Around a board room table in Sunnyvale, Calif., two-dozen friends and alumni from Cal Poly assembled to hear about a movement brewing at their alma mater — one that would crystallize in the Center for Innovation & Entrepreneurship.

Jeff Witous (B.S., Business Administration, 1983) called upon old classmates and fraternity brothers who had since made an impact in Silicon Valley. According to Witous, the group was as diverse as Cal Poly itself, with alumni who studied construction management, computer science, accounting, mechanical and electrical engineering, architecture, and liberal arts all in attendance.

What the group realized was that a center this different would need a different kind of support.

“It was just brilliant,” said Witous. “At the conclusion of a presentation by Dr. Jonathan York, everyone around the table pulled out their checkbook. But it wasn’t just the money. It was having a program that brought our alumni home.”

That meeting in 2010 helped shape the CIE Founders’ Circle, a league of supporters near and far who gave much more than financial assets to the center. These alumni also volunteered their expertise to guide the CIE’s growth in its early years and build student programs strategically.

“Learn by Doing resonates with all Cal Poly alumni,” Witous said. “Well, the CIE is Learn by Doing on steroids. It’s just a natural evolution of the philosophy, and it cuts across every industry.” Since then, Witous has personally helped the CIE Founders’ Circle add one quarter of its members.

But it didn’t stop there. Many alumni and entrepreneurs have also returned to campus to speak at entrepreneurship forums, guest lecture on their industry experience, counsel and mentor budding Cal Poly startups, and network with students as they transition into the working world.

“Whenever I talk to Cal Poly students, it restores my faith in the future,” Witous said. “I start my talks with something I really screwed up badly, helping students to understand how taking risks — and sometimes failing — is part of being an entrepreneur and innovator.”

Witous urges others to take action by sharing the CIE story with their former classmates, encouraging them to come home to Cal Poly and make a direct impact on the next generation of students.

“I EMBRACE THE OPPORTUNITY TO DISCUSS HOW BEING ENTREPRENEURIAL DOESN’T MEAN YOU NEED TO START YOUR OWN BUSINESS. LARGE CORPORATIONS SEEK INNOVATORS AND RISK TAKERS TOO.”

— Jeff Witous