

Coeds Come to the Cal Poly Campus
The Return of Female Students to Cal Poly

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by

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Introduction

During the years between 1929 and 1956, women were banned from attending Cal Poly. Women were among the first classes of Cal Poly students, but the crisis that was the Great Depression led to financial strains on higher education; ultimately Cal Poly chose to resolve burdens by eliminating women from the student body.¹ After more than a quarter century of an all-male student population, women were re-admitted in 1956. With such an abrupt reversal in policy, the now coeducational institution faced many challenges. How would the male students respond? What were the expectations of the women students, and did these expectations differ from those of the male students? What courses and majors would the female students study? This paper will investigate these questions and more during this influential time in Cal Poly's history.

In the first years of having female students back on campus there were complicated relations involving the administration as well as the male students, revealing the social trends involving women in higher education. When women returned in 1956, rules and expectations were placed upon them that were more restrictive than those placed upon their male counterparts. Regulations involving dress code and attire, housing visitation and behavior were among the expectations of female students. In addition, the Home Economics Department was added to the curriculum in 1956, which alludes to the expectation that females would pursue this degree rather than more masculine disciplines like agriculture or engineering.² Not only was there apprehension from the administration, but the male students as well. Female students were

¹ 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), 3-24; *Cal Poly: The First Hundred Years* (San Luis Obispo: Robert E. Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, 2001), 7-35.

² *California State Polytechnic College Bulletin: Catalog Issue 1956-1957* (San Luis Obispo: California Polytechnic State University, 1956), 3, accessed January 31, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/catalogs/55>.

greeted with mixed reactions from the male student population, and some wondered why women wanted to pursue a college education. Despite the concerns of administration and male students, women integrated at Cal Poly and were actively involved in student life. The addition of women to Cal Poly did not disrupt the academic goals of the university, but enhanced the school because of the higher student enrollment and increased faculty. Women participated in clubs and organizations as well as student government and the different school publications. This period of change for Cal Poly was integral because, as the yearbook *El Rodeo* stated, 1956-1957 was the “turning point of Poly’s history.”³ With the reintroduction of women to Cal Poly, female students experienced distinct boundaries and limitations due to the rules and expectations of the administration and male students. Despite the difficulties involved in adjusting to coeducation, women made a profound impact on Cal Poly by altering many aspects of the school, including the campus buildings, curriculum, faculty, staff, and student organizations and clubs.

Historiography

Throughout the United States, universities have experienced similar moments of integration, when institutions became coeducational. Amy McCandless describes female student experiences at Southern colleges like Clemson University and Auburn University during the 19th century. Both Clemson University and Auburn University were land-grant schools focused on more practical and technical education, much like Cal Poly.⁴ While geographically and culturally there are differences between Cal Poly and Southern universities, McCandless discusses a similar resistance to coeducation and the difficulties associated with higher education

³ Jim Luther, ed., *El Rodeo: 1957* (San Luis Obispo: California Polytechnic, 1957), 6-7, accessed January 31, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1032&context=elrodeo>.

⁴ Amy Thompson McCandless, *The Past in the Present: Women's Higher Education in the Twentieth-century American South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 89-99, accessed January 31, 2016, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=32501&site=ehost-live>.

for females during the mid-twentieth century.⁵ McCandless also examines how the agrarian-centered South developed agriculture and technical schools around the beginning of the 19th century that were dominated by males and sought to be separate institutions focused on practical education, which was a similar trend seen in the creation of Cal Poly.⁶

Additionally, Amy Sue Bix relates a parallel atmosphere as at Cal Poly when schools such as Cornell and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute experienced the push for more women in male-dominated fields of study, like engineering, during the pre and post-World War II eras.⁷ There was disapproval of coeducation in these fields from both administrators and male students alike at Cornell and RPI, who questioned the purpose of women pursuing engineering degrees and categorized women as distractions and inadequate candidates for these programs.⁸ Bix also discussed the rise of women in engineering programs as a result of World War II at Purdue, where women had been involved in engineering since 1897.⁹ Because of this longer tradition of female involvement and coeducation there was much less resistance and discrimination in the post-World War II era.¹⁰ Purdue during and after World War II experienced much less resistance to women in engineering fields than schools like Cornell and RPI, where coeducation was more recent and still in progress.¹¹

Both McCandless and Bix argue that women have historically faced discrimination in higher education, be it boundaries from attendance or limitations at the institutions.¹² This paper

⁵ McCandless, *The Past in the Present*, 1-6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷ Amy Sue Bix, *Girls Coming to Tech! A History of American Engineering Education for Women* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2013), 1-27, accessed January 31, 2016, <http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/servlet/opac?bknumber=6731152>.

⁸ Bix, *Girls Coming to Tech!*, 106-112.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 103-112.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 103-112.

¹² McCandless, *The Past in the Present*, 1-17; Bix, *Girls Coming to Tech*, 1-27.

will focus not only on the discriminatory boundaries and limitations experienced by women at Cal Poly and how female students were treated, but also on how the addition of women impacted the campus and curriculum.

Rules and Regulations

In preparation for women returning to the Cal Poly campus, the issue of rules in regards to female students needed to be addressed. This new demographic of the student population had to properly adjust to a campus that had functioned without women for 27 years. The administration created a guidebook for the newly admitted women, called “Cues for Coeds at Cal Poly.”¹³ This handbook outlines behavioral expectations of female students as well as suggestions for socially adjusting to college life. While these rules were meant to aid the newly admitted women in adapting to life at Cal Poly, the rules also presented inequalities and biased presumptions. For example, women had a dress code that was put in place, whereas male students did not have policies on how to dress during school. This dress code also hindered female students, as their academic goals were not aligned with the regulations on clothing. There were women who were pursuing degrees in Animal Husbandry as well as other agricultural majors, which required them to take labs and work outdoors. Women were permitted to wear pants during school only for a lab class, and then women were expected to change back into a dress or skirt.¹⁴ Even though there were certain exceptions to the dress code for attending labs and activities immediately after labs, the rules complicated and restricted women on campus.¹⁵

¹³ “Cues for Coeds at Cal Poly” (San Luis Obispo: California State Polytechnic College, 1956), 1-6, Box 670 Folder: Cues for Coeds, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University.

¹⁴ “Cues for Coeds at Cal Poly,” 1-12.

¹⁵ Marge De Palma, “Curriculum Variety Causes Coed Dress Problems Here,” *El Mustang*, November 9, 1956, 2, accessed February 13, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2692&context=studentnewspaper>.

The double standard involving apparel at Cal Poly was evident to the women students. One female student wrote to *El Mustang* that she had been unaware of a dress code or rules for women's appearance, and was confused as to why men coming from their agriculture classes or labs were not told to change or clean up.¹⁶ She also stated she was here "for an education, and not to compete in dress competition."¹⁷ Although dress code and rules involving appearance are only a minor aspect of college life, the inequalities of these regulations display the barriers women faced in so many aspects of higher education. The rules about women's clothing and appearance represent the harsher standard women were held to, which translated to barriers and inequalities for female students as they traversed coeducation.

There were also extensive rules involving the dorms and visitation hours. Several articles in *El Mustang* also had to repeat the dorm rules for the female students, because there was apparently not enough awareness of the rules for the new female students.¹⁸ The article "Rules for Women Students" essentially summarized the guidelines for female students in the dorms because many students had complained that the rules were not "properly disseminated."¹⁹ The "Cues for Coeds" in 1957 also outlined disciplinary actions that the school could take if the female students did not follow the dress code and housing regulations.²⁰ Additionally, an article in *El Mustang* noted two female students who were dismissed from Cal Poly for several violations including "improper wearing apparel, rowdiness during study hours and late returning

¹⁶ Eileen McGrew, "Dress or Redress," *El Mustang*, November 16, 1956, 5, accessed February 13, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2693&context=studentnewspaper>.

¹⁷ McGrew, "Dress or Redress," 5.

¹⁸ "Rules for Women Students," *El Mustang*, November 9, 1956, 4, accessed February 13, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2692&context=studentnewspaper>.

¹⁹ "Rules for Women Students," 4.

²⁰ "Cues for Coeds" (San Luis Obispo: California State Polytechnic College, 1957), 23, Box 670, Folder: Cues for Coeds, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University.

after established dorm hours” among other infractions.²¹ Not only were there rules in place about the dress of female students, but these rules were enforced. While the apparel of the female students who were dismissed was not the only reason for their expulsion, it was a factor in the decision.²²

Response from Male Students

The reintroduction of women back to Cal Poly was a major change met with differing reactions from the male student population. The male students who disapproved of female college students or with the coeducation of Cal Poly were vocal about their opposition in the student newspaper, *El Mustang*. Most of the dissension over women on campus involved the male students questioning the motives behind women in higher education and the purpose of them pursuing a college degree. There were several articles in *El Mustang* that discuss the belief that female students at Cal Poly were only there to meet men and find a husband, rather than pursue higher education. In the article “What is this Word, Education?,” one male student discussed his belief that despite the female students’ insistence that they were here for an education, he considered their behavior and information from previous articles to have proven this notion false.²³ While letters to the editor do not always reflect the majority opinion, this article proves that the sentiment of women not being at Cal Poly for higher education was present at least to some degree among the male students. This questioning of female students’ motives in enrolling at Cal Poly was not the first to be published in *El Mustang*. In another article titled “What About Husband-Hunting; Coeds Give Interesting Views,” female students

²¹ “College Officials Dismiss Two Girls,” *El Mustang*, January 19, 1956, 2, accessed February 13, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1966&context=studentnewspaper>.

²² “College Officials Dismiss Two Girls,” 2.

²³ “What is this Word, Education?,” *El Mustang*, November 9, 1956, 5, accessed February 13, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2692&context=studentnewspaper>.

commented if they were at Cal Poly to find a husband.²⁴ Some of the interviewed women confirmed the suspicion that finding a husband was at least a factor in coming to Cal Poly, but most of the females attributed their attendance to a desire for further education and pursuing a degree. The belief that women only wanted to pursue men rather than an education must have been prevalent enough among students to justify the interviews for the article. The concerns over coeducation not only stemmed from the male students, but from faculty and administration as well. Some faculty and male students in the varying departments at Cal Poly were fearful of how the addition of women would alter the academic rigor of Cal Poly as well as the academic goals. In the Agriculture department, “faculty and students alike” had mixed emotions about females joining the department, some believing it “would be ruined,” thinking that the female students would not be able to handle the physical aspects of the agriculture majors which would result in the changing of courses.²⁵ The apprehensions and criticisms surrounding coeducation at Cal Poly were widespread, from the male students to faculty, which created inequalities and barriers before women even arrived. And even once women were a part of Cal Poly, concerns remained about why women wanted to get a college degree.

The new women students were not met entirely with negativity by the male population. One particular *El Mustang* article discusses the belief among some of the men that there were not enough female students, especially when the women “wearing rings” were subtracted.²⁶ While the sentiment reflected in this article does not necessarily celebrate the admission of women from

²⁴ “What About Husband-Hunting; Coeds Give Interesting Views,” *El Mustang*, October 19, 1956, 5, accessed January 22, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2689&context=studentnewspaper>.

²⁵ Jim Luther, ed., *El Rodeo: 1957* (San Luis Obispo: California Polytechnic State University, 1957), 21, accessed February 28, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1032&context=elrodeo>.

²⁶ “Too Few Females’ Lament Many Men,” *El Mustang*, October 5, 1956, 1, accessed February 28, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2687&context=studentnewspaper>.

an academic or egalitarian perspective, it nonetheless reveals a positive attitude from many of the male students towards coeducation and women at Cal Poly.

Curriculum Changes

Additions and alterations were made to the curriculum from the 1955-1956 academic year to the 1956-1957 year. With female students back on campus, new departments, majors, faculty and classes were added to the course catalogs. Specifically, the Home Economics Department was added back to the curriculum. This department that had been on the same 27-year hiatus as female students, both of which were eliminated in 1929.²⁷ Home Economics made its return to Cal Poly academics at the same time as female students, which reveals the idea that female students were largely expected to join this department, and that the department would not be useful without female students. Also Education became a separate department; in the year prior to women being admitted there was an Education and Psychology department, whereas in the fall of 1956 a new Education Department appeared.²⁸ Additionally the Physical Education department was added to the Course Catalog in the 1956-1957 year.²⁹ Other majors were also added, for example a new degree was added in “Flower Arranging”, which involved a two-year program that resulted in a technical degree.³⁰ Agricultural Chemistry and English were also added in 1956.³¹ Another department was added to the Agriculture Division in the fall of 1956,

²⁷ *California State Polytechnic College Bulletin: Catalog Issue 1956-1957*, 3.

²⁸ *California State Polytechnic College Bulletin: Catalog Issue 1955-1956* (San Luis Obispo: California Polytechnic State University, 1955), 3, accessed January 31, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/catalogs/54>; *California State Polytechnic College Bulletin: Catalog Issue 1956-1957*, 3.

²⁹ *College Bulletin: Catalog Issue 1955-1956*, 3; *College Bulletin: Catalog Issue 1956-1967*, 3.

³⁰ “New Degree Offered in Flower Arranging and Corsage Making,” *El Mustang*, November 16, 1956, 2, accessed February 13, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2693&context=studentnewspaper>.

³¹ Luther, *El Rodeo: 1957*, 22.

the Farm Management Department.³² All these additions may not have been entirely associated with the addition of women to Cal Poly, but the Home Economics Department as well as the Flower Arranging major were largely female-dominated areas of study, which points to the influence of coeducation in the curriculum additions.³³

The expanded departments and more expansive course catalogs that appeared coinciding with women on campus display the effect women had on altering Cal Poly. The new departments and majors were not entirely the result of women coming to campus and can also be associated with the trend of expanding higher education after World War II. But because the Home Economics Department's defunding and later return to Cal Poly parallel the banning and readmission of women, these trends seem to be associated with one another. Also, women were involved in the Agriculture as well as Engineering programs, so both of these divisions benefitted from the increased enrollment.

Female Involvement on Campus

Throughout the initial years that women rejoined the Cal Poly campus female students participated in clubs, organizations and activities. Women were also involved in the student publications like the *El Rodeo* yearbook and the newspaper, *El Mustang*. A female student was made the Sports Editor for *El Rodeo*, being selected over other male yearbook staff because of her qualifications.³⁴ Also, based on the photographs in *El Rodeo*, women were involved in varying clubs on campus including: Boots and Spurs, California Student Teachers Association, Canterbury Club, Christian Fellowship, Farm Center, Farm Management Club, Crops Club,

³² *College Bulletin: Catalog Issue 1955-1956*, 3; *College Bulletin: Catalog Issue 1956-1967*, 3.

³³ "New Degree Offered in Flower Arranging," 2.

³⁴ "Girl is First Sports Editor," *El Mustang*, November 16, 1956, 2, accessed February 13, 2016, http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2693&context=student_newspaper.

International Relations Club, Ornamental Horticulture Club, Poultry Club, Poly Chi, Press Association, Ski Club, and Woolgrowers Association.³⁵ In addition to student clubs, women were also involved in various committees and student activities including: ASB, College Union Board, Poly Royal Board, Music Board, Awards Committee, Fall Leadership Committee, Rally Committee, Homecoming Committee, Election Committee, Orientation Committee, and Inter-Class Council.³⁶ Female students also formed an all-girl service club in their first year on Cal Poly, with 35 girls joining from the onset.³⁷ Women also served on elected boards, like the committees for campus housing, as well as the elected officers for the Freshman and Sophomore classes.³⁸

Among the concerns of adding women to Cal Poly was the fear that the goals and traditions of Cal Poly would diminish, since “some expected” the “learn by doing” philosophy would be weakened with female students because they would not be able to properly adapt or meet the challenges of higher education.³⁹ But in reality the “spirit of this theory increased” due to the “heightened degree of participation in sports, activities, and student government.”⁴⁰ The female presence in student clubs and organizations helped to better the Cal Poly campus and increase student participation in activities.

Additionally, many women from the first classes of female students in 1956 and 1957 surprised and defied the expectations of the male students, faculty and administration. One example is a woman written about in *El Mustang*, she had run her own trucking company and

³⁵ Luther, *El Rodeo*, 113-155.

³⁶ Luther, *El Rodeo*, 158-173.

³⁷ “All-Girl Club Meets in Try to Organize,” *El Mustang*, January 15, 1957, 1, accessed February 13, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1965&context=studentnewspaper>.

³⁸ “Women Elect,” *El Mustang*, October 26, 1956, 6, accessed January 22, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2690&context=studentnewspaper>.

³⁹ Luther, *El Rodeo*, 47.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

had worked in agricultural trucking for 24 years, and then decided to pursue a degree in Agricultural Journalism.⁴¹ The article describes her as a hard-working and exceptional woman who worked in the virtually all-male trucking industry. A biological sciences major was also described in an article, where her love for science and animals such as “toads” and “frogs” was contrary to the image perceived of the typical female student. These articles reveal the deeply-rooted stereotypes of the departments female students should be in as well as the activities that were deemed normal for women, and how the female students were defying these stereotypes.

In 1956 there was a significant proportion of women studying majors typical of female students of the time, with the Home Economics major being entirely comprised of women and Elementary Education also being a female-dominated major.⁴² But not all female students pursued a degree in the majors more characteristic of women of this era. Female students of the 1956 academic year were in the following majors as well: Animal Husbandry, Farm Management, Crops Production, Ornamental Horticulture, Poultry Husbandry, Agricultural Education, Architectural Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Agricultural Journalism, Biological Science, English, Mathematics, Physical Education, Physical Science, Social Science and Education.⁴³ There were only a limited number of majors that did not have at least some female presence.⁴⁴ Despite the expectations placed upon females in higher education by the culture of the time as well as male students and administration, many students in the first classes of women at Cal Poly studied areas contrary to those expected of them. This wide degree of

⁴¹ “Truckdriver, Lady Style, Joins New Coed Crop Here,” *El Mustang*, October 12, 1956, 3, accessed January 22, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2688&context=studentnewspaper>.

⁴² “Enrollment Figures Show 3687 Here, 195 Women,” *El Mustang*, February 1, 1957, 1, accessed February 13, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1970&context=studentnewspaper>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

participation throughout the different areas of study displayed the falsity of expectations as well as the female students' ability to contribute to the learn by doing philosophy.

A Changed Cal Poly

The return of women impacted Cal Poly, both on the physical campus as well as in terms of personnel on campus. The issue of housing the new female students caused changes in the buildings. There were three previously male dorms that were converted into women's dorms for the new female students.⁴⁵ With safety being a concern of making Cal Poly coeducational, \$25,000 worth of "protective street lights" were added to campus.⁴⁶ Also, new faculty were added to accommodate the new departments and the increased student enrollment. Faculty were added for the new Home Economics department, and a woman was added to the administration, as the Associate Dean of Students.⁴⁷ Moreover, the enrollment on campus increased, with the roughly 200 female students that enrolled for the 1956-1957 academic year. There were 3,570 regular students at Cal Poly during the Winter Quarter of 1956, which included 201 women.

The changes that occurred during the coeducation of Cal Poly not only affected the campus and buildings, but also academic aspects as well. With the increased enrollment and new departments, Cal Poly had an expanded curriculum that included new majors and new faculty members. The increased enrollment that occurred after World War II along with the increased enrollment from coeducation brought about these changes, creating a changed Cal Poly.

⁴⁵ "Too Few Females' Lament Many Men," *El Mustang*, October 5, 1956, 1, accessed February 28, 2016, http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2687&context=student_newspaper.

⁴⁶ "Too Few Females," 1.

⁴⁷ Luther, *El Rodeo*, 17.

Conclusion

Cal Poly in the 1950s experienced similar issues assessed by Amy McCandless, in regards to coeducation, as Southern schools like Clemson University and Auburn University. Auburn University was a polytechnic school, which like Clemson emerged in the agrarian-focused region of the South.⁴⁸ Cal Poly similarly was a polytechnic school that grew out of a rural and agricultural region.⁴⁹ Cal Poly, much like Clemson and Auburn, resisted coeducation because of the technical and agricultural goals of the school which did not seem to align with females in higher education. This resistance to coeducation bred barriers and inequalities, which emerged in the rules and regulations for women at Cal Poly.

Cal Poly also had a similar atmosphere in the post-World War II era as Cornell and RPI in regards to the rise of female participation in the study of engineering. At both Cornell and RPI, faculty and administration were hesitant to allow coeducation in engineering majors because of the concern that female students were going to lessen the academics and were not qualified to study these subjects.⁵⁰ In contrast, Purdue after World War II had increased female participation in engineering majors, because they had a longer tradition of women in these fields.⁵¹ Cal Poly's integration of women was closer to that of Cornell and RPI, in that there was criticism and hesitation from the students and faculty because of a fear that women would weaken the school's teaching philosophy and academic level. Because Cal Poly had been an all-male school for more than a quarter-century, there was not the level of adaptation to women in engineering fields that Purdue had after World War II.

⁴⁸ Bix, *Girls Coming to Tech!*, 106-112.

⁴⁹ McCandless, *The Past in the Present*, 89-99.

⁵⁰ Bix, *Girls Coming to Tech!*, 106-112.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 103-111.

Women at Cal Poly faced hindrances and inequalities upon their readmission to Cal Poly because of the policies that governed female students and the predictions that male students, faculty and administrators had for the effect coeducation would have on Cal Poly. Despite the negative concerns of some of the male students and faculty, women altered the Cal Poly campus for the better. Women students actively participated in student clubs, organizations and activities, while studying majors contrary to the social norms of the time. In addition, the added student enrollment caused an increase in faculty as well as a more varied curriculum with expanded departments, thus beckoning in a new era for Cal Poly.

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