Cal Poly alumnus Rich Jacobsen (B.S., Business Administration, 1985) operates in a base-10 world, with mergers and acquisitions ruling his day. As managing director of Greenhill & Co., a leading independent advisory firm in the heart of San Francisco’s Financial District, his head is in time zones thousands of miles away, where markets are in full swing long before sunrise in the West.

With a glance toward the fog peeling back behind the Golden Gate Bridge outside his office, Jacobsen begins a daily ritual — assembling his to-do list by using the same organizational method he learned from Cal Poly Professor Don Yale nearly 30 years ago. From daily tasks to multi-billion dollar mergers and acquisitions, Jacobsen can trace his success back to his time with the accounting and finance faculty in the Orfalea College of Business who ignited his interest in the field.

“Most of my instructors were professors with years of teaching experience who were enthusiastic about their subjects and had an ability to connect with students on a personal level,” Jacobsen said. “They had an outstanding understanding of their subject but also knew how to teach the material in an effective manner.”

Professors like Mary Beth Armstrong, Alan Bailey, Jan Duffy, and Ken Reiner helped thousands of Orfalea College of Business students, including Jacobsen, amass a wealth of practical knowledge in accounting, law and finance. According to Rami Shani, Orfalea’s associate dean for faculty and research, those close relationships are central to Cal Poly’s approach to education. Small class sizes and the university’s Learn by Doing philosophy also mean students have meaningful one-on-one interaction with seasoned educators, not just teaching assistants.

With these professors helping Jacobsen blend his technical
abilities with confidence, he made the leap from Grand Avenue to Wall Street. But throughout his career, Jacobsen noticed how major financial firms were consistently overlooking Cal Poly graduates in favor of those from more elite institutions.

“Many firms are not familiar with the high quality of graduates coming out of the Orfalea College of Business, and thus it is difficult for students to earn the opportunity to interview for financial analyst positions at top Wall Street firms,” Jacobsen said. So he decided to do something about it.

Recently, Jacobsen has turned back to Cal Poly to make a strategic investment in Orfalea College of Business faculty who are inspiring today’s class of financial professionals.

As part of a major gift to the university, Jacobsen and his wife, Margaret, established the Jacobsen Faculty Fellowship, jumpstarting the college’s initiative to attract and retain leading instructors committed to preparing career-ready graduates through Learn by Doing. The award will support one professor each in accounting, economics and finance who exemplify Cal Poly’s teacher/scholar model while innovating curriculum and mentoring fellow faculty members. Most importantly, the award will recognize educators with a track record for motivating their students toward greatness in fields known for staunch competition.

“Faculty members are the building block for all the college hopes to achieve, particularly those teachers who can develop curriculum that will be responsive to the evolving external business environment,” said Shani.

“By being engaged in diverse collaborative research projects with industry, our faculty develop the ability to enhance, refine and initiate innovative academic curriculum that is vital to practice.”

With the right faculty leading the way, Jacobsen believes the prowess of Cal Poly graduates will garner the attention it deserves among other big-name schools. “While some graduates of elite schools take an analyst position for granted, Cal Poly students are willing to ‘run through walls’ to make the most of their opportunity,” Jacobsen said of his experience with new hires at Greenhill.

In the long run, Jacobsen knows there will be a sizable return on his investment in Orfalea College of Business faculty in the accounting, finance and economics fields. Jacobsen is looking to recruit more Cal Poly graduates from those programs at Greenhill through

“Faculty members are the building block for all the college hopes to achieve.”
— Rami Shani, Associate Dean of Faculty and Research

A faculty fellowship has enabled Accounting Professor Rodney Mock to enrich the student experience by launching the Graduate Tax Speaker Series in his master’s-level taxation courses. Mock says the guest lecturers bring curriculum into focus with a practitioner-oriented perspective on sophisticated transactions and industry trends. This year, he’ll welcome more than 40 professionals, including partners and directors from top public accounting firms and industry giants. Students jump at the chance to network and learn from innovative professionals in the field. “With this experience, many of my students stay in public accounting and ascend to management-level positions very quickly,” Mock says.

Jacobsen is looking to recruit more Cal Poly business students to his firm for in-depth industry tours spotlighting competitive careers in finance. Jacobsen sees the virtuous loop growing as more alumni rise into leadership positions in these industries and hire more Cal Poly graduates.

“The Cal Poly students I have recruited over the years have performed at a high level,” he said. “This is a win-win-win for firms like mine, for the students and the college.”

But Jacobsen’s effort doesn’t end here. He hopes that his fellow Orfalea College of Business alumni recognize that faculty played a role in their success and seize this initiative to support truly excellent educators. “There have been many graduates from the college of business over the years that have gone on to achieve great success,” Jacobsen adds. “Margaret and I hope that a few of them will read this article and reach out to the college to explore ways that they can help, too.”