1.1.1 The Founders

Formerly Known As Policy Number:

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Leland Stanford Junior University was founded by Leland and Jane Stanford in 1885 in memory of their only son, Leland Junior, who died of typhoid fever in Florence, Italy in 1884 just before his 16th birthday. His parents had come to California in 1852 and, although Mr. Stanford was trained as a lawyer, he entered the mercantile business with his brothers in the gold fields. They established large scale operations in Sacramento where Mr. Stanford became a leader in business and politics. He was one of the “Big Four” who built the western link of the first transcontinental railroad and was elected Governor of California and later United States Senator.

Senator Stanford procured the passage by the California legislature on March 9, 1885 of an enabling act under which a University, or Universities, might be founded, endowed, and maintained in California through an ordinary deed of trust. Senator and Mrs. Stanford executed such a deed of trust on November 11, 1885, founding Stanford University. This document, known as The Founding Grant, conveyed to the 24 original trustees the Palo Alto Farm and other properties, directed that a University be established on the farm, and outlined the objectives and government of the University. Thus, the 8,800 acre campus and approximately $20,000,000 formed the original endowment.

Along with Johns Hopkins and Cornell ?also founded in the 19th Century? Stanford University was in the vanguard of American universities patterned on the German model, which stressed research and the freedom to learn and teach. In addition to the traditional liberal arts education, all three provided scientific, technological, and professional training.

The objectives of the University as stated in The Founding Grant were “to qualify students for personal success and direct usefulness in life; and to promote the public welfare by exercising an influence in behalf of humanity and civilization, teaching the blessings of liberty regulated by law, and inculcating love and reverence for the great principles of government....”? The Founding Grant also called for “a University of high degree,? offering ?studies and exercises directed to the cultivation and enlargement of the mind.?”

In a letter to David Starr Jordan, the first president of the University, setting forth his educational ideals, Senator Stanford cited the need for instruction in the sciences, mathematics, law, and ?general education? if the student was to qualify for “usefulness in life.? But Senator Stanford also attached great importance to the study of literature, music, and art. “The imagination needs to be cultivated and developed to assure success in life,? he wrote. The University opened its doors October 1, 1891. Senator Stanford died within two years, and the University was plunged into severe financial jeopardy because of the complicated nature of his estate and a government suit involving railroad holdings. Only the determination and sacrifices of Mrs. Stanford, President Jordan, and the faculty kept classes going. The estate was cleared after, in Jordan’s words, “six pretty long years.”

The Founding Grant reserved to the Founders the right to amend the Grant, and Mrs. Stanford, in the years following her husband’s death made several amendments in the form of addresses to the Board of Trustees. These covered such points as the non-sectarian, non-partisan nature of the University, the powers of the President, the duties of the Trustees, financial management, housing on campus, gifts from others than the
Founders, summer schools, research, and tuition.

Mrs. Stanford died in 1905 and thus was spared a second crisis when the 1906 earthquake caused more than $2,000,000 in damage to campus buildings. Fortunately, this, too, proved to be only a temporary setback for the University.

The Founding Grant has been published along with the text of the original deed of trust and other legal texts pertaining to the founding of Stanford University. Copies are widely available. Additional information concerning the history of the University is in the University Archives in Green Library.

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