

Town and Gown at Cal Poly

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‘It’s not that they’re bad, they just don’t realize how noise travels,’ resident Donna Nash said. Over the years, she’s seen more cars and more students added to the college, and the related neighborhood issues — more noise, specifically screaming — has increased.

‘When the older kids get here, there are a lot of parties, and we find the beer bottles in our bushes and the red cups.’¹

As of fall 2014, twenty thousand, one hundred and eighty six people living in the city of San Luis Obispo, California were students that attended California Polytechnic State University. This number does not seem ridiculous until it is made clear that the entire population of San Luis Obispo is 46,730 people.² When the local community college, Cuesta College, is taken into consideration, the Cuesta students add about fourteen thousand students to the population.³ These numbers portray a small city with a large population of college students in regards to permanent residents. San Luis Obispo with its copious bars and endless college parties is a town centered around Cal Poly, Cuesta and the students that attend these institutions, regardless of the seemingly calm manner and small town feel the city attempts to portray. The San Luis Obispo City Council works to maintain this feel through various ordinances which set strict rules for San Luis Obispo County residents.⁴ In this relationship between students and residents residing in

¹ Cynthia Lambert, “Cal Poly hosts walk in streets near campus to eyeball neighborhood concerns,” *The Tribune* (San Luis Obispo, CA), Sept. 19, 2015, 1.

² “Cal Poly Quick Facts,” *calpoly.edu*, last modified Fall, 2014, <http://calpolynews.calpoly.edu/quickfacts>, accessed Feb. 12, 2016.

³ “Quick Look,” *Cuesta College*, last modified 2014, <http://californiacommunitycolleges.cccco.edu/college>, accessed Mar. 1, 2016.

⁴ San Luis Obispo Municipal Code, “Ordinance 1159, Ordinance 1159 Ordinance 1469”, <http://opengov.slocity.org>, accessed Mar. 11, 2016.

such close proximity to each other, there are bound to be problems that arise, historically known as issues between “town and gown.” This term comes from medieval Europe and describes “distinct spheres for the university (gown) and for lay people in the communities (town).”⁵ This paper will discuss the relationship between the town and the gown, and how the San Luis Obispo City Council has created ordinances and rules to maintain the small town feel. Various articles from *The Mustang Daily*, *The Tribune*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, *KSBY*, and *The New York Daily News*, as well as scholarly journal articles, will work to show how the ordinances affected the already strained relationship between the students and the residents. Although there are many parties which occurred around the Cal Poly campus throughout the history of the university, I will focus on three, non-Greek affiliated events. Even though Cal Poly is by no means one of the top party schools, these three main have greatly altered the relationship between the permanent residents and the students: Poly Royal in 1990, Mardi Gras in 2004 and St. Fratty’s Day in 2015.

There are various perspectives on this topic, including statements made in *The Mustang Daily*, which dictate that it would be best if Cal Poly students go out of their way to introduce themselves to their neighbors. This approach hopes for students and permanent residents to come together in discussion, and attempt to get to know each other, thus solving their problems without police intervention.⁶ Another explanation for the disconnect between the two parties is described in a scholarly article titled, “Bridging ‘Town and Gown’ Through Innovative University-Community Partnerships.” This article details the history behind miscommunications and disagreements between permanent residents and college students from other towns, “This

⁵ Loomis Mayfield, “Town and Gown in America: Some Historical and Institutional Issues of the Engaged University,” *Education for Health* 14, no. 2 (2001): 237.

⁶ Lori Cheeseman, “Resident/student BBQ Molds Good Neighbor Relations,” *The Mustang Daily*, Oct. 2, 1991, 5.

state of affairs being the result of opposing philosophies and practices.”⁷ This explanation for the disconnect between the “town and the gown” is beneficial because it gives us a logical reason for disagreements between the two groups, and offers an explanation for the tension between the two dominating groups in San Luis Obispo.

Cal Poly’s current Vice President for Student Affairs, Keith Humphrey, believes that it is more of a cultural problem as opposed to a philosophical problem. Humphrey argues, “the effort is also about culture change... ‘And culture change is something that takes time.’”⁸ There are other views on this topic from the eyes of the permanent residents whose philosophies differ from the students. Yet in various San Luis Obispo ordinances, it is clear that city officials and council people believe that it is best to use police force and heavy fines in order to stabilize relationships.⁹ Although it may not be true in every case, it seems clear that when issues between students and residents are dealt with through the police, unforeseen consequences arise.

The relationship between Cal Poly students and San Luis Obispo residents is important because this conflict still plagues the university and those affiliated with it today. Not only is the town surrounding Cal Poly altered by this relationship, but other college towns around the country also struggle with this dilemma. This is a serious problem and it is important to learn more about the cultural and philosophical views which surround both sides in order to come to a solution.

In this paper I will argue that the relationship between Cal Poly students and permanent San Luis Obispo residents has become more tense throughout the years, and that this relationship is not unlike other events in cities within close proximity to differing universities. Examples of

⁷ Lawrence Martin et al., “Bridging ‘Town & Gown’ Through Innovative University-Community Partnerships,” *The Innovation Journal*, no. 20: 2.

⁸ Lambert, “Cal Poly hosts walk,” 1.

⁹ San Luis Obispo Municipal Code, “Ordinance 1159” (1990), <http://opengov.slocity.org>, accessed Feb. 21, 2016.

these include Pioneer Day at California State University, Chico, and Deltopia at the University of California at Santa Barbara. After analyzing various city implemented ordinances spanning a large course of time, it is clear that the San Luis Obispo City Council and their ordinances have added tension to the relationship by reducing the mutual respect and trust which had previously existed, however, it is also clear that parties and riots that Cal Poly and Cuesta students have participated in, have forced these types of reactions from the permanent residents and the City Council of San Luis Obispo; seemingly perpetuating the lack of trust and miscommunication.

I. Poly Royal in 1990 and Pioneer Day in 1987

Cal Poly's Poly Royal began as a way for the University to showcase agricultural achievements made by the students. On March 31, 1933, the first Poly Royal began as crowds showed up to participate and judge livestock and horticulture.¹⁰ Events included "estimating the weight of horses, scoring dairy cattle, estimating the number of eggs in a basket, a chick-guessing contest, plant identification...and a cow milking contest."¹¹ The tradition continued and began to change in order to acknowledge the events of the time and the new majors of which students and faculty were a part. For example, during World War II, "The 1943-44 Poly Royals featured war bond auctions and a performance of mass calisthenics by Naval Trainees."¹² Poly Royal slowly changed into more of a social event; even coming to be known as "Party Royal" by students and residents.¹³ This change in the Cal Poly tradition can be attributed to the 56% increase in binge drinking throughout this time.¹⁴ With college students and other younger

¹⁰ "Poly Royal," *Cal Poly: Robert E. Kennedy Library*, n.d, <http://lib.calpoly.edu/search-and-find/collections-and-archives/university-archives/timeline/poly-royal>, (accessed February 21, 2016).

¹¹ Nancy Lewis, "Poly Royal: a show case of of Cal Poly's past...", *The Mustang Daily*, Apr. 23, 1982, 2.

¹² Lewis, "Poly Royal," 4.

¹³ "25 years after the Poly Royal riots, residents wonder if history could repeat itself," *KSBY* (San Luis Obispo, CA), Apr. 29, 2015, 1.

¹⁴ "Binge Drinking By The Numbers," *Choose Responsibility*, n.d., https://www.chooseresponsibility.org/statistics_c/, accessed Mar. 8, 2016.

people from various cities and states vacationing in San Luis Obispo to join in the partying during the Poly Royal weekend, the party began to become too much to handle.¹⁵ In April 1990, the tradition was halted when over 1,000 people began a riot on California Boulevard. The violent mob attacked police with rocks and beer bottles, at one point even setting garbage bins and palm trees on fire.¹⁶ In addition to attacking police, rioters damaged private businesses, causing an astonishing total of \$50,000 in damages.¹⁷ Immediately after the event, Cal Poly administrators, including President Warren Baker, and City Council members cancelled Poly Royal indefinitely; Mayor Ronald Dunin even called the event, “the worst experience in the history of San Luis Obispo,” and he mentioned that, “...even during the 1960s we never had any problems like this”.¹⁸

Prior to the Poly Royal events were various San Luis Obispo City Council noise ordinances pertaining to students. Passed on January 16th, 1990, San Luis Obispo City Ordinance 1159 reads, “Noise disturbance’ means any sound which...(b) annoys or disturbs reasonable persons of normal sensitivities...no person shall make, continue or cause...a disturbance in such a manner as to be plainly audible at a distance of fifty feet from the noise maker.”¹⁹ The students’ reactions to Ordinance 1159 resulted in the events that happened during Poly Royal, further showing how the City Council’s actions only provoked unwanted reactions from students. Although it is important for students to remain respectful of others in regards to sound, this ordinance is unreasonable and directly attacks students, only breaking down the trust

¹⁵ “25 years after the Poly Royal riots.”

¹⁶ Miles Corwin, et al., “Cal Poly Festival Revelers Rampage in San Luis Obispo...,” *Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 28, 1990, A1, 1.

¹⁷ “25 years after the Poly Royal riots.”

¹⁸ Miles Corwin, “Cal Poly Ends Annual Rest; Blames Rioting,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 1, 1990, A1, 1.

¹⁹ San Luis Obispo Municipal Code, “Ordinance 1159” (1990), <http://opengov.slocity.org>, accessed Feb. 21, 2016.

and respect expected of both parties. This shattering of mutual trust and respect caused by the introduction of Ordinance 1159 initiated the reactions witnessed during 1990 at Poly Royal.

Chico State University's Pioneer Day is an event that mirrors Cal Poly's Poly Royal. With its roots as a day to show off the work of the university students to younger college-bound high schoolers, Pioneer Day was meant to be a day about the university, and not a day about the personal lives of students. Pioneer Day began in 1915 and included many activities similar to Poly Royal. Comparably, Poly Royal and Pioneer Day attracted large crowds of people from other locations to watch performances by university affiliated clubs and organizations, and to participate in a huge parade. On April 25, 1987, violent student riots similar to those during Poly Royal broke out, causing the Chico State University's President, Robin Wilson, to cancel Pioneer Day indefinitely. The rioting and violence that occurred even caused President Wilson to say that, "He took Pioneer Day 'out back and shot it in the head.'"²⁰ This statement is very similar to one made by Cal Poly's President, President Warren Baker, in regards to Poly Royal, "Cal Poly students were involved...these nights hurt the chance to promote good community-university relations, and so I can't condone that behavior at all." He made it very clear that the reason why Poly Royal had to end so abruptly was because of the students actions and the trust that was broken between the town and gown.²¹ The similarity between the ending of Pioneer Day and of Poly Royal clearly shows the parallel between the two events and the actions and reactions of the students and officials. Both these events show that Cal Poly and Cuesta students are not different from other students in California, and that officials in both San Luis Obispo and Chico responded to the same problem with similar actions.

²⁰ "History of Pioneer Days & Pioneer Week at Chico State," [taugamatheta.com](http://www.taugamatheta.com), n.d. <http://www.taugamatheta.com/historyofpweek.htm>, accessed Feb. 28, 2016.

²¹ "A chat with the President," *The Mustang Daily*, Sept. 10-15, 1990, 3.

II. Cal Poly Mardi Gras in 2004 and UCSB's Deltopia

Often referred to as “the biggest [Mardi Gras] celebration west of the Mississippi,”²² the 2004 celebrations of Mardi Gras at Cal Poly negatively affected the already stressed relationship between San Luis Obispo students and residents. Parties broke out at off-campus apartments; Mustang Village and Cedar Creek apartment complexes were filled with students looking to party. With “an estimated 5,000 people crammed into the intersection...individuals [were] throwing rocks, bricks, cans, bottles and other debris at police”, a violent melee was occurring.²³ The partying escalated and police had to call reinforcement officers in from Los Angeles as well as put riot gear on in order to try and quell the students. At around 2:00 in the morning, police and city council officials determined that of the 180 individuals arrested, 43 percent were locals, 49 percent were from out of town, and the remaining 8 percent had not listed an address. This breakdown of arrests during the Mardi Gras events parallel those of University of California at Santa Barbara’s annual Deltopia event. A 2015 article mentioned that “92 percent of the event-related arrests involved individuals who have no affiliation with UCSB.”²⁴

The events at Mardi Gras fortunately resulted in only minor injuries, although one individual had to be transported to the hospital for a head injury, and “at least 12 vehicles were damaged in the melee.”²⁵ In the same February 24th, 2004 edition of *The Mustang Daily*, the students’ opinions were made clear through an editorial. Students felt as if they had been treated unfairly by the police and university officials. “Both the City of San Luis Obispo and Cal Poly are relying on retroactive and violent means of control,” said one. The students’ partying,

²² Brian De Los Santos, “Mardi Gras, Cal Poly and the ‘biggest celebration west of the Mississippi,’” *Mustang News*, Feb. 11, 2013, 1.

²³ Brian Koser, “SLOPD gives riot remarks,” *The Mustang Daily*, Feb. 24, 2004, A1, 1.

²⁴ Andrea Estrada, “Deltopia: Keeping It Local,” *The UC Santa Barbara Current*, Mar. 31, 2015, 1.

²⁵ Koser, “SLOPD gives riot remarks.” 1.

however, did add to the violence, and was even acknowledged by one student in the February 24th, 2004, *The Mustang Daily*, “The Saturday night Mardi Gras crowds acted as catalysts of negative force of the guns and aggressively clad law enforcement. And this is just part of what culminated in the ‘riot.’”²⁶ The events on Mardi Gras sparked anger from the students as well as anger from officials who were trying to stop the violence. As San Luis Obispo Chief of Police, Deborah Linden, stated at the time, “[I was] ‘extremely disturbed’ by the violence over the weekend.”²⁷ With students craving to party without police involvement, and permanent residents’ desires to live in a calm neighborhood, it is clear that miscommunications and misunderstandings led to violence and rash actions that put a strain on the relationship between the town and the gown. The events had gotten so out of control that the Cal Poly President at the time, Warren Baker, said, “I’m disturbed about the reported behavior of Cal Poly students using Mardi Gras as an excuse to disrespect personal property and police.”²⁸ Often times the argument is made that there are “opposing philosophies and practices” that are to blame for the disconnect between the two parties.²⁹ This explanation directs the blame onto the entire group of students and their philosophy that they have the freedom to party how they want. This directly clashes with the philosophy of the permanent residents and the San Luis Obispo City Council, who want a small quiet town. Cal Poly’s Vice President of Student Affairs, Cornell Morton, disagreed and argued that, “The issues have to do with personal behavior. It has to do with civility...It has to do with respect. It really starts with he individual.”³⁰ Morton’s reasoning varies from that of others,

²⁶ Koser, “SLOPD gives riot remarks.” 4.

²⁷ Koser, “SLOPD gives riot remarks.” 2.

²⁸ John Pierson, “Campus officials respond,” *The Mustang Daily*, Feb. 24, 2004, 1.

²⁹ Martin, et al., “Bridging ‘Town and Gown.’” 2.

³⁰ Pierson, “Campus officials respond.”

and directly puts the responsibility on each student, rather than acknowledging that some of the problem could be the culture at Cal Poly and in all of San Luis Obispo.

The reactions from San Luis Obispo Mayor Dave Romero were drastic and included the cancellation of future Mardi Gras events.³¹ In addition to the reactions of the mayor, the San Luis Obispo City Council passed Ordinance No. 1469. In this ordinance, it was made clear that the only way to control the students and their partying was to increase fines. This ordinance was passed on December 7th, 2004 and mentioned that, “The increased penalties for citations will reduce the criminal activity in San Luis Obispo during the period of Mardi Gras, and reduce the potential for a major disturbance.”³² The fine increases are hefty and could amount to \$1,000 for a third violation within one year. These fines and citations are obviously directed at students based on the language and word choice used in the ordinance, “hosting a gathering where underage persons consume alcohol...noise control.”³³ This ordinance is the City Council’s way of fighting university students and reprimanding them for their behavior during Mardi Gras in 2004.

The events of Deltopia in Santa Barbara resulted in similar actions from the Santa Barbara City Council. An article from *The UC Santa Barbara Current*, mentions that city ordinances regarding parking and the closure of beaches around Isla Vista would take place during the Deltopia weekend.³⁴ These ordinances and restrictions are much like those which resulted from the Mardi Gras events at Cal Poly, and the breakdown of arrests displays that of Cal Poly’s as well. The events of Mardi Gras in 2004 strained the relationship between the students and the permanent residents, by creating an environment where trust and community

³¹ “San Luis Obispo Mardi Gras Controversy.” worldlibrary.org. Last modified 2006, accessed Feb. 27, 2016.

³² San Luis Obispo Municipal Code, “Ordinance 1469” (2004), <http://opengov.slocity.org>, accessed Feb. 28, 2016.

³³ Ordinance 1469

³⁴ Estrada, “Deltopia: Keeping It Local,” 1.

could not flourish. With a disinterest from both sides to listen to each other, and a constant retaliation from the students and the permanent residents, any attempt at pleasant town and gown relations were shattered.

III. St. Fratty's Day in 2015

On March 7th, 2015, over one thousand students attended a party at an off-campus house, titled "Pink House". Dubbed St. Fratty's Day by Cal Poly and Cuesta Students, the event was extremely similar to Poly Royal and Mardi Gras. Police had been alerted prior to the event that the party would occur, however they were not aware that it would begin as early as 4:30 in the morning on Saturday. As the students gathered to celebrate a 6-year old tradition, the party began to get out of control. Eventually approximately forty students managed to collapse the roof of a garage, leaving nine injured, and police and firefighters were called to help manage the students. The party was held a week before St. Patrick's Day in an attempt to avoid the extra cost that is incurred when a party happens during a double fined period of time.³⁵ This shows that students attempted to work around the City Council's rules and ordinances in order to achieve the party that the students wanted. This scheming behavior perpetuated the lack of trust between the students and the San Luis Obispo City Council. In reaction to the students' actions, the San Luis Obispo City Council responded quickly with Ordinance No. 1621. This ordinance stated that, "Gatherings still occur within the residential areas of the City, most notably within the areas of the City that are more saturated with students with a high percentage of rentals and student aged residents."³⁶ Since this ordinance was passed on August 25th, 2015 when the majority of San Luis Obispo students were not in the county, but rather on summer break, most students felt that

³⁵ KSBY Staff, "Cal Poly investigation into St. Fratty's Day incident complete; final report released," *KSBY* (San Luis Obispo, CA), Jun. 9, 2015, A1, 1.

³⁶ San Luis Obispo Municipal Code, "Ordinance 1621" (2015), <http://opengov.slocity.org>, accessed Feb. 28, 2016.

the City Council was attempting to attack the students when they were not present; only furthering the trust issues and tensions.³⁷ Current Mayor Jan Marx even mentioned that, ““With this change, I hope students will decide how they want to relate to their community...and decide whether they want to be a positive force or engage in behavior they know is disruptive and dangerous...students...will take more personal responsibility for their actions.”³⁸ By targeting students, the City Council clearly put the blame on the students, which only added to the ill feelings the students had towards the City Council.

In addition to this ordinance, the City Council also passed Ordinance 1616, titled the Rental Housing Inspection Program. This ordinance allowed for a \$98 fee in exchange for the state to inspect the interior and exterior of all rental houses in San Luis Obispo.³⁹ Although this may seem beneficial to all parties, when examined closely, it is clear that the City Council is using this ordinance to reduce the number of rental properties in San Luis Obispo, thus lowering the amount of student housing and the amount of parties. In one editorial article from *The Mustang News*, it is clear what the students believe the City Council is trying to do, “San Luis Obispo’s city government does not support the living situation of college students...they don’t want us to live in rentals off campus.”⁴⁰ This issue really affects students because this ordinance and others that the City Council has proposed will not allow for other student housing in San Luis Obispo. Building codes force Cal Poly to not build taller buildings, and refuse to allow residence halls to be farther from campus.⁴¹ These restrictions are seen as attacks from San Luis Obispo City Council towards students, which in turn breaks down students’ faith in the

³⁷ Gina Randazzo, “City Council cracks down on unruly gatherings, allows UPD to enforce off campus,” *Mustang News*, Sept. 21, 2015, 1.

³⁸ Randazzo, “City Council cracks down,” 1.

³⁹ San Luis Obispo Municipal Code, “Ordinance 1469” (2004), <http://opengov.slocity.org>, accessed Feb. 28, 2016.

⁴⁰ Eric Stubben, “City Council: Your Not-so-Friendly Neighbors,” *Mustang News*, Jan. 25, 2015.

⁴¹ Stubben, “City Council.”

government, and forces them to feel their rights are being attacked. Although the students' actions were inexcusable, the reactions of the San Luis Obispo City Council were drastic, and shattered the mutual respect and trust between the two groups. The interactions between the two parties continues to plague San Luis Obispo and the people who live in this city. With students feeling as if their freedom is being compromised, and permanent residents feeling like their community and sense of belonging is disappearing, the actions from both sides only strained these issues, rather than fix them.

IV. Conclusion

“‘Poly royal was a riot. Mardi Gras was a riot. What happened at the roof collapse, it was a party that got out of control,’ former Chief Gardiner said”.⁴² These three major events strained relations between students and permanent residents in San Luis Obispo by breaking down the trust and respect between them. Poly Royal began to alter this relationship when students rioted in 1990. The outcomes that occurred from Poly Royal were ordinances that affected not only students' lives, but also the lives of permanent San Luis Obispo residents. Pioneer Day at Chico State University, which occurred three years prior to Poly Royal, showed that students at Cal Poly were not unlike students at other universities. With similar origins and similar endings, Poly Royal and Pioneer Day show that the actions of students and the outcomes of these events are not unique, rather, they represent a larger example of how two groups living within a college town interact, and how this relationship can become detrimental to both of these parties.

Mardi Gras in 2004 represents another incident in which the town clashes with the gown. With Cal Poly President, Warren Baker, placing blame on the students, and students believing that the incident was dramatized by the police, it is clear that clashing ideologies caused a

⁴² “25 years after the Poly Royal riots.”

problem. Students were under the impression that they had done nothing wrong, however the permanent residents and the police believed that the students were out of control. The rioting of the event, coupled with the extensive use of police force made for an event that ended in confusion and anger from both sides. Once again the San Luis Obispo City Council fought back with an ordinance that was tailored to affect students. The City Council's decision to increase fines around the time of known holidays was their attempt to punish students to the full extent of the law. While this ordinance was aggressive, it was hardly unreasonable considering the damages incurred during Mardi Gras. The students' decisions to throw and attend holiday parties sometimes weeks before the actual holiday is another example of the students efforts to defy the laws that the San Luis Obispo City Council has put into place, and works only to break down trust and respect. This trend is common, and we can witness this in Deltopia events at the University of California at Santa Barbara. In the case of Deltopia at UCSB, an entire event was created for the purpose of partying. The City Council of Santa Barbara also reacted similarly to the City Council of San Luis Obispo in regards to ordinances. However, Santa Barbara has Isla Vista, a section of the city dedicated to students, which helped to maintained the situation.

St. Fratty's Day in March of 2015 is another example of this complicated relationship. Once again students celebrated a holiday weeks in advance in order to evade double fines set by the City Council. This resulted in an early morning party, eight injured students and a new ordinance from the City Council. It is clear that permanent residents of San Luis Obispo do benefit from their proximity to the students. Through sporting events, permanent residents gain a

greater sense of community. They even gain economic wealth through the demand for housing which increases their property value.⁴³

This issue between students of San Luis Obispo and the permanent residents of San Luis Obispo can be explained through a break in the cultural and philosophical ideas of the two parties. Students clearly desire freedom and fun while residents want peace and community. These desires are brought about by the cultural expectations of the two groups, and the stage in life that they are at. The city of Santa Barbara might have solved this issue already by creating an area completely saturated with students: Isla Vista. If San Luis Obispo were to have its' own area meant for student housing, there might be a chance for good relations and prosperity to all. These three events have acted as obstacles that caused difficulties between the town and the gown, and changes in the community must happen in order to better this situation.

⁴³ Benjamin Chmiel, *The University Campus: An Engine for Livability* (Kansas: Kansas State University, 2014), 136.

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