

'Cats give back

New advancement strategies build culture of philanthropy at Chico State

Story by Nicole Williams, Photo by Jason Halley



Brenda Gutierrez, far right, and other members of the new Chico State Student Philanthropy Council, recently celebrated passing the 1,000 student-donor mark, up from 39 last year.

“Chico State is changing,” said fourth-year sociology major Brenda Gutierrez, who is vice president of finance for the new [Chico State Student Philanthropy Council](#).

Formed in September, the student council is part of the University’s new effort to build a culture of philanthropy and transform private giving to Chico State. Its mission is threefold: educate students and campus on fundraising’s role at the University, explain where the money goes, and tell people how to help.

“Most people think tuition and the state cover the cost of our education, but that only covers part of it,” said Gutierrez, a first-generation college student and first-generation Mexican-American. Programs like the career center, the writing lab, and tutoring services—“those are the things that really change people’s lives and deserve our support.”

As state spending on higher education remains below pre-recession levels, public universities face thinning resources for a growing population.

Vice President for University Advancement Ahmad Boura sees this new landscape as an opportunity for private support to play a major role in the lives of students, faculty, and the entire community.

“This is a defining moment for Chico State,” Boura said, pointing to the University’s first comprehensive capital campaign, which is still in its early quiet phase; the immediate success of the Student Philanthropy Council, which is leading the culture change from the heart of campus, adding nearly 1,000 student donors in just one semester; and a new leadership giving program, the [Tower Society](#), which offers alumni, parents, and friends more focused and engaging opportunities to invest in Chico State’s public education and service.

“We have a chance to build a University where the people who really love and believe in this place are the ones shaping its future,” said Boura, who originally planned for the Student Philanthropy Council to be staffed by paid student workers.

Gutierrez and the other members—many of whom work in the [Chico State Calling Center](#)—refused to accept payment for working on the Student Philanthropy Council, saying it was against the giving-back philosophy they are passionate about promoting.

“It’s not about asking for a big gift,” said Gutierrez, who knows a single dollar or two “means everything” to students. Instead, philanthropy is about getting involved and showing support. “People care because it’s about the beauty and the community here. We are so ‘other-oriented’—people want to make a change, they want to be part of something bigger than themselves.”

And they are part of something bigger, Boura said. In addition to training and mentoring student volunteers, he and his team of [development officers](#) have traveled across the country, visiting with alumni, parents, and friends, inviting them, once again, to be a part of [the University’s remarkable story](#).

“It’s one of the best parts of my job,” he said. “They each tell me how their lives or their kids’ lives were changed by the people who work here, how they discovered who they were and what they wanted to be.”



Signs of a campus culture shift are seen December 1 on Giving Tuesday, as students raise funds for the University they love.

Every story seems to share the same thread: an education that expands learning out of the classroom and emphasizes what matters most—relationships.

“Their relationship with the beauty of campus, their relationship with the programs they were involved in, and their relationships with faculty who really wanted them to succeed,” Boura said. “That’s what inspires me to keep engaging people to join the effort, to do something great here.”

The Tower Society is key to the mission of Boura and his team. Honoring donors who make an annual leadership gift of \$1,500 or more, the society’s primary focus is harnessing the relationships alumni and parents already have with the University they love.

“I was a very different person entering Chico State than I was leaving,” said David Scotto, an inaugural Tower Society member. “I always tell people I physically left in 1989 but my heart never did.”

Scotto (BS, Business Administration, and BA, French, ’89) is the senior vice president and chief learning officer at the insurance claims management company Sedgwick, Inc. and regularly recruits Chico State graduates. He says he and other alumni have been waiting for an opportunity like the Tower Society.

The leadership group not only helps Scotto better direct his financial support but also connects him to the people impacted by the scholarships, learning opportunities, programs, technologies, and other worthy initiatives that members invest in.

“This is the first time Chico’s done it in this way,” said Scotto, who is also on the Alumni Board of Directors. “It’s not just sending a check, it’s getting involved because you’re part of this bigger thing.”

For another new Tower Society member, Natural Sciences [Distinguished Alumna Debra Hook](#), the program offers a way to give back to the place that gave her a head start. Growing up in a no-stoplight town in rural California and struggling with her father’s serious illness, Hook felt college was almost out of reach.

“Had Chico not been so reasonable and accessible, I may never have gone,” said Hook (BS, Dietetics, ’85), who spent most of her career treating rare DNA disorders as a pediatric dietician and is now a consultant for a pharmaceutical company focused on rare diseases.

“I think people are starting to realize that, if they don’t participate, (the excellence) will go away.” –Tower Society member Debra Hook

Without professors like Paige Johnson in nutrition science and Dwayne Curtis in biology, who both “demanded excellence,” Hook said she wouldn’t be where she is today.

The Tower Society allows her to make informed decisions on how to support programs that help students discover and work toward their passions.

“I think people are starting to realize that, if they don’t participate, it will go away,” she said.

Chico State’s new and re-inspired supporters are joining long-committed faculty and staff like Robin McCrea, who has given to the Animal Science Program for almost four years through the [payroll deduction program](#). Thanks to her position as an administrative analyst in the College of Agriculture, McCrea says she realizes what it takes to keep each unit running well.

“The College of Ag is such a family in itself,” said McCrea. “It was a way I could further support what they were doing.”

McCrea’s gifts help purchase donation-dependent items for the [livestock judging team](#) “so the students could learn better and prepare for competition.”

Bolstered by the overwhelming support, dedication, and passion of students, alumni, faculty, and staff, Boura knows the University’s Student Philanthropy Council, Tower Society, and first capital campaign are the start of a new culture.

“This is just the beginning,” Boura said. “That’s the motto of the Tower Society—building a bold tomorrow.”

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