.

## COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING

**Ronald S. Smith (B.S. Electronic Engineering, 1983)**

Fundamentally, my Cal Poly education was about learning how to learn. My coursework and my professors pushed me to go beyond the basics to the underlying principles driving the results and then apply those principles in a hands-on lab environment. Doing that helped me gain a deeper, broader understanding of my field. I find myself applying these learning principles beyond engineering, into every aspect of my life.

## COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS

**Hiroki T. Asai (B.S. Applied Art and Design, 1992)**

The biggest lesson I learned here is that you get out of life what you put in. John Mendenhall was one of a handful of teachers who had a huge impact on me. I remember being a senior and being terrified at the idea of competing for a job during a recession. But John told me, "There's always going to be someone with more resources, more connections and even more talent. The ones who succeed are the ones who are willing to learn, who have no ego and who are willing to work really hard." So I did. And I always left myself open to learn something new. And I always tried to stay humble.

## COLLEGE OF SCIENCE AND MATHEMATICS

**John T. McDevitt (B.S., Chemistry, 1982)**

I became hooked on the learn-by-doing experience through my first two research projects, and there has been no looking back. At Cal Poly I not only learned basic science and engineering skills, but I also secured my keen interest in research activities and applications that have a societal importance. For the past two decades I have served as an educator at major universities, mentoring young graduate and undergraduate students with the hope of passing along a similar interest in education and passion for problem solving for issues of societal importance – stimulated by the same learn-by-doing methods.

## ORFALEA COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

**George A. Famalett (B.S., Accounting, 1986)**

Cal Poly gave me the skills and confidence to take on problems in areas even when I lacked experience. I once had an assignment in Belgium, completing audits in six countries. I needed to quickly get up to speed on the issues, facts and laws and meet and negotiate with in-country advisers and revenue officials. Each country had a different procedure and approach on audits. I succeeded because the learn-by-doing philosophy taught me to break tasks down, have a plan and see it through. □



**Honored Alumni for 2010, left to right** (with President Emeritus Warren J. Baker, center): Jim Grant, Hiroki Asai, George Famalett, Ken Volk, John McDevitt, Ron Smith. *Photo by Gael Brown Humphrey*