

Student Government: An Investment in Human Potential

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by

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Officially incorporated in 1964, California Polytechnic State University's Associated Students, Inc. presides over a variety of aspects of student life on campus including student government, the management of several on-campus buildings, and employing students to work in these facilities.¹ The official ASI webpage proudly states their vision to "be every student's connection to the ultimate college experience."² Cal Poly has had student body presidents since the 1905-06 school year, but it wasn't until 1921 that the first official organization was created in the form of the Student Affairs Council, or SAC.³ Nationally, student self-governance in higher education has existed in a variety of forms since the 1700s beginning with literary societies, only evolving into modern day student associations such as our ASI near the turn of the twentieth century.⁴ The strong desire for any form of autonomy came from the "students' beliefs that they should be involved in the aspects of college life which most affected them."⁵

Cal Poly was founded at the beginning of the twentieth century, long after early American student movements for representation, and thus has had some form of student organization since the very beginning. In addition, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period of time known as the Progressive Era, there was a flourishing interest in student government. Institutions were growing in numbers, and as such had more diverse student bodies that needed better representation so smaller student assemblies were turning into class

¹ "About Us," ASI Cal Poly, accessed February 9, 2016, http://www.asi.calpoly.edu/about_us.

² "About Us," ASI Cal Poly.

³ Fred L. Genthner, memorandum to Ole Melund, 7 Jan 1977, ASI/SAC — CPVF, Robert E. Kennedy Library Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, San Luis Obispo, CA.

⁴ Walter P. May, "The History of Student Governance in Higher Education," *The College Student Affairs Journal* 28, no. 2 (2010): 207.

⁵ *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood: In History and Society*, s.v. "Student Government," by Glenn Wallach, 794.

councils.⁶ Progressive Era reformers supported this growth as they "saw student government as an extension of the progressive education concept of learning by doing."⁷ The common belief was that by training students in democracy at these institutions they would be better trained in the "practicalities of democratic citizenship."⁸

By the end of World War II though, this fervor was dying down and was being replaced with apathy. Students were more concerned with larger social movements addressing national or global crises than they were in the day-to-day issues faced by student government. They also believed that due to the controlling behavior of college administrations at this time any involvement in student government was just a farce.⁹ Coincidentally, it was during this time that Cal Poly's ASI began to become a recognizable force on campus. Cal Poly was born out of the Progressive education movement and has always been driven by the desire to prepare its students for the labor force, with exactly the motto quoted above: "Learn By Doing."¹⁰ Even today this Progressive Era slogan is splashed over every brochure, quoted in every speech, and printed on every poster at Cal Poly. This connection to real-world preparedness is sown into the very ethos of the university and is just as apparent in the student organizations as in the curriculum and rhetoric. ASI's work revolves around "human potential" and student success, acting in tandem with the university.¹¹ Cal Poly's roots in the Progressive Era created a unique role for student government as a real-life lab for "Learn By Doing," which allowed it to flourish during a time when other universities' student associations were losing traction.

⁶ May, "The History of Student Governance," 210-211.

⁷ Wallach, 794.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ May, 214.

¹⁰ Andrew Gorman, "School of the People: The Progressive Origins of Cal Poly," *The Forum: Journal of History* 6, no. 1 (2014): 9-12.

¹¹ "About Us," ASI Cal Poly.

Historiography

In the United States, scholarship on student self-governance and politics discusses with a wide lens the history as well as the evolution of these institutions. Often the universities covered have been in existence since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and thus have several hundred years worth of development. This gives them a larger time period with which to determine trends. This is the case with Walter P. May's article "The History of Student Governance in Higher Education" where he covers almost 400 years of student associations: from the colonial period to the last half of the twentieth century. May traces the evolution of student government using examples from the University of Virginia, the College of William and Mary, Harvard, and Yale, among others. Using these universities as the standard May argues that each stage of student government was later seen in wider American society. "Literary societies [of the eighteenth century] provided an outlet to embrace the revolutionary spirit of their age,"¹² while the gradual opening up of student government was mirrored later in American government.

Other works focus generally on the effects of student government on the leadership capabilities of the students. A study performed by George D. Kuh and Jon P. Lund highlights these personal benefits by comparing their own findings with existing literature on the topic.¹³ From 1988-1989, the authors conducted 149 student interviews with seniors, some members of student government, some not, at a dozen different colleges in order to determine what these students felt they had gained from the experience. Overall the students involved in student government reported higher feelings of practical and social competence, meaning they felt more comfortable leading, working with others, making decisions, and felt they had better

¹² May, 218.

¹³ George D. Kuh and Jon P. Lund, "What Students Gain From Participating in Student Government," *New Direction for Student Services* 1994, no. 66 (1994): 5-17.

organizational skills due to their experiences.¹⁴ In addition, these are the skills most often reported by employers as desirable. Kuh and Lund admit that it is impractical to suggest that everyone be directly involved in student government, but they believe students should take a more active role in the decision making practices of student associations. They also specifically note, “If habits of good citizenship are not cultivated when students are in college ... it is not surprising that later in life these same people remain detached from civic life.”¹⁵

Another work that emphasizes the civic nature of student government is William B. Welsh’s article titled “Democracy Through Student Government.” In it Welsh details what he deems to be the true purpose of student government: “practical education in democratic self-government.”¹⁶ He came to this conclusion after spending some time working for the National Student Association, an organization that focused on issues on college campuses and worked to promote the respect of students as adults.¹⁷ Welsh highlights how both the faculty and the students view the role of student government as something trivial to keep students busy. Some students even say that they are acting as “a front for the administration and ... the dean holds a veto over any worthwhile project that might be undertaken”¹⁸ Despite this, Welsh believes that student government works to familiarize students with the difficult and slow process of bureaucracy. It prepares them for the real world that they are soon to join. Welsh also writes that

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁶ William B. Welsh, “Democracy through student government.” *Educational and psychological measurement* 8 (1948): 523.

¹⁷ Angus Johnston, “United States Student Association: History” (2012) <http://usstudents.org/about/history/>, accessed 28 February 2016.

¹⁸ Welsh, “Democracy through student government,” 523.

the NSA encourages students to “look beyond their classrooms and ... to help themselves with their educational problems.”¹⁹

The common thread to these studies is the role of student government in promoting and training students for success outside of college. Whether through developing a space for students to discover their voices, where they can learn real-life skills such as working on a team with people different from themselves or how a democratic government functions and runs, students are taught practical skills. Student government protects, supports, and teaches its members in ways that cannot always be done inside of the classroom. While none of these works trace the origins of these beliefs, that is what I will be doing. May comes close in his analysis, but instead links changes in self-governance to later societal trends. This paper will work in the opposite direction, demonstrating how the larger Progressive movement shaped the implementation of student government at Cal Poly.

The Progressive Era

From its very foundation in 1901 as the California Polytechnic School, a vocational high school, Cal Poly has worked to further the “practical application of knowledge.”²⁰ Today this sentiment has evolved into the motto of “Learn By Doing,” a hands-on learning tactic espoused by every student, faculty member and administrator at one time or another. This sentiment however is not completely unique to Cal Poly and arose out of the larger sociopolitical movement known as Progressivism. This movement worked to rebuild American democracy through social, cultural, and educational reform. Most importantly they saw education as an

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 529.

²⁰ *Cal Poly: The First Hundred Years* (San Luis Obispo, CA: Robert E. Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, 2001), 15.

opportunity to counteract “the tensions created by immense social, economic, and political turmoil wrought by the forces of modernity.”²¹ Educational reform sought to remove the emphasis on the institution and instead place it on the students. Reformers believed that by “[teaching the students] to understand the relationship between thinking and doing” they would be better prepared to perform their civic duties.²²

These efforts flourished up until the Cold War era when fears about the Soviet threat caused a return to a more traditional academic approach. This was due to the amount of focus Progressivism placed on career preparedness, which some critics argued only worked “to meet the labor demands of America’s budding industrial society.”²³ However, despite the shift away from Progressive education, certain fundamental ideas such as learning developed and informed by students and teachers as well as an emphasis on centralized and efficient administration remain today.²⁴ The Progressive movement’s effect on education instilled the idea of student government acting as a training ground for democratic citizenship. The fact that Cal Poly was founded on the basic tenets of the movement helped to keep these efforts at the forefront and created a culture where student government could prosper.

A Voice for the Students

Cal Poly remains as a unique Progressive institution due to its emphasis on the process on collaborative and active education. The tenets advocated by the Progressive reformers also represent those shared by the scholars of student government. By actively participating in a

²¹ *Encyclopedia of Education*, s.v. “Progressive Education,” by Catherine Gavin Loss and Christopher P. Loss, 1933.

²² *Ibid.*, 1934.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1935.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1938.

bureaucratic leadership role these students learn how to succeed in the workforce. And the student body as a whole learns how to be a part of, and participate in, a larger democratic society. As mentioned previously in this paper Cal Poly has had some form of student representation from the time of its founding. But, Cal Poly's ASI did not begin to become a force on campus until the mid-1960s. During this time many institutions were being hit with waves of student activism including the anti-war and civil rights movements. Cal Poly was not immune to this either, but students tended toward peaceful protest as opposed to the violent image that often is depicted.²⁵ So, at a time when students on a national scale were struggling with larger social movements, Cal Poly's student government turned to more practical student needs.

The turning point seems to be in 1964 when Cal Poly's student government became incorporated.²⁶ This meant that ASB would be a "legal "fictitious person" whose liable assets are ASB property and the contents of the ASB treasury, and not those of the individual members."²⁷ Cal Poly made this decision following the legal proceedings of the 1960 plane crash that killed members of the football team. As reported in *El Mustang*: "Huge monetary damages were due to the dependents of the dead football team members and the injured survivors. Somebody had to pay — but whom?"²⁸ The families filed suits against "the airline [that flew the plane], the insurance company, President McPhee and the Associated Student Body."²⁹ These events caused

²⁵ Robert E. Kennedy, *Learn By Doing: Memoirs of a University President: A Personal Journey with the Seventh President of California Polytechnic State University*, (San Luis Obispo, CA: California Polytechnic State University, 2001), 287-302; Jennifer Freilach, "Cal Poly: Liberal, Not Radical," *La Vista* (2015): 17-25.

²⁶ Student Affairs Council, Incorporation Resolution, 18 February 1964, ASI Minutes and Agendas 1961-1968, 630.03, Robert E. Kennedy Library Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, San Luis Obispo, CA.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ "Incorporation Measures Reach Ballot," *El Mustang* (San Luis Obispo, CA), 17 Jan 1964, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1041/>.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Cal Poly to realize that each member of the ASB could potentially be held liable for damages and, while this did not happen, they wanted to protect against it in the case of future events. This move was approved by student body vote during the 1963-1964 school year.

By 1974, ASI had undergone some big changes including opening two new facilities that served the student body. One was the Children's Center opened in 1973, now known as the Orfalea Family and ASI Children's Center following a \$1,000,000 donation from the Orfalea Foundation in 2000.³⁰ This is a daycare facility that specifically caters to the needs of students who have children. During the 1971-1972 school year, the 1,821 married students were surveyed, of the responders 75% had kids and 85% of that number were interested in on-campus childcare.³¹ It was also advocated for on the grounds that there was no place on campus for home economics, sociology, psychology and education majors to gain practical experience, citing a similar center at Fresno State that served these degrees.³² The other larger and more influential building was the student union. The Julian A. McPhee College Union (CU) was opened in 1971 and eventually renamed the Julian A. McPhee University Union (UU) in 1973.³³ This building was marketed as the "living room" of Cal Poly's campus as it gave students a place to not only study, but offered a variety of spaces for activities and events. In addition, students are responsible for almost all of the management of the building. The Board of Governors,

³⁰ "About Us," ASI Cal Poly.

³¹ John Teves, "SAC to Battle Day Care," *El Mustang* (San Luis Obispo, CA), 3 May 1972, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1748/>.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Robert E. Kennedy, letter to Shari Walters, 23 Jan 1973, ASI Minutes and Agendas 1973-1999, 630.03, Robert E. Kennedy Library Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, San Luis Obispo, CA.

responsible for the creation of policies and annual budgets, and the staff of the CU are made up predominantly of students.³⁴

The University's Living Room

The expansion of the UU was many years in the making, but by the 1960s many students saw it a necessity. "Cal Poly is situated [in] virtually a cultural desert," claimed the College Union, a subcommittee of ASI responsible for planning social events.³⁵ This group wanted "to try and irrigate that desert" in order to meet the needs of the ever expanding students and staff.³⁶ One way was with a brand new student union that had all of Cal Poly's clubs under one roof along with larger multipurpose spaces. The planning for Cal Poly's UU was a collaborative one spanning almost thirty years and involving countless members of the student body and administration.³⁷ The first move was made in 1935 when President McPhee decided that the all the profits from the newly built El Corral campus bookstore would go into savings, a fund he stated he had to "[guard] with his life."³⁸ By 1964, this fund had grown to \$500,000, enough for the down payment on a new student union.³⁹

The College Union Building Committee, another ASI subcommittee, was officially formed in 1963. They were responsible for overseeing all final aspects of planning as an

³⁴ Associated Students, Inc., College Union brochure, 1971, University Union, 233.65, Robert E. Kennedy Library Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, San Luis Obispo, CA.

³⁵ College Union, College Union Report to SAC, 29 October 1963, ASI Minutes and Agendas 1961-1968, 630.03, Robert E. Kennedy Library Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, San Luis Obispo, CA.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ College Union Building Committee, College Union Fact Sheet No.1, 1964, University Union, 233.65, Robert E. Kennedy Library Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, San Luis Obispo, CA.

³⁸ Darryl Skrabak, "Planning Ahead, 1935-1966," *El Mustang* (San Luis Obispo, CA), 26 May 1964, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1067/>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

unofficial committee had laid the groundwork.⁴⁰ The committee was made up of mostly faculty, but there were two student members as well. Students were included on this committee in order to act as a liaison. They gave voice to student wishes; in return they communicated the decisions of the committee to the student body and answered any questions in open forums.⁴¹ The Building Committee first sought this student voice in planning what would become the CU through a College Union Questionnaire distributed in April 1964.⁴² This poll asked students what amenities they wanted to see in the proposed student union including a multipurpose room, ASB business office facilities, games area, hobbycraft area, bookstore and more. This questionnaire also gave room for student feedback, one suggestion being guest rooms.⁴³

There was also student outreach in a variety of other forms. In the days leading up to the fee referendum The El Mustang ran an article titled “Student Union Vital To College Life,” which worked to advertise the history and purpose of student unions.⁴⁴ It stated that it wasn’t advocating for a “yes” vote, but if the students had any questions they should attend one of the CU Building Committee’s Q&A session. The same edition featured Architecture students who were recruited to work on mock-ups of CUs in order to advertise to students the possibilities.⁴⁵ When this group of seventeen boys was interviewed all agreed, except for one, that the new student union would be a good addition to campus, though they admitted a few reservations. One

⁴⁰ College Union Building Committee, College Union Building Committee Report to SAC, 15 October 1963, ASI Minutes and Agendas 1961-1968, 630.03, Robert E. Kennedy Library Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, San Luis Obispo, CA.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*; “CU Group Informs Leaders,” *El Mustang* (San Luis Obispo, CA), 14 April 1964, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1059/>.

⁴² College Union Building Committee, College Union Fact Sheet No.1, 1964.

⁴³ Edna Togawa, “CU Models Will Be On Display,” *El Mustang* (San Luis Obispo, CA), 8 May 1964, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1063/>.

⁴⁴ Chuck Smith, “Student Union Vital to College Life,” *El Mustang* (San Luis Obispo, CA), 8 May 1964, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1063/>.

⁴⁵ Edna Togawa, “Architects Dig Into Building Plans,” *El Mustang* (San Luis Obispo, CA), 8 May 1964, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1063/>.

student was quoted as saying that despite the need for the building he was “afraid that there [would] be more administrative authority over the clubs if the campus clubs [were] situated in one building.”⁴⁶ Others believed it was worthwhile for increased opportunities for student socialization, especially for the out-of-state students or those without cars. The one dissenter believed the CU should only be built if this increased fee was optional as getting an education was already expensive and the CSU system was supposed to be the cheaper option.⁴⁷

Despite these concerns the ASI worked to successfully liaison with the student body to figure out the best plan that reflected the needs of the students. In May 1964, a month after the initial questionnaire, the fee proposal that asked students if they would be willing to pay an up to \$20 fee upon completion of the CU in the 1966-1967 school year was put to a vote. This fee needed to be approved in order to secure a 25-year loan of \$3 million for the new building; the El Corral Bookstore savings would cover the remaining cost.⁴⁸ It was approved by a 91.8% favorable vote.⁴⁹ Despite this positive attitude there was a delay in actually breaking ground for several years due to difficulty gaining funding from the federal government.⁵⁰ This caused concern among the student body that they would be paying fees for a building that they would never get to use. To remedy this ASI passed a bill stating that Cal Poly Alumni were “granted all privileges normally accorded all Cal Poly students in the use of facilities and services in the

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ “CU Building Election Starts Today,” *El Mustang* (San Luis Obispo, CA), 26 May 1964, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1067/>.

⁴⁹ College Union Building Committee, fall report to SAC, 13 Oct 1964, ASI Minutes and Agendas 1961-1968, 630.03, Robert E. Kennedy Library Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, San Luis Obispo, CA.

⁵⁰ “End to 20-year Dream: College Union Building,” *El Mustang* (San Luis Obispo, CA) 19 July 1968, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1305/>.

Julian A McPhee College Union Building.”⁵¹ In the spring of 1971, the CU was officially opened with a three-day celebration that included guided tours, a Trivia Bowl, dancing, film marathons, and a variety of concerts and music events.⁵²

Looking to the Future

Cal Poly’s “Learn By Doing” focus is a big part of what makes the university unique and it is what helped the ASI shift the focus of its student government during the 1960s and 70s. Cal Poly’s roots in the Progressive era gave the ASI a way to find a different source of motivation than at other universities. It helped the organization to remain relevant to changing student needs and desires. ASI acted as the voice of the student body and supported student movements against the administration. But, it also worked as a lab for the members to practice skills they would need out in the workforce. They learned how to manage projects and differing opinions by working with a variety of different peoples. They were also taught how to communicate and compromise effectively in professional settings. In addition, as Welsh noted in his work, student government taught them that bureaucracy is a difficult and slow process; and the work of Cal Poly’s ASI exemplifies this sentiment, then and now.

Student government familiarized and taught students the processes of democracy. The planning of the UU began many years before it was even brought to the attention of the student body; and once it was, there was disagreement over whether it was the best course of action. ASI then had to go through the process of campaigning for the UU and advertising its usefulness to

⁵¹ Applied Sciences Council, Bill 67-6 College Union Use, 27 Feb 1968, ASI Minutes and Agendas 1961-1968, 630.03, Robert E. Kennedy Library Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, San Luis Obispo, CA.

⁵² “Union Opening Today Signifies End to Dream,” *El Mustang* (San Luis Obispo, CA), 5 Mar 1971, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1560/>.

the student body. Finally, after the students voted yes, there was a six-year delay in receiving the financing needed from the federal government. This one project showed how fickle and challenging democracy could be, but also its capacity for change. By participating in and experiencing this complex system of checks and balances every member of campus, not just the leaders of ASI, learn how to get involved. ASI has continued to add to these community-building efforts and now manages both facilities mentioned along with the Recreation Center and the Sports Complex, added in 1993 and 2000 respectively.⁵³

Today, the ASI is still a forum for students' voices, as seen with the February 2015 University Union Fee referendum. In an interesting parallel to the events of the 1960s, approximately 32% of the student body voted in total, with 58.11% voting "no" to an expansion of the UU.⁵⁴ Their concerns often echoed the sentiments voiced by the dissenters of the original vote: too expensive, the money would be better spent elsewhere, and that it seemed wrong to vote on something that affected future students.⁵⁵ And, despite concerns, it seems that the current University President, Jeffrey Armstrong, will uphold this vote.⁵⁶ After almost fifty years, the ASI and the UU still acts as a training ground for democratic citizenship and the workforce. This time though, the desires of the masses did not match those of the administration and the student government. Perhaps it was just not the right time for this vote and in future years another will take place with different results, but this referendum marks the beginning of another slow bureaucratic process and the continuation of the democratic tradition for the ASI.

⁵³ "About Us," ASI Cal Poly.

⁵⁴ Naba Ahmed, "Students Vote No on New UU," *Mustang News* (San Luis Obispo, CA), 25 Feb 2016, <http://mustangnews.net/students-vote-no-on-new-uu/>.

⁵⁵ Michelle Logan, "Students React to Rejection of New UU Plan," *Mustang News* (San Luis Obispo, CA), 26 Feb 2016, <http://mustangnews.net/students-react-to-uu-referendum-denial/>.

⁵⁶ Ahmed, "Students Vote No."

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