

Cal Poly and the Wayward Field of Home Economics

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By

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Since its establishment in 1901 California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo has gone through a number of identity crises. What began as a progressive institution that aimed to educate the state's future blue-collar workers has matured into a recognized academic institution. As the school grew, its faculty and administrators had to decide which features of Cal Poly fit into their vision of its future, and which should be left behind as the university progressed. Many aspects of Cal Poly's curriculum were scrapped somewhere between rural-secondary school, and comprehensive polytechnic university. The now defunct Department of Home Economics falls into this unfortunate second category.

In the spring of 1992, during a period of intense statewide budget cuts, Cal Poly's Department of Home Economics began to be phased out.¹ Students pursuing a degree in Home Ec were allowed to continue their studies, but incoming Cal Poly students could not enroll in the major, and in several years the department was done away with completely.² Articles from the *Mustang Daily* at this time reveal confusion among students and faculty as to why exactly the Home Ec Department was getting the axe.³ President Baker, VP of Academic Affairs Robert Koob, and other administrators downplayed the phasing out of Home Ec as a simple necessity of the budget crisis. By defunding Home Ec along with the department of Engineering Technologies (ET) the administrators claimed they could spare the rest of Cal Poly's departments from making cutbacks.⁴ Some, like head of the Home Ec Department Barbara Webber, felt that this

¹ John Hubble, "Baker seals departments' fate." *Mustang Daily*, May 13, 1992, accessed January 29, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/4323>.

² Anita Kreile, "Home Ec Not Finished Yet." *Mustang Daily*, March 3, 1993, accessed January 29, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/4431>.

³ Hubble, "Baker seals departments' fate."

⁴ Hubble, "Baker seals departments' fate."

simple justification was not enough.⁵ In a 1993 interview with *Mustang Daily* reporter Anita Kreile, Webber expressed that “she thought an outdated image of what home economics involves contributed to the decision to cut the program.”⁶ In Webber’s opinion, the administration failed to recognize the academic rigor that she felt was present in her major.

Home Economics is a broad discipline. Its courses look very different depending on where you find them. Many individuals’ views of the field may derive from their experience with high school Home Ec classes, where the objective is often simply crafting better parents. Webber saw her department as much more complex than that. Home Economists that defend their fields position on college campuses argue that today, their discipline is concerned more broadly with the impact that dynamics in the home has on society as a whole.

For a time, Cal Poly and the growing field of Home Economics shared many important core values. They were both driven by common ideals: aiming to improve the lives of commonplace individuals through education, and stressing practical, hands-on education.

Like Cal Poly, the profession of Home Economics has also experienced major transformations in its day. Home Economists like Dr. Yvonne Gentzler express pride in the way that the field has adapted along with the changes in American society. Gentzler also recognizes though that Home Ec has always struggled to justify its place in academia, considering it’s technical roots.⁷ By the 1990’s many Home Ec departments were made

⁵ Kreile, “Home Ec Not Finished Yet.”

⁶ Kreile, “Home Ec Not Finished Yet.”

⁷ Yvonne S. Gentzler, “Home economics: ever timely and forever complex,” *Phi Kappa Phi Forum* 92.2 (2012), 6.

to defend their presence on college campuses. Some departments changed their images to meet these demands while others like Cal Poly's were left behind.⁸

Today the popular image of Home Economics is often a negative one, which calls to mind issues of sexism and outdated gender roles. Professionals who remain in the field argue that these are misperceptions, and that Home Ec is more important now than it ever was. These home economists retain the belief that educational institutions can improve the home lives of students by practically combining lessons from the various fields of nutrition, family psychology, microeconomics and others.

Though Cal Poly phased out its Home Economics program in 1992, the two entities nevertheless shared many similarities throughout their growth. The disbanding of the Home Ec Department is revealing of major shifts that were taking place within Cal Poly and the field of Home Economics respectively: Cal Poly's departure from its polytechnic roots, and Home Economics' growing disunity as a field.

History of Home Economics

The discipline of Home Economics officially began in 1899, at the first Lake Placid Conference in Lake Placid, New York.⁹ Attending this conference were specialists in the fields of psychology, public health, and nutrition, among others. At these conferences, which would become an annual meeting for the next decade, attendees laid the groundwork for the new field. Their image of Home Economics was based on the simple idea that the dynamics of our nation's households were important, too important for higher education to ignore. Members of the conferences argued that the quality of

⁸ Gentzler, "Home economics," 6.

⁹ Sarah Stage, "Ellen Richards and the Social Significance of the Home Economics Movement," in *Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of the Profession*, ed. Sarah Stage and Virginia B. Vincenti (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 19.

American citizens' home lives impacted their productivity, their happiness, and directly shaped the character of the next generation of Americans.¹⁰ Conference attendees worried that mothers and fathers weren't born with the inherent knowledge of how to raise a well adjusted child, or how to plan a nutritious diet for their families. Their solution to this issue was to address it by means of education.¹¹

Home Economics was founded with the conviction that students should go to school in order to be more successful in the home, and educating individuals in this way would lead to a larger impact on society. These ideas can be seen as products of a progressive era way of thinking. The ideals of the progressive era were formed as a reaction against the progress of industrialization in the U.S..¹² Progressives saw the growth of factories and corporations as a threat to the working class individual's independence. Andrew Gorman writes in his article, "School of the People: The Progressive Origins of Cal Poly", that education was a primary tool of progressives in the effort of "empowering the individual".¹³ This was exactly the sort of thinking which guided the founders of Home Economics.

Another guiding principle which influenced the Lake Placid conference was the work of educational philosopher John Dewey.¹⁴ Dewey believed that students were the most successful when they were taught in a hands-on setting.¹⁵ The first Home economists thought that this was especially true for their discipline, and designed classrooms and curriculums so that students could get first-hand experience.

¹⁰ Gentzler, "Home economics," 6.

¹¹ Stage, "Ellen Richards," 20.

¹² Andrew Gorman, "School of the People: The Progressive Origins of Cal Poly," *The Forum: Journal of History* 6, no. 1 (June 2014): 4.

¹³ Gorman, "School of the People," 6.

¹⁴ Getzler, "Home Economics," 6.

¹⁵ Getzler, "Home Economics," 6.

In its early years, the field of Home Economics allied with similar vocational fields. In this way Home Ec benefitted from the federal funding which had been awarded to the 'Land Grant Schools'.¹⁶ These were institutions that were founded between 1862 and 1890, which focused on providing practical educations to members of the nation's future working class.¹⁷ Home Economics was readily incorporated into the educations offered to young women at land grant schools.

One trait of Home Economics that has largely stayed with the discipline throughout its entire history is a lack of men. From the outset, it was assumed in a way that students of housekeeping and childrearing were going to be women. Some may take issue with the way that Home Economics is dominated by women. One might see the whole field as a sexist one that intends to reinforce dated gender expectations: husbands as breadwinners and wives staying in the home.¹⁸ But Getzler points out that at the time when Home Economics was being developed, women made up only 19% of the American work force, "Most households contained a working father and stay-at-home mother; thus, parenting fell to the traditional caretaker."¹⁹ The founders of Home Economics were being practical, not patriarchal when they assumed that women would make up their field. While nutrition and child development are indeed important areas of knowledge for both husbands and wives to be competent in, home economists recognized that they could make a grater change by educating the half of the population who were generally held as more responsible for these areas.

¹⁶ Getzler, "Home Economics," 6.

¹⁷ Gorman, "School of the People," 4.

¹⁸ Lenora Dannelke, "Where Has Home Economics Gone? — Experts Speak to the Importance of Food Education in Schools," *Today's Dietitian* 13.3 (2011), 8.

¹⁹ Getzler, "Home Economics," 6.

Of course, as the twentieth century drew on, the gender norms which were commonplace during the Lake Placid conferences began to be challenged. Along with a growing population of women in the workforce, came many other social changes. And with social progress came changes to the discipline as a whole. In the article “Home Economics as an Academic Discipline”, Marie Negri-Carver notes that by the 1960’s Home Economics departments in colleges across the country were changing their aims, focusing more on preparing students for “professional objectives” rather than homemaking.²⁰ This shift involved providing more concentrated educations. While a broad understanding of all the different elements of home economics was seen as important for a successful stay at home parent, a more focused understanding of nutrition, textiles, or education was seen as more employable.

By the 1990’s Home Economics was experiencing a period of turbulence. Gentzler writes that the primary issue plaguing the field was (and *is*) as lack of a unified identity.²¹ Home Economists disagreed on the broader goals of the profession. Many saw it as a practical vocation that ought to be focused on producing homemakers. While others viewed Home Economics as a more academic endeavor, one in which students pondered the relationship between home life and society as a whole, and prepared themselves for specialized professions.²² This disunity resulted in a fissure within the field. In 1993 the American Home Economics Association, which had taken part in shaping the discipline since 1909, announced its position that the whole field needed a rebranding.²³

²⁰ Marie N. Carver, *Home Economics as an Academic Discipline* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1979): 34.

²¹ Gentzler, “Home Economics,” 7.

²² Gentzler, “Home Economics,” 7.

²³ Virginia B. Vincenti, “Chronology of Events and Movements Which Have Defined and Shaped Home Economics,” in *Rethinking Home Economics*, 330.

The American Home Economics Association changed its name to the American Association for Family and Consumer Sciences, and many university departments adopted similar new titles.²⁴ Other departments, like Cal Poly's, didn't survive this period. Gentzler writes, "Some colleges and universities folded the five areas of emphasis in this interdisciplinary profession into the respective domains. And many home economics education programs in higher education were simply shut down."²⁵ In many ways the field has never recovered from this period of disunity.

History of Cal Poly

In March of 1901, just two years after the founders of Home Economics met for the first time in Lake Placid, California's state legislature passed bill which called for the establishment of a Polytechnic institute in San Luis Obispo. In the article "School of the People" Gorman writes that in the years leading up to Cal Poly's creation, there was some confusion surrounding what the school would ultimately look like, and whether or not it would ever even come to fruition.²⁶ The article states that the individuals who were fighting for the new school were aware of the vagueness of its mission.²⁷ Myron Angel, the man who first proposed the idea of a polytechnic school in San Luis Obispo, admitted that if the purpose of the institute was not well defined, that was in order to appeal to legislators.²⁸ In other words, Angel did not want Sacramento to write Cal Poly off as simply a farm school or normal school. One intention that seems like a constant was for the school to offer "non professional" educations to blue collar Californians and in this

²⁴ Vincenti, "Chronology," 330.

²⁵ Gentzler, "Home Economics," 7.

²⁶ Gorman, "School of the People," 8.

²⁷ Gorman, "School of the People," 9.

²⁸ Gorman, "School of the People," 8.

way contribute to the general welfare of the state.²⁹ This mission fit squarely into the tenants of progressivism, and differed from the state's more academic institutions at the time like the University of California and Stanford University. Based on the shared aspirations of Home Economics and the new secondary school of Cal Poly, that of improving the lives of worker class through education, it should be no surprise that one of the very first disciplines to be taught at Cal Poly was Domestic Science.

In the early 1990's Cal Poly made several large steps away from its polytechnic roots. In 1990 the Music Department was established.³⁰ A year later the campus welcomed a new Philosophy Department.³¹ These were signs that Cal Poly was continuing to grow as it neared its one hundredth year. The type of growth it was experiencing is important to note. The Music and Philosophy programs were to be part of the School of the Liberal Arts, and not the first disciplines that come to mind when one thinks 'polytechnic'.

In March of the next year, the school scheduled a "liberal arts week", which was meant to showcase and celebrate Cal Poly's humanities-centered departments. In a *Mustang Daily* article which focused on the upcoming liberal arts week, a history lecturer named Paul Hiltpold was paraphrased as saying, "the School of Liberal Arts makes Cal Poly a classic university rather than a trade school."³² Hiltpold's opinion here goes to show just how much the school had evolved from its trade school origins.

²⁹ Gorman, "School of the People," 8.

³⁰ Mara Wildfeuer, "New Major Is Music to Poly's Ears." *Mustang Daily*, October 18, 1990. Accessed February 14, 2016. <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/4109>.

³¹ Carolyn Nielsen, "Philosophy Department Sponsors Lectures to Introduce New Major." *Mustang Daily*, October 21, 1991. Accessed February 27, 2016. <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/7109>.

³² Christy Winauro, "Liberal Arts School to Host Open House," *Mustang Daily*, March 12, 1992, accessed February 25, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/4291>.

Cal Poly's two new majors concerned their students with much more academic pursuits, compared to the more practical aims of the school's older technical disciplines. By the early nineties, the learning objectives of the Home Economics Department fell somewhere in between practical and academic. Students worked with their hands, and reasoned with their minds. Members of the department probably took pride in balance that was stuck here. Soon though, the success of the Home Ec program at Cal Poly would be called into question.

Budget Crisis of 1992 and the Disbanding of Cal Poly's Home Economics

Department

This week of liberal arts celebration took place in the middle of a particularly nasty period of system-wide CSU budget cuts. On February 20th of that year *The Mustang Daily* reported that the CSU system's portion of the statewide budget would drop from 4.6 percent to 3.5.³³ Because of this decrease the Cal State system would lose around 800 million dollars in potential funding over a six-year time frame.³⁴ The article explained that the CSU board of trustees had voted to raise tuition fees in response to this loss of funding, but the Cal State schools would be expected to make cuts to their own budgets on top of the tuition hikes.

Over the next two months Cal Poly's administrators, working in a degree of cooperation with the faculty's representational body, the Academic Senate, scrambled to decide what areas of the school's budget would lose their funding. A *Mustang Daily* article by staff writer Caroline Neilson quoted president Baker saying, "We are not

³³ Allison Gatlin, "CSU Trustees Vote 'Yes' on 40 Percent Tuition Hike," *Mustang Daily*, February 20, 1992, accessed February 25, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/4276>.

³⁴ Gatlin, "CSU Trustees Vote 'Yes.'"

cutting fat; we're cutting bone and tissue."³⁵ One area that many faculty members agreed should bear the brunt of the cutbacks was the school's athletic programs.³⁶ Individuals with this opinion argued that if academic programs could be spared it would be worth it to do away with some competitive sports teams, which one might see as an extravagance.

Vice President Koob was of the opinion that athletics were worth paying for, and that budget cuts should be vertical rather than horizontal, meaning he thought several full departments ought to be done away with rather than having the cuts spread around.³⁷ In this way, a majority of the academic programs could be spared at the expense of a select few. Ultimately, the books were balanced through a combination of tuition hikes, vertical and horizontal cuts. Some members of the faculty felt they had been ignored during the decision making, and everybody for the most part agreed that the CSU trustees were forcing the school to rush the process.³⁸

By mid May of 1992 Baker his announced his final decision that ET and Home Ec would have to go as a part of the vertical cutbacks. The announcement was met with understandable anger. Members of the Academic Senate complained that they'd been excluded for the budget balancing.³⁹ At one Academic Senate meeting which took place days before the final decisions were made one speaker, who in the meeting minutes is only identified as Morris, summed up the general sentiment felt among the Department of Home Ec, saying, "we are very concerned with the process used to target our program for

³⁵ Carolyn Nielsen, "Board OKs Fee Increase After Grim Baker Speech," *Mustang Daily*, May 22, 1992, accessed February 25, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/4330>.

³⁶ Academic Senate Minutes, May 5, 1992, Cal Poly Digital Commons, accessed February 14, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/senateminutes/541>.

³⁷ John Hubble, "Koob talks about budget-cutting process," *Mustang Daily*, April 27, 1992, accessed January 29, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/4311>.

³⁸ Academic Senate Minutes, April 28, 1992, Cal Poly Digital Commons, accessed February 14, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/senateminutes/541>.

³⁹ Academic Senate Minutes, April 28, 1992.

elimination. We don't feel democracy has been evident, no rationale has been given for the proposed cut of our entire program."⁴⁰ If Morris expected that the rationale behind Home Ec's disbanding would be made more clear, then the next few months would prove to be very disappointing.

Justification, and Lack of Justification for Home Ec's Disbanding

Home Ec majors and faculty members held protests in the hopes that the administration would reverse their decision, others simply wanted to know why their major had been chosen. In the case of ET, Baker was more able to justify the disbanding by arguing that most of what the department offered, along with its faculty could be incorporated into other engineering departments.⁴¹ Home Economics was not as easily lumped into other fields, though the Nutrition and Psychology Departments gradually took over some of its curriculum as the Department was phased out.⁴²

Throughout the spring quarter of 1992 the school administration avoided supplying a clear answer to the question "why has Home Ec been singled out?"⁴³ During a speech broadcast over the school radio station KCPR, Baker did cite the fact that Home Ec had lost accreditation in 1989 as a reason for its disbanding.⁴⁴ What Baker didn't mention was that Home Ec was not the only non-accredited program at Cal Poly at the time. Bringing up this loss of accreditation may also not have satisfied some members of the Home Ec Department, who viewed their loss of accreditation as largely the fault of the administration; *The Mustang Daily* article "Baker Seals Departments' Fate" explains,

⁴⁰ Academic Senate Minutes, May 5, 1992.

⁴¹ Hubble, "Koob talks about budget-cutting process."

⁴² Hubble, "Baker seals departments' fate."

⁴³ "President Baker Must be a leader Now," *Mustang Daily*, April 30, 1992, accessed February 27, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/4314>.

⁴⁴ Hubble, "Baker seals departments' fate."

“The loss of accreditation was spurred on by the administration’s removal of critical components like nutritional science and relocating them to other schools.”⁴⁵ Whether members of the Department liked it or not, this point on accreditation would be the best justification they would receive.

Compare Cal Poly’s phasing out of Home Economics with CSU Chico’s, who did away with their Home Ec department in the very same year. Chico’s President Robin Wilson explained the decision making process that lead his school to cut Home Ec to a *Mustang Daily* writer in an interview. The resulting article, “Chico State may also Cut Home Ec”, paraphrases Wilson saying, “the quality of a given program would not be considered in the budget-cutting process. [Wilson] said weaker programs closer to the main mission of the university would still be safer from cuts than excellent programs on the fringe.”⁴⁶ Chico’s Home Ec program was viewed as expendable because its vocational qualities did not strictly conform with Chico’s more academic mission as a university. The Department was given the axe despite Wilson admitting that other departments were generally weaker.

If President Baker were to follow Wilson’s reasoning here, Home Ec would be safe on Cal Poly’s campus, because it’s themes of practical education fit squarely into the school’s ‘Learn by Doing’ motto, and its Polytechnic roots. Unfortunately for the Home Ec program, the central ideals which it shared with Cal Poly did not keep it safe from cutbacks. This lead some to question weather or not the institution was living up to its title as ‘polytechnic university’.

⁴⁵ Hubble, “Baker seals departments’ fate.”

⁴⁶ David Bock, “Chico State May also Cut Home Ec” *Mustang Daily*, May 14, 1992, accessed January 29, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/4324>.

A number of the Cal Poly faculty perceived the phasing out of Home Ec and Engineering Technologies as a part of a larger trend of the school's moving away from its technical roots. The week after Baker announced the fate of those two programs, a petition, that protested the school's transformation into what it called "CSU San Luis Obispo" received over one hundred signatures from members of the faculty.⁴⁷ The petition caused some tension between departments. Its supporters claimed they were defending what historically had set Cal Poly apart from the rest of the CSU system, while others agreed with President Baker, who labeled the petition "divisive."⁴⁸ Baker went on to formally disavow the petition, thereby putting more distance between its sentiment and the administration.

Throughout the three year course of Home Ec's gradual dismantling, majors and faculty continued to express their disappointment over the explanation they felt they had been denied. In lieu of a satisfactory justification from the administration speculations were made. Some faculty members, the same that signed the petition, saw the cut as motivated by the administration's desire to abandon its technical roots. Barbara Webber, the head of the doomed department, expressed that she thought a misconception over what her field was all about had lead her departments phasing out.⁴⁹ One could imagine that Webber was aware of the fissure that Gentzler writes the field of Home Economics was going through in the early nineties.⁵⁰ While some Home Economists clung to the notion that housewifery was the preferable future for the average Home Ec student, Webber probably would disagree. Webber, as a Department head defending her field's

⁴⁷ John Hubble, "Faculty Protests Cuts to Poly's Technical Majors," *Mustang Daily*, May 19, 1992. Accessed February 14, 2016.

⁴⁸ David Bock, "Chico State May also Cut Home Ec."

⁴⁹ Kreile, "Home Ec Not Finished Yet."

⁵⁰ Gentzler, "Home economics," 6.

place at an academic institution, would probably argue that her program offered real academic rigor, and prepared students for professional careers and not necessarily homemaking.

Many Home Ec majors suggested that the administration held an oversimplified view of their field. A third year named Erin Orsinger expressed her frustration with the misperception she felt her department was victim to, explaining, “‘It’s not a bunch of bullshit. . . It’s really quality courses. They’re hard. We’re not bakin’ cookies!’”⁵¹ Orsinger felt that the education she was perusing was not respected on her campus. Her suggestion that the administration saw Home Economics as, “a bunch of bullshit” is clearly an exaggeration, if not outright false. But considering Baker’s complete silence on the matter of Home Ec’s fate, one can’t exactly blame Orsinger for assuming that the President regarded her major as a joke.

Since the early nineties Cal Poly has become less of polytechnic institution, and Home Economics has become increasingly disunited.⁵² By examining the possible reasons that Home Economics was dismantled in 1992 we can learn more about Cal Poly’s development as a state university, and the evolving standards the school sets for the education it delivers. The demise of Cal Poly’s Home Economics Department also fits squarely into the history of the field. The controversy over whether or not the administration fully understood the department and its goals can be seen as reflecting the disunity that in 1992 characterized Home Economics. Barbara Webber and her students could accuse Baker of not understanding their Department, of seeing it as preparation for

⁵¹ Kreile, “Home Ec Not Finished Yet.”

⁵² Lenora Dannelke, “Where Has Home Economics Gone?,” 8.

homemaking instead of preparation for a professional career, however, one could defend him by pointing out that the field of Home Economics itself wasn't very well defined.

Home Economists were divided on how practical or how academic their field really was. Depending the Home Economist you talked to, you would have a vastly different understanding of the discipline, and a different opinion of whether or not Home Ec deserved to be taught at the university level.

The threat of cuts to funding will always be present at a large, partially state-funded institution like Cal Poly. The way that the school handles budget crises can be very revealing of the institution as a whole. Which programs does the school most value? Which are not central to the school's goals? What exactly are Cal Poly's goals? These are all issues that are brought to the light during periods of cut backs.

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