

Weathering and Withering through the Great Depression: McPhee's Early Years  
at The California Polytechnic School

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by

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## Introduction

In 2008 the United States experienced a financial downturn that shook the economic foundations of this country. Unsuspecting homeowners watched helplessly as their homes were lost through the plummeting housing market and consequential bank foreclosures. This economic crisis affected almost all groups of people, including the students and faculty of higher education. In fact, the California State University system narrowly agreed with the California Faculty Association union to a set of furloughs, which amounted to a 10% pay cut for faculty over the 2009 academic year.<sup>1</sup> However, economic depressions are not new to the administrations of colleges and universities.

Stemming from a stock market crash in October of 1929, the Great Depression is perhaps the most influential economic depression to effect higher education. Various scholarly articles chronicle both the difficulties faced and the actions taken of higher education during the Great Depression. Among these, H. Blair Bentley focuses on the effects of the Depression on education in the state of Tennessee. Bentley discusses how the historically liberal arts colleges and universities were forced to accept curricula that “began to bend and sometimes break in the direction of vocational training” and were also forced to accept reduced funds from the state.<sup>2</sup> In addition to Bentley’s article, it is valuable to discuss Elaine El-Khawas’s “The Impact of Economic Crises on American Universities: Lessons from the Past.” In her article El-Khawas claims that “the collapse of the stock market in 1929 and the following decade of deep economic

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<sup>1</sup> Associated Press, “Union Accepts Furloughs at California Universities,” *The New York Times*, July 25, 2009, accessed February 5, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/26/us/26california.html>.

<sup>2</sup> H. Blair Bentley, “Pedagogy in Peril: Education in the Volunteer State During the Depression,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 2 (Summer, 1984): 183-5.

turmoil caused significant hardship and dislocation for most colleges and universities.”<sup>3</sup> During the early 1930s American schools and universities, including the California Polytechnic School at San Luis Obispo, underwent dramatic losses in enrollment and university finances.

In the face of these difficulties and the precarious position of the school, the leadership of Julian A. McPhee was essential to its growth. McPhee was appointed President of the California Polytechnic School in 1933 on the heels of the resignation of former President Benjamin Crandall as a result of the Great Depression and consequential debilitating budget cuts.<sup>4</sup> In the 1934 annual report to the Board of Education, McPhee presented himself as effectively saving the wellbeing and securing the future of Cal Poly.<sup>5</sup> True to his report, McPhee did lead Cal Poly to flourish through the Great Depression by transitioning the school to be solely committed to vocational education.

However, an argument of McPhee’s success is incomplete without an analysis of student reaction to the reorganization of Cal Poly; it is important to take stock of what was lost, what withered, through McPhee’s decisions. Richard Dale Moody and Morris Eugene Smith’s dissertations, along with a history of agricultural education prepared for the Bureau of Agricultural Education by S.S. Sutherland, agree with the claim that McPhee was important in the growth of the prominence of the California Polytechnic School. Yet, they lack an analysis of the effects and responses of the students before, during, and after the Great Depression. This focus on such a narrow time frame, from 1928 to 1938 and its investigation of the students’ perspectives provides a unique element that sets it apart from these previous historical accounts.

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<sup>3</sup> Elaine El-Khawas, “The Impact of Economic Crises on American Universities: Lessons from the Past,” *Higher Education Management and Policy* vol. 23, no. 2 (2011): 30-31.

<sup>4</sup> “Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School San Luis Obispo, California,” January, 1935, 141.01 Annual Reports, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, 3-4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

Julian A. McPhee's leadership and the transition to vocational training is an essential reason for the growth of Cal Poly, through the budget cuts and decreased enrollment of the Great Depression.

### **Historiography: Atmosphere of American Higher Education**

As different historians have examined, the Great Depression's affects were felt among colleges and universities across the entire nation. These works serve to place Cal Poly in the more broad historical context of what was occurring in American higher education. One author, Elaine El-Khawas, has previously been mentioned as she suggests, in her article "The Impact of Economic Crises on American Universities," that universities experienced serious hardships during the Depression as a result of dramatic losses in university finances and enrollment figures. Her article proposes that the boom of the 1920s period helped many institutions fare relatively well through the Depression and also that "as a whole [there was] good support by state legislatures for public colleges and universities."<sup>6</sup> However, this account diverges from the history of Cal Poly. The California State Board of Education actually recommended that the California Polytechnic School "be abolished as an educational institution," and Governor James Rolph lobbied for the transition of Cal Poly to a state prison in order to save money and provide more useful functions to the state.<sup>7</sup> As a result of the transition of leadership from Dr. Benjamin Crandall to Julian A. McPhee, Cal Poly was not abolished nor transformed into a prison.

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<sup>6</sup> El-Khawas, "The Impact of Economic Crises", 30.

<sup>7</sup> Morris Eugene Smith, "A History of California State Polytechnic College, the First Fifty Years, 1901-1951," Ed.D. Thesis, University of Oregon, 1957, 163-4.

Evidenced by large budget cuts Cal Poly's history also veers from El-Khawas's claim that agricultural institutes "were not significantly affected by the Depression."<sup>8</sup>

The claims of H. Blair Bentley in his study of the impact of the Depression on higher education in the state of Tennessee prove more accurate to the situation at the California Polytechnic School. Bentley states, "vocational training...was given a healthy boost by the economic crisis."<sup>9</sup> This introduces the idea that vocational training institutions proved more stable through the Great Depression as the economy coerced students and instructors to revert to more practical education and minimize excess or wasted funds and programs. This pressure from a struggling economy exhibits how economics and academics have been entwined; inseparable as they are, this relationship became especially undeniable as funds plummeted during the Great Depression. In order to convey the severity of the issue: Purdue's external research income dwindled from \$240,000 to \$15,000 from 1931 to 1933 along with drastic research budget cuts for schools such as Texas A&M, \$15,000 to \$1,900 from 1932 to 1933, and Kansas State University, \$63,000 to \$17,000 from 1931 to 1934.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Bentley considers that the University of Illinois "weathered the depression better than most" by only absorbing a 50 percent budget cut. All higher education institutions, not withstanding Cal Poly, were forced to continue in a greatly reduced scale and found it necessary to cut programs, salaries, and other functions of the school that the leaders decided were non-essential.<sup>11</sup>

The report by Committee Y of the American Association of University Professors, primarily written by Malcolm M. Wiley, expands our understanding of the atmosphere in which

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<sup>8</sup> El-Khawas, "Impact of Economic Crises," 33.

<sup>9</sup> Bentley, "Pedagogy in Peril," 188.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Seely, "Research, Engineering, and Science in American Engineering Colleges: 1900-1960," *Technology and Culture*, vol. 34, no. 2 (April, 1993): 354.

<sup>11</sup> Seely, "Research, Engineering, and Science," 354.

Cal Poly found itself during the first half of the 1930s. Wiley suggests that “the shock [from the Depression] came with an unmistakable force in 1932.”<sup>12</sup> Cal Poly fits into this national trend as McPhee assumed the role of President just one year after the Depression struck at its worst. Furthermore, Wiley claims that a great majority of universities were forced to reduce faculty salaries within the years 1930 to 1936, especially at public Western schools.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the apparent necessity of reductions to faculty salaries and programs, the burden of financing higher education that was charged to the students mounted noticeably during the Depression.<sup>14</sup> Cal Poly resided within this atmosphere of great pressure and crippling limitations as McPhee decided to suspend many of the programs and functions of Cal Poly in favor of transitioning back to “Dr. Anderson’s original ‘track’, laid out for Poly in 1902,” that of an institute for vocational education.<sup>15</sup>

### **McPhee’s Early Plans for Cal Poly, 1928-1933**

In 1917, Julian A. McPhee commenced his career in agricultural education as he accepted a position as an instructor at El Dorado Union High School in Placerville, California.<sup>16</sup> McPhee’s prominence in the agricultural education field grew until he was eventually named Chief of the Bureau of Agricultural Education in California in 1927.<sup>17</sup> His long history of dedication to agricultural education and his early interest in Cal Poly exhibit a commitment to vocational training even before the Great Depression’s affects were felt on higher education. It is interesting

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<sup>12</sup> Malcolm M. Wiley, *Depression, Recovery and Higher Education: A Report by Committee Y of the American Association of Professors* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1937), 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>15</sup> 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: California Polytechnic State University, 2001), 16.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, “A History of the California State Polytechnic College,” 176.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, “A History of the California State Polytechnic College,” 177.

to note that McPhee's strategies for vocational education were not changed by the affects of the economic crisis, but rather that his ideas for practical training were reinforced.

Only one year after McPhee assumed his post as Chief of the Bureau of Agricultural Education the California Polytechnic School—under the leadership of Dr. Crandall and Margaret Chase, vice president at the time—began offering junior college classes at the school.<sup>18</sup> The next year, in February of 1928 McPhee issued a comprehensive report of the California Polytechnic School. In the report certain aspects of the school, especially the industrial and aeronautical departments, are highly praised.<sup>19</sup> However, McPhee found that “instructional costs, especially in the household arts department, were excessive,” and in addition, McPhee, with his expertise in agricultural education, heavily criticized the agricultural department.<sup>20</sup> The criticism for the agricultural department stemmed mostly from McPhee's vision of greater potential for Cal Poly to become a leading agricultural school in the state.

In August of 1929, Dr. Crandall's office responded with a ten-year building program for the school.<sup>21</sup> The report exhibits the mounting influence of McPhee as he placed pressure on Crandall to begin changes in the agricultural department. In fact, the report was signed by Julian McPhee, since as Chief of the Bureau of Agricultural Education he oversaw that aspect of Cal Poly. McPhee's involvement at Cal Poly continued to rise through continuous correspondence between the years 1930 and 1933. As early as June of 1930 Crandall wrote to McPhee for his

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<sup>18</sup> *The California Polytechnic Bulletin With Junior College Division 1928-29*, (San Luis Obispo, 1928), 1-3; *Catalogue of The California Polytechnic State School of Agriculture, Mechanics, Engineering, Printing and Home Making, 1926-27* (San Luis Obispo, 1926), 1-5.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, “A History of the California State Polytechnic College,” 152.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin Crandall, “Report of Conference on Tentative Ten-year Building Program for San Luis O'bispo Technical School—Aug. 15, '29,” Box 46, Folder title: “Study of Conditions at CPS, Made by Julian A McPhee and Sam H Cohn,” 144.02 Julian McPhee Papers, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University.

recommendation for a new agricultural instructor.<sup>22</sup> McPhee had already requested actions to be taken at the school; however, Crandall, from McPhee's perspective, appeared to be against the shift to greater agricultural education and does not support the agricultural department.<sup>23</sup> The correspondence also reveals the impact of McPhee's decision begin holding state agricultural contests at Cal Poly, leading to the school rising from obscurity.<sup>24</sup> This greater visibility was part of McPhee's goal to spread the reputation of Cal Poly as a respected institution and also bring many agricultural instructors from around the state to visit, and support, Cal Poly. One result for this greater visibility was to secure the school as a more prominent institution, eventually leading to success in weathering the depression.

In 1931 McPhee presents his perspective through the "Suggested Plan for the Utilization of the California Polytechnic School in the Further Development and Integration of the California Agricultural Education Program." In this second report McPhee declares his vision of Cal Poly as solving "practically all of the problems of agricultural education."<sup>25</sup> McPhee argues that this is the best route for Cal Poly for numerous reasons: it would save the school money, it was already located in an agricultural area, it would not require any "legislative action" since the department is already in place, and that the buildings and equipment necessary for thorough and

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<sup>22</sup> Benjamin Crandall to Julian A. McPhee, June 9, 1930, Box 2 Folder title: "Bureau of Agricultural Education Program, California State, 1931-32," 144.02 Julian McPhee Papers, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University.

<sup>23</sup> Julian A. McPhee to Benjamin Crandall, April 24, 1933, Box 2 Folder title: "Bureau of Agricultural Education Program, California State, 1931-32," 144.02 Julian McPhee Papers, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University.

<sup>24</sup> Julian A. McPhee to Benjamin Crandall, May 19, 1931, Box 2 Folder title: "Bureau of Agricultural Education Program, California State, 1931-32," 144.02 Julian McPhee Papers, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University.

<sup>25</sup> Julian A. McPhee, "Suggested Plan for the utilization of The California Polytechnic School in the Further Development and Integration of California Agricultural Education Program," Box 46 Folder 12, 144.02 Julian McPhee Papers, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, 9.



complete agricultural training were already present.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, McPhee claimed that the school was “not serving any definite needs, since students attending the school just ‘drift’ there.”<sup>27</sup> McPhee’s plan is soon carried out as he assumed greater influence over the decisions at Cal Poly and the transition to focus solely on vocational education commences.

### **Transition to Vocational Education**

The 1932 “Suzzallo Report”, commissioned by Governor James Rolph, substantiates the claim that McPhee’s early plans for Cal Poly were the best way to guide the school through the Depression. Since the school did not fulfill any functions that other high schools and junior colleges were not already completing, and in light of the economic situation, the school was to be abolished.<sup>28</sup> In an effort to preserve Cal Poly from this fate, McPhee placed the agricultural department under his direct supervision. He promptly made many changes: Cal Poly began to hold vocational agricultural teaching conventions, hired new staff members, and required students to have definite vocational objectives.<sup>29</sup> These transitions were in tune with the State Board of Education’s demand to “continue only vocational training, preparing students for work in agriculture or industry.”<sup>30</sup> Within six months of McPhee’s modifications the sections of the Suzzallo report that suggested the elimination of Cal Poly were publicly repealed as “obsolete.”<sup>31</sup> McPhee continued his quest towards Cal Poly being uniquely vocational as he assumed Presidency of Cal Poly after the resignation of Crandall. McPhee’s letter “To the Graduates” in

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<sup>26</sup> Julian A. McPhee, “Suggested Plan for the utilization of The California Polytechnic School in the Further Development and Integration of California Agricultural Education Program,” Box 46 Folder 12, 144.02 Julian McPhee Papers, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, 6-15.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Kennedy, *Learn by Doing*, 18.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, “A History of the California State Polytechnic College,” 166-172.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, “A History of the California State Polytechnic College,” 170.

<sup>31</sup> Kennedy, *Learn by Doing*, 19.

the 1935 *El Rodeo* yearbook presents this goal in his own words that after their vocational training students “will be better able to take [their] rightful place in the occupation for which [they] have prepared [themselves].”<sup>32</sup>

To prepare for the school year of 1933 McPhee launched a massive reorganization of the faculty Cal Poly became “now a technical institute offering training in vocational agriculture and in trades and industries.”<sup>33</sup> The catalogs and bulletins published before each academic school year chronicle these changes. For example, even the title page is revised from describing Cal Poly as “A State Institute of Agriculture, Mechanics, Engineering, Aeronautics, Printing and Home Making,” to “A Technical Institute for Agriculture and Industry” from the Fall of 1928 to Fall of 1933, McPhee’s first year as President.<sup>34</sup> The agriculture department was designed by McPhee to train students to rapidly enter careers in farming. The course of study was only two years long, or sometimes three if a student began in the “lower” program, for the purpose of enabling students to graduate and work as soon as possible.<sup>35</sup> The economic strains of Depression lead to projects comparable to today’s philosophy of “Learn by Doing” being exceeding popular as McPhee encouraged the idea that students could “earn while learning” through projects of raising animals and growing crops.<sup>36</sup> The Aeronautics Department was also pragmatic in its use of “Earn while you Learn” projects. In the 1933 academic year “students rebuilt or completely overhauled seven airplanes,” providing real experience that also gave

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<sup>32</sup> *The 1935 El Rodeo* (San Luis Obispo, 1935), Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University.

<sup>33</sup> Smith, “A History of the California State Polytechnic College,” 182.

<sup>34</sup> *The California Polytechnic Bulletin With Junior College Division 1928-29* (San Luis Obispo, 1928), 1; *Bulletin of The California Polytechnic School, A Technical Institute for Agriculture and Industry... School Year 1933-34* (San Luis Obispo, 1933), 1.

<sup>35</sup> Smith, “A History of the California State Polytechnic College,” 184-185.

<sup>36</sup> Smith, “A History of the California State Polytechnic College,” 185.

economic value to their work.<sup>37</sup> The two-year aeronautics program was designed to train students to pass the “airplane mechanic or airplane engine mechanic license examinations” and enter the workforce.<sup>38</sup> These changes in curriculum were beneficial to the school, in raising money from students’ work, and also to the students, who were directly prepared for jobs as skilled laborers.

In accordance with his attempts to promote the school, McPhee championed the commencement of Poly Royal in 1933. Poly Royal, known today as “open house”, was an event for the school to attract attention and exhibit to the state of California, and the community, the value of the vocational training it was providing. The event quickly became popular as the state was convinced of the value of continuing, and lending support to, Cal Poly. The following year there were more than 2,000 visitors that come to Cal Poly for the 2<sup>nd</sup> annual Poly Royal event.<sup>39</sup> The school was quickly rising in status as the leading vocational education institute in the state with McPhee leading the charge.

### **Smith, Moody, and Sutherland—Admirers of McPhee**

Other historians have also previously taken note of, and acknowledge, the role of McPhee during his time at Cal Poly. The dissertations of Morris Eugene Smith and Richard Dale Moody also claim that McPhee was critical to the growth of Cal Poly through the Depression even as a 60 percent cut in the budget, a major impetus for Crandall’s resignation, plagued the school. These accounts duplicate McPhee’s own words as he exclaims his great impact on Cal Poly through the 1934 annual report. In his introduction McPhee cites how the school has suffered

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<sup>37</sup> Smith, “A History of the California State Polytechnic College,” 188; *Bulletin of The California Polytechnic, A State Institute of Agriculture, Engineering, Mechanics, Aeronautics, Carpentry, Electricity and Printing... 1930-1931* (San Luis Obispo, 1930), 12.

<sup>38</sup> Smith, “A History of the California State Polytechnic College,” 188-189.

<sup>39</sup> *El Rodeo Scrapbook, 1934* (San Luis Obispo, 1934), Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University.

from the “adulteration of its original principles,” which refers to the importance of vocational training to Cal Poly’s very first Director, Leroy Anderson.<sup>40</sup> McPhee is singleminded and determined in his vision of Cal Poly excelling as a vocational training institute.

In addition, fellow agricultural educator S. S. Sutherland provides that McPhee was influential in developing and promoting agricultural education across the whole state and not only at Cal Poly as he states that McPhee established “a weekly 15 minute radio program...to go out...to all the high school departments in the state.”<sup>41</sup> Sutherland also perceives the significance of McPhee to Cal Poly in the same way that Moody and Smith praise his influence in developing vocational training.

It is evident that McPhee, and those who write about him, perceive his role as significant in the growth of Cal Poly. Yet, these three authors lack an acknowledgement of actions or decisions that McPhee made that some would cite as a regression of the status of the California Polytechnic School. None of the reports include a discussion of the role, or absence thereof, of women at Cal Poly during the years of the Great Depression and lingering for a few decades after. This paper adds to the conversation these topics as it is just as important to address the various aspects of Cal Poly that clearly withered during the early years of McPhee. With this understanding I will attempt to show to some degree how each of these various aspects that were lost are understandable, unfortunate as they are, during such a difficult time as the Great Depression and that McPhee’s transition to vocational training still promoted the growth of Cal Poly.

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<sup>40</sup> “Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School San Luis Obispo, California”, January, 1935, 141.01 Annual Reports, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Sidney S. Sutherland, “A History of Agricultural Education in California Secondary Schools, 1901-1940,” Prepared for the California Bureau of Agricultural Education (Davis: University of California, 1940), 21.

## Withering During the Depression

Despite McPhee's success he certainly was not perfect, nor did he appeal to every student, faculty, or individual involved with the California Polytechnic School. Similar to the majority of universities and colleges across the nation various programs, groups of people, and even ideas withered under the pressure experienced by the school. Perhaps one of the most remembered blemishes on the presidency of McPhee was his treatment of women: including faculty and students.

These losses of some aspects of Cal Poly extend to the person of Margaret Chase, women as students at the school, and the academic programs of home making, or home economics. Margaret Chase began her career at the school in 1908 and served as vice president under the three Presidents before McPhee; she even served as acting interim president for almost a year.<sup>42</sup> Chase was instrumental in establishing the Junior College at Cal Poly in 1927 and in promoting a wide array of general education classes for students at Cal Poly. It is for these reasons that she did not belong as a decision-maker under McPhee as he demoted her from vice president to her original role as a full-time instructor.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, McPhee's presidency of the school is tainted by his decision to not allow women back in to Cal Poly after the 1929 legislation banning the entrance of women to the school was repealed in 1937. The dissolution of the home making program at Cal Poly in favor of transitioning to focus on agriculture and industry aligns with the ban of women from Cal Poly.

One should be very careful to use this as evidence to accuse McPhee though. When the entirety of the situation is presented one can better understand why McPhee did not fight against

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<sup>42</sup> Kennedy, *Learn by Doing*, 12-16.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

the ban on women and the loss of educational programs for women at Cal Poly. The bulletin of the academic school year of 1929 to 1930 explains the two reasons for the barring of women from entrance to Cal Poly. First, the courses that Cal Poly offered for women were no longer necessary as many high schools throughout the state offered the same type of training, there was simply no longer a need for these programs.<sup>44</sup> A second reason is that the percentage of women as students at the school was meager: in 1929 women only comprised about five percent of the total student population.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, only two years before the ban on women, in 1927, there were a mere seven women enrolled in the program for household arts.<sup>46</sup> While this is no excuse for McPhee's actions to continue to deny women from entering Cal Poly as the ban was lifted in 1937, perhaps one can understand how the financial expenditure was impractical in comparison to the amount of women enrolled, especially as the Depression escalated financial trouble at the school. Unsavory as it is, perhaps McPhee's devotion to revert the school to vocational training, a necessary action to prevent the complete dissolution of the school, did not have room for women students. Today this proves a ridiculous idea as women have gained more of a prominence among industry and agriculture, but perhaps the culture of the day, and not completely McPhee, is more to blame for this initial exclusion of women.

### **Impact on Students at Cal Poly between 1928 and 1938**

Another aspect of Cal Poly that struggled during the early years of McPhee's presidency was the student life and extracurricular activity. An analysis of the impact on students before, during, and after the Depression and conveys that the suspension of programs and extracurriculars from the years 1933 to 1937 were unfortunate, but ultimately Cal Poly matured

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<sup>44</sup> *Bulletin of The California Polytechnic with Junior College Division, A State Institution of Agriculture, Engineering, Mechanics, Aeronautics, Carpentry, Electricity and Printing... 1929-1930* (San Luis Obispo, 1929), 12.

<sup>45</sup> *Bulletin of The California Polytechnic... 1929-1930*, 12.

<sup>46</sup> Smith, "A History of the California State Polytechnic College," 158.

and progressed as it waved farewell to the Depression. First, continuing the discussion of the impractical financial burden of programs to training women, is the significance of an article that appears in the May 18<sup>th</sup> edition of the 1928 *Polygram*, the student-run newspaper. The article praises the home making programs at Cal Poly and gives measure to the success in the case of one specific student.<sup>47</sup> This article reinforced the idea that individual women suffered from the decision to ban women, even if it was a small number and provides evidence that not all students agreed with McPhee's decisions to transform the California Polytechnic School. It is important to realize that some student's goals and academic careers were neglected by the vocational school that McPhee crafted.

In the midst of the Great Depression, and the transition to vocational education led by McPhee, the impact on students is best explained by the absence of activity. While students did enjoy Poly Royal festivities, and other events put on by the student body including homecoming, Christmas parties, and May Day events, students lost many functions that had previously been part of the Cal Poly education.<sup>48</sup> This is highlighted by a six-year gap in a student run newspaper—which was discontinued by McPhee, the dormancy of many extracurricular clubs and programs, and the reduced budget for the *El Rodeo* yearbook—a staple of Cal Poly student life every year.<sup>49</sup>

However, this absence of extracurriculars was necessary during such a critical era in Cal Poly's history, and after these quiet years there was a great rebirth of student activity. In the Fall

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<sup>47</sup> "Old Graduate Finds Home Making Training Very Valuable Asset," *The Polygram*, May 18, 1928.

<sup>48</sup> *Program of Events: 30th Anniversary Homecoming, California Polytechnic School, November 3-4, 1933*, Box 46, Folder title: "Study of Conditions at CPS, Made by Julian A McPhee and Sam H Cohn," 144.02 Julian McPhee Papers, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University; *Program: Poly Royal, Second Annual Agricultural Show, March 17th, 1934*, Box 46, Folder title: "Study of Conditions at CPS, Made by Julian A McPhee and Sam H Cohn," 144.02 Julian McPhee Papers, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University.

<sup>49</sup> *El Rodeo Scrapbook, 1934*, (San Luis Obispo, 1934), Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University.

of 1938 the extracurriculars of Cal Poly were revived through the publication of the “first paper in six years,” the new student-run newspaper, *El Mustang*.<sup>50</sup> The resurrection of the newspaper suggests that the school was successfully leaving the Depression in the past. Among the articles in this issue, Cal Poly boasted “improved facilities” and “excellent additions” along with rejuvenated club activity.<sup>51</sup> It is evident that the student authors of the newspaper took pride in their school as they welcomed Governor Frank Merriam for a visit.<sup>52</sup> The students also took pride in their president, McPhee, through an article titled “The Chief.” The short article provides the opinion of students in 1938 of the role of McPhee through the Depression: “It has been through his efforts that our school has made such fine progress during the last six years.”<sup>53</sup> The next issue published of *El Mustang* further supports the proof of expansion of the school’s facilities and raising enrollment figures and also “renewed activity” of extracurriculars.<sup>54</sup> Finally, the last issue of *El Mustang* in 1938, published in December, reveals the “greatest boost to Poly advertising in history,” the planned full technicolor film of student activities at Cal Poly.<sup>55</sup> The second half of the 1930s was an era of rebirth for the California Polytechnic School that was made possible by McPhee’s commitment to vocational education, even as the Depression forced students to forego extracurriculars for the sake of budgets and in the name of efficiency.

## Conclusion

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<sup>50</sup> “Cal Poly Publishes First Paper in Six Years,” *El Mustang*, November 4, 1938.

<sup>51</sup> “Poly Campus Boasts Excellent Additions, Improved Facilities,” *El Mustang*, November 4, 1938; “Glee Club Makes First Appearance,” *El Mustang*, November 4, 1938.

<sup>52</sup> “Governor to Visit Campus,” *El Mustang*, November 4, 1938.

<sup>53</sup> “The Chief,” *El Mustang*, November 4, 1938.

<sup>54</sup> “Completion Near On Six New Dorms,” *El Mustang*, November 23, 1938; “Block ‘P’ Shows Renewed Activity,” *El Mustang*, November 23, 1938.

<sup>55</sup> Giles Liegerot, “Technicolor Movie Taken of Campus Life: Greatest Boost to Poly Advertising in History,” *El Mustang*, December 16, 1938.



The role of Julian A. McPhee, Cal Poly's sixth president, and his actions through the Great Depression remain significant today as the recent 2008 financial downturn lingers in recent memories. Beginning in 1928 and continuing through the 1930s, McPhee provided the focused leadership that was necessary to make Cal Poly effective through a time of constricted funds and the lack of surplus. The system of vocational education that McPhee brought to the school proved to be more stable as it promoted pragmatism through preparing students for vital careers during the Depression.

From his early plans through his decisions as President, McPhee held the long-term interest of the California Polytechnic School as his goal. It is important to remember though, as every man is, McPhee was not perfect and many justifiably criticize his treatment of women, including previous vice president Margaret Chase, and the home making program. However, even at the cost of a few losses, the restricting pressures that the Great Depression had on higher education support the claim that McPhee's return to practical, vocational training was indeed the best way for Cal Poly to weather, and even thrive, through such turbulence. In the midst of this atmosphere of limitations and restrictions wrought by the Great Depression the role and leadership of Julian McPhee was critical to the continuity and growth of the California Polytechnic School.

Through this time the relationship between academics and economics was illuminated as the dependence of academics upon economics grew more evident. This tension, and the mounting pressure from Depression, explains how the decisions and actions that McPhee made to transition the school to vocational training were a mixture of both choice and necessity. Today, this is a familiar struggle as controversy continues of how higher education should use their meager funds in the most effective manners possible. To McPhee, this meant focusing on

those pragmatic careers that would quickly lead to secure positions in the workforce. To our current president, Jeffrey Armstrong, and those yet to come, this could mean something distinct as the methods to weather a recession may look different today. Yet still, the delicate balance between economics and academics persists.

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