

## **Innovating Experiential Learning Through Student-Led Fundraising**

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### **Context and Fundraiser Evolution**

Cal Poly's Experience Industry Management Department relies on "Learn By Doing" to prepare students for real-world roles. It sends them to conferences like IMEX and the Cal Travel Summit, engages them in case competitions such as the PCMA Case Competition and Sport Marketing Hackathon, and organizes agritourism trips to Munich. Hosting signature events such as the Open Forum at the Experience Innovation Lab, Open House, and the end-of-year celebration have traditionally cost the department about \$25,000 annually. With state and federal support covering only a fraction of those costs, we explored mini-endowments, non-traditional funded projects, and revenue-neutral pilots (for example, a Southern California destination-insight program that paid students by the hour) before deciding to scale and reinvent our two-decade-old auction dinner.

In 2024, drawing on FSLI frameworks and working with Professor Prentice, we transformed the Auction Celebration into a fully student-led capstone. Twenty undergraduates selected via a GPA-based application took responsibility for every detail, from venue scouting in November to post-event analysis in March. Maintaining a 1:7 student-to-attendee ratio ensured each planner had a distinct leadership role in sponsorship outreach, vendor negotiation, marketing, logistics, or on-site coordination while still managing the scope of a live fundraiser.

Our twofold goal was simple: first, to deliver an immersive "learn by doing" experience; and second, to generate essential revenue for EIM's high-impact programs. This approach built on two decades of alumni goodwill and industry partnerships, and refocused our energy on what we do best, hands-on student-driven events.

### **Results, Reflections, and Future Directions**

#### *2024 Highlights.*

At the Justin & J. Lohr Center for Wine & Viticulture, we welcomed 125 alumni, parents, and advisory-council members including Sara Grauf (SVP, SF Giants), Barb Newton (CEO, Cal Travel), and Ryan Becker (SVP, Visit CA) to bid on 26 silent-auction lots, 12 live items, four dessert experiences, and our "fund-in-need" appeal. With five cash sponsors and 12 in-kind donors underwriting décor, furniture, and auction items, we achieved a record \$76,000 gross, netting \$51,000 after \$25,000 in expenses compared to the previous 2016-2023 average of \$65,000.

### *Key Takeaways.*

Off-campus venues amplify results. Holding the auction off campus in 2025 at The White Barn created a more relaxed atmosphere. Attendees placed bids that were significantly higher than on campus events, boosting live-auction revenue by 30 percent. Students learned to adapt event layouts to unique floor plans and negotiated contracts with external vendors in different settings.

Industry connections drive sustainability. In-kind contributions from alumni and advisory-council members covered more than 60 percent of total expenses, including donated wine packages, décor, furniture and audiovisual support. Securing these gifts taught students how to develop sponsorship proposals that offer clear value to partners while keeping our budget on target.

Committee size matters. A planning team of twenty students, about one per seven guests, provided sufficient capacity to manage all tasks efficiently while ensuring each member led a meaningful area such as marketing, sponsorship outreach, operations or guest services. Requiring a minimum 3.0 GPA to join motivated academic performance and ensured a committed, capable cohort.

Engagement fuels giving. Selling tables of eight to ten guests fostered group camaraderie and friendly competition. Student auctioneers followed scripted prompts and read crowd energy in real time, sustaining enthusiasm and driving a 30 percent increase in live-auction income over previous years.

### *2025 Breakthrough.*

On February 22, 2025, at The White Barn in Edna Valley, 150 guests bid on 25 silent lots, 10 live items, and four desserts. Six cash sponsors joined 16 in-kind partners. Gross proceeds jumped 35 percent to \$103,000 and net proceeds rose to \$78,000, effectively matching 2024's gross with 2025's net income. Students took pride in outpacing the previous record, strengthening their real-world skills in negotiation, teamwork, and adaptive problem solving.

### *Acknowledgments.*

Thank you to Professor Prentice, the rest of the EIM faculty, our advisory council members, and especially the twenty student leaders whose hard work turned challenges into record results. As one student noted, "Negotiating a donated wine package taught me more about stakeholder management than any classroom exercise ever could."

For more information on the event, please visit:

<https://eim.calpoly.edu/auction-dinner>

<https://events.handbid.com/auctions/2025-eim-auction-celebration-eims-magic-revealed>