

Student, Scientist, Dean

DEAN WENDT'S CAL POLY JOURNEY HAS TAKEN HIM FROM STUDYING MARINE BIOLOGY TO LEADING THE COLLEGE OF SCIENCE AND MATHEMATICS



“We’re in the business of enriching lives through learning, discovery and innovation,” says Dean Wendt, Cal Poly alumnus (Biological Sciences, '93) and new dean of the College of Science and Mathematics.

The California native experienced the impact of a Learn by Doing education firsthand, and knows it’s the key to helping students reach their full potential. In some ways, he’s been preparing for this role his whole life.

THE BEGINNING

Born in the L.A. area, Wendt spent his formative years in a tightly knit central European immigrant family in Sacramento. As a boy, he didn’t know that his fascination with the natural world meant he was a biologist, but he did learn that success required grit, determination and a caring community.

“My family arrived with almost nothing and built it all. That helped me recognize the value of hard work,” Wendt said. “At the same time, we all relied on the people around us to succeed.”

BECOMING A SCIENTIST

In 1989, Wendt arrived at Cal Poly as a first-generation transfer student, wanting to change the world but unsure how to channel his energy. With the help of faculty and staff who both challenged and supported him, he found his way to contribute to society: science.

“Cal Poly gave me a pathway to make a difference in the world. My education here made me a scientist,” Wendt said.

As Wendt began to consider graduate school, his advisor, Tom Richards, encouraged him to seek out an undergraduate research experience. Through a connection at the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant, Wendt designed an experiment that allowed him to pursue his interest in the larval stages of marine invertebrates.



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“It was a great experience. I was using physics and biology, doing field work and building things in the lab — really learning what it means to be a scientist,” Wendt said.

This experience helped him land a spot in a doctoral program at Harvard University. After a postdoc in Hawaii and a stint at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Wendt jumped at the opportunity to return to Cal Poly as a professor in 2002.

“I lost touch with Dean, but when he applied for my position in the Biological Sciences Department, I was thrilled,” Richards said.

TURNING SCIENTIFIC EXPERTISE OUTWARD

After returning to Cal Poly, Wendt soon became involved with a local committee studying the expansion of the Monterey National Marine Sanctuary, which starts in Monterey County and extends south to San Luis Obispo County.

“I saw that Cal Poly had an opportunity to help answer some interesting questions. It helped me understand how we can use our scientific expertise to improve our communities and our lives,” Wendt said.

That insight shaped his career. A small project grew into an ongoing, decade-long research program and collaboration with the local fishing community that now serves as a

Pictured: Dean Wendt talks with physics Professor Colleen Marlow and her research students at a team meeting.



model for the rest of the state. Over the years, the project has educated countless students, brought in millions of dollars of grant funding and built the West Coast's largest data set on marine protected areas.

A NEW WAY TO GIVE BACK

In his new role, Wendt will continue fostering partnerships that allow students to engage with the community and industry through research projects, internships and study abroad experiences. He also plans to continue the college's trajectory of providing more undergraduate research opportunities on campus.

"I connect to what was important to me as a student, and I want to keep that in focus as we make decisions," Wendt said. "We have to help students develop the tools they need to give their passion and energy a direction in the world. I can't imagine a more challenging and rewarding job, and I'm deeply grateful to give back to this university that gave me so much."

Provost Kathleen Enz Finken thinks Wendt will more than meet this challenge. "Dean brings outstanding leadership skills and campus knowledge as well as a genuine love of Cal Poly and the College of Science and Mathematics," Enz Finken said. "His energy and excitement will help move the college to the next level."

And the man who knew him way back when, Tom Richards, his undergraduate advisor, agrees: "The College of Science and Mathematics could not have selected a better dean." //

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Pictured: (top) Wendt checks in with students doing homework in the Baker Center. Photo credit: Tony Turreto. Pictured: (bottom right) Wendt, then a biology professor, explains algae photosynthesis to a class at the Cal Poly Pier in 2003.

OFF THE RECORD

AN INFORMAL CHAT WITH DEAN DEAN



HOMETOWN:

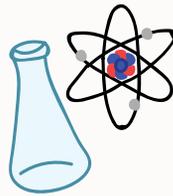
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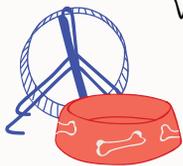
SUPERPOWER:

The scientific method.

There is tremendous power in the way that humans have been able to accumulate knowledge over time, and I think that methodology has given us an incredible capacity to change and improve our lives, and to understand the way that nature works and our place in the natural world. My cape would be a lab coat, of course.



FIRST CAREER ASPIRATION:



Work at a pet store. I would call it an innate passion. I love animals. And I was a kid who needed money.

TOP THREE CAL POLY STUDENT MEMORIES:

1. Leading a WOW group. Collaborating with my co-counselor to plan that experience for the new students and then having all that preparation turn into a rewarding week for them gave me a real feeling of accomplishment.
2. Winning the intramural soccer competition.
3. Being selected Outstanding Graduating Biological Sciences Student.



FAVORITE RESEARCH MOMENT:

My favorite moments are when students with an unknown in front of them design an experiment.

My message is you have to trust the process. If there's something real, it will reveal itself. It's so rewarding to see them go through a long, complex process and know at the end that they created that knowledge. It's their expertise.

BEST THING ABOUT BEING DEAN SO FAR:

I've always been Dean.

I'm in a role in which I can do good things for a place that I love, and I get a lot of joy from that.

WHAT'S UP WITH THE PAPERCLIP?

One time I put it on my jacket pocket, and I got comments about it.



I don't know what to tell you. It was not an intentional thing.

It's a fashion statement — men have limited options for flair. It's a great conversation piece as well.

