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SSU OWES ENGINEERING DEPARTMENT TO DIE-HARD DEAN

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Saeid Rahimi doesn't take ``no" lightly.

When he was told 20 years ago that an **engineering department** would never work at Sonoma State University, Rahimi, a young physics professor just starting his career, took it upon himself to develop laboratories, write curriculum and apply for grants that would help him teach **engineering** classes anyway.

In the 1990s, when his colleagues were opposed to plans to create a graduate degree for engineers, Rahimi met with each of them one at a time -- over coffee, over lunch, knocking on their office doors at all hours -- to convince them to support the program.

And earlier this month, when the California State University Board of Trustees finally approved the long-sought **engineering department**, Rahimi's colleagues teased him that next he'd be running a presidential campaign.

``People thought I was crazy," he said with a laugh.

``People would say you cannot do it, and that's a challenge to me," Rahimi said. ``It requires a lot of perseverance and hard work and planning. It took a lot of jaw-work to convince people we needed this **department**."

Rahimi, now 55, knew as soon as he joined the faculty at Sonoma State in 1982 that he wanted to someday create an **engineering department** there. He just never expected it would turn out to be such a long and winding road.

But he was nothing if not determined, immediately nagging his mentors at Sonoma State about creating a **department**, and when that didn't work, doing what he could on his own.

Rahimi was born in Kermanshah, Iran, and earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in

physics from Shiraz University in Iran. He worked briefly as a physics instructor at the National University of Iran in Tehran before moving to the United States to study for his doctorate at Pennsylvania State University.

After graduating in 1981, Rahimi did a year of postdoctoral research at the Oregon Graduate Institute of Science and Technology before joining Sonoma State in 1982.

He climbed steadily through the faculty ranks -- stopping along the way to work at Hewlett-Packard for a few months while on sabbatical -- and is now the dean of Sonoma State's School of Science and Technology, which includes the newly created **Department of Engineering Science**.

But throughout his career, he never lost sight of the ultimate goal -- creating a program for **engineering** students at Sonoma State.

The real effort started seven years ago, when Rahimi was appointed acting chairman of the physics **department** and introduced an overhaul of the curriculum there, focusing on lab-intensive studies and research.

At the same time, Rahimi noticed a swing toward telecommunications and high-tech startups in Sonoma County, and he saw a need for education that matched the local industry.

"I saw what was coming and I thought we needed to be prepared," Rahimi said. "In the county there was movement in that direction. Industry folks, startup companies, they were coming. It was resonating all over the place."

So Rahimi arranged meetings with tech executives asking what they wanted from the university. Their overwhelming response was in favor of creating a degree program for **engineering** students. Rahimi spent the next three years developing a master's degree -- raising \$8 million in equipment and financial aid from private industry so the program could be self-sufficient.

The first 24 students started the graduate program in fall 2001, a year after it was approved by CSU administrators. The program now has about 50 students.

But it took another three years -- and long days spent campaigning both in Sonoma County and at the Cal State systemwide level -- for Rahimi to win approval for the undergraduate program and the creation of an **engineering department**.

Sonoma State will need to raise another \$450,000 to start the bachelor's degree program, which Rahimi hopes to open to students in September 2005. The program will likely start with about 20 undergraduate students, but could grow to more than 150.

Meanwhile, Rahimi has been asked to give presentations at other CSU campuses to help them duplicate his grass-roots process for creating new **departments**.

"It's catching on," he said. "The walls we build up between disciplines are artificial. They don't need to be there. It's a success story that can be duplicated elsewhere."

Rahimi said he sees the new **engineering department** as a source of both pride and relief.

He loves watching students work with state-of-the-art equipment, much of it supplied by local companies, and knowing that local youths don't have to leave the county to get an **engineering** degree.

That's especially important to Rahimi as a father. He and his wife, Aram, who is the pharmacy director at Palm Drive Hospital, have two boys, Neema and Cheyenne -- both of whom have already shown an interest in science.

``They're both techies," Rahimi said. ``My oldest son, whenever it is time for gifts, he says, `Get me a gadget.'

``You don't know how much I enjoy seeing a \$200,000 piece of equipment that undergraduates are using now," Rahimi said. ``It is a certain degree of pride that I can't explain. Our students may never know how fortunate they are."

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PHOTO: 1 by JEFF KAN LEE / The Press Democrat

Saeid Rahimi, dean of Sonoma State University's School of Science and Technology, recently won approval from the CSU Board of Trustees to start a **department of engineering**.

Infobox: Saeid Rahimi

Family: wife, Aram, is pharmacy director at Palm Drive Hospital; two sons, Neema, 13, and Cheyenne, 10.

Position: Dean of School of Science and Technology at **SSU**.

Recent accomplishment: Led creation of **SSU's new Department of Engineering Science**.

Quote: ``People would say you cannot do it, and that's a challenge to me. It took a lot of jaw-work to convince people we needed this **department**."

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