

The Civil Rights Movement at Cal Poly Compared to Other Universities Across the Nation

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By

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Civil Rights Movement at Cal Poly Compared to Universities Across the Nation

Our country was founded on the fundamental basis that “All men were created equal.” However from studying history, we know that although all men were indeed created equally, they are often treated very differently. In recent United States history, there is no better case of this (apart from slavery) than the horrific treatment of the African American population during the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s. During this time in the Southern American civil rights demonstrations were happening daily gaining more and more attention from the United States citizens across the nation. Demonstrators had one goal in mind and that was to level the playing field between African Americans and white Americans. On the other hands, riots and hate crimes were being by the racist opposition who wanted to “keep blacks in their place.” Typically, almost all we learn and hear about was the happenings in the more radical and racist South. What I am aiming to analyze in this paper is how demonstrations at Cal Poly differed from similar events in the South. A question I will be answering is “How and why were demonstrations in the South much more broadcasted in the media?” Also, I will be explaining that the demonstrations regarding race relations in the West were much more peaceful, and how that translated to Cal Poly.

Civil Rights in America

In the America of the 1960s, stories of protests and demonstrations could be seen across the front pages of newspapers across the nation. These demonstrations were largely carried out by college students in the racially segregated South. For example in one celebrated instance, “On February 1, 1960, Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, David Richmond, and Ezell Blair, Jr., walked into an F.W. Woolworth Company store in Greensboro, North Carolina, purchased some school supplies, then went to the lunch counter and asked to be served.”¹ Events such as these were broadcasted at the local levels, then gradually gained more attention finally gaining national

¹ "Sit-Ins," Civil Rights Movement 1955-1965: Sit-Ins, , accessed February 07, 2017, <http://www.watson.org/~lisa/blackhistory/civilrights-55-65/sit-ins.html>.

recognition. We hear about the Montgomery Alabama bus boycott and the Selma marches with Martin Luther King Jr. but we do not hear much about what was going on on the West Coast. In my paper, I aim to show that the Civil Rights Movement was indeed a monumental affair but had differing impacts across the nation. Even though it did not gain nearly as much attention as the American South-East, demonstrations were coordinated by groups in the West, for example “The U.C. Berkeley Chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) played a major role in organizing protests and sit-ins.”²

A very common theme in this time period was to have different groups invite speakers to come to their respective campus perform a talk. In Cal Poly President Robert E. Kennedy’s box labeled “Student Unrest”, he placed a document from the CSU Trustee Meeting of October 24, 1968. In this document was accounts of a man named George Murray’s speech at Fresno State. In his speech he was quoted to have said multiple anti-government and anti-American things such as, “If the students want to run the colleges--if the administration won’t go for it-- then you control it with a gun.”³ Radical talks like these were not received well by conservative faculty and administrators as they made it clear talks like these were not permitted on their campuses. In the same box and folder there was a document titled “Open Letter to the State Colleges and Universities,” which gave calculated and compelling reasons to not allow Eldridge Cleaver to give talks at their universities.⁴ At the time Eldridge Cleaver was a man famous his campus speeches that often incited violence. He was an early leader of the Black Panther Party, and was

² "The Civil Rights Movement in The Bay Area - Google Arts & Culture," Google Cultural Institute, , accessed February 07, 2017, <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/exhibit/ARtEd5p>.

³ Minutes of trustee meeting. 24 October 1968. 144.03 Kennedy Student Unrest, Box 35, folder “Controversial Plays, Speakers, and Art in CSC System”. University Archives. Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

⁴ Open letter to the California colleges and universities. 144.03 Kennedy Student Unrest, Box 35, folder “Controversial Plays, Speakers, and Art in CSC System”. University Archives. Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

known for his ideas of using armed struggle to gain equality for all African Americans. A man of his reputation quickly became one who was not invited to California State University campuses.

Civil Rights At Cal Poly

At Cal Poly, demonstrations for the civil rights movement were not very common but when they were, they made headlines. One very broadcasted event in San Luis Obispo at the time was the firing of Angela Davis who was a UCLA African American philosophy professor, and the argument of whether it was constitutional or not. Angela Davis was a known Communist at a time when being a Communist was very dangerous. The debate was whether or not the fact that she was African American had anything to do with her firing. This was one of the many issues President Kennedy had to deal with during his tenure as president of the school. On January 27, 1971 a student led protest in front of the student union was held regarding the firing of Angela Davis.⁵ This is interesting because it is one of the few instances in which black students got together to protest instances in the news. Another instance of student unrest at Cal Poly was when SNAP (Students for New Action Politics) gathered to protest the BYU wrestling team who had arrived for their match.⁶ The students were gathered to protest the Mormon teachings that African Americans were not allowed to become priests in the Mormon church. This protest was common and the BYU athletic teams had faced many situations like this leading up to the events at Cal Poly. This leads me into an interesting idea that the students at Cal Poly a lot of times were not very passionate about what they were protesting, but rather they did it because it was the “cool” thing to do. Not to say that what they were doing was unimportant,

⁵ “Black Rally for Angela Downtown.” *Mustang Daily*. January 27, 1971. This was in President Kennedy’s box labeled student unrest. Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

⁶ “SNAP to Protest Mormon ‘Racism’.” *Mustang Daily*. February 13, 1970. This was in President Kennedy’s box labeled student unrest. Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

rather they may not have felt very strongly towards the subject at hand. In the *Mustang Daily* article about the ROTC sit-in protest, one student was interviewed by the *Mustang Daily* asking why he was protesting and he didn't know.⁷ On the west coast, people may have taken part in the civil rights movement just because it was interesting and a thing to do, but when the Americans invaded Cambodia in the Vietnam war, their attention quickly gravitated towards that instead.

However, this did not mean Civil Rights events relating to African American issues did not occur. A *Mustang Daily* article titled "Truth Comes Out" covered a story of a shoving match between a member of the agricultural group and an African American man. The agriculture student was with others protesting the Safeway Superstores regarding their sale of non-union grapes. At this event, a disgruntled member of the audience made a profane remark about one of the widely publicised "Aggie's" (a term used to describe a stereotypical conservative agricultural individual) family. The Ag student shoved the other student who happened to be an African American man. This event at the time was made to appear to be an attack from the Ag community against the black community when it turns out was simply a personal disagreement. The author of the article then began to challenge the intentions of the accusers. He went on to say "these radicals are aiming their attacks at the Ag department. Next week it could be the P.E. department or any other department."⁸ These allegations claimed that the African Americans in the audience were only there to cause a scene. I think it is fair to say that Mr. Matre was a man on the conservative side of the spectrum at Cal Poly but his claim does hold substance. It appears the African American group was trying to make something appear to be something other than what it was. Initial reports were the shoving match was ignited by racial tension when upon

⁷ "Students Organize Protest." *Mustang Daily*. March 10, 1967. Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

⁸ "The Truth Comes Out." *Mustang Daily*. April 19, 1969. Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

further investigation it was started by an African American man making snide remarks about the other's family. This goes hand-in-hand with what Dr. Grant D. Venerable II said in his recent talk at Cal Poly called "African American Impacts on the Rise of Modern Science at M.I.T., Cal Poly, and Cal Tech." When asked about his experiences upon arrival as the first African American chemistry teacher at Cal Poly in 1971, he said he was not aware of any hostility towards him due to his race but then he went on to state that he may have been a bit naive.⁹ In the South, segregation and discrimination was the main source of racism. At Cal Poly, Dr. Venerable faced harsh judgement from other professors. A few felt that Dr. Venerable got to where he was as a college professor because of affirmative action. Some felt that he did not earn his PhD from the University of Chicago, as affirmative action made it easier. So even though Dr. Venerable may not have noticed any hostility towards himself due to his race, he was treated differently than his other white colleagues and that is the situation many found themselves in on the West Coast.

Cal Poly Shift in Focus

Cal Poly's white student body was more preoccupied with the war in Vietnam. For example, in a *Mustang Daily* article called "Students Organize Protest", covers a student organized protest of the Cal Poly ROTC program formal inspection.¹⁰ The interesting aspect of this is that in the south where there was a vast population of people directly affected by the civil rights movement, there was much more at stake, therefore there was much more time and energy spent on the protests.

⁹ Grant Venerable II. "Atoms, Mentors, and Ancestors: African American Impacts on the Rise of Modern Science at M.I.T., Cal Poly, and Cal Tech." Lecture, San Luis Obispo, CA, February 17, 2017.

¹⁰ "Students Organize Protest." *Mustang Daily*. March 10, 1967. Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

At Cal Poly during this time, the white population far outnumbered the minority population and was widely regarded as a conservative white population at that. The population at Cal Poly and in San Luis Obispo at the time treated events like these very differently than people in the South. In an article in the *Mustang Daily*, George Ramos, a then Cal Poly journalism instructor who later went on to be a Pulitzer Prize winner for the *LA Times*¹¹ said, “*The Mustang Daily* believes...the BSU must realize Poly is not subject to urban solutions. Since this college is rural oriented, it seems logical that the BSU may have to be more flexible in its approach. If it isn’t, the administration may be forced by the conservative elements to take a more hard line stand, which is favored by Governor Ronald Reagan.”¹² This shows a very conservative mindset towards protests having anything to do with changing the status quo. Also, it appears to possibly be a warning to those thinking about protesting that they will have a strong opposition.

A Different Type of Movement

In the article, “The Civil Rights Movement in the American west: black protest in Seattle, 1960-1970” the author Quintard Taylor explains that the civil rights movement on the west coast was indeed different than in the south. He explained how, “in Seattle, WA, where African Americans fought for major grievances in job discrimination, housing bias and de facto school segregation.” Based on his argument, we see that on the west coast the fight was more towards equal rights and equality while in the south it was more for freedom. Although both of these fights were of grave importance, it is safe to assume that the fight for freedom was more prone to

¹¹ Keith Thursby and Ruben Vives, "George Ramos dies at 63; former Times reporter and columnist," Los Angeles Times, July 25, 2011, , accessed March 10, 2017, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jul/25/local/la-me-george-ramos-20110725>.

¹² George Ramos, “BSU needs flexibility,” *Mustang Daily*, February 12, 1969. Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

violence.¹³ In Joshua Michael Harmon's M.A. thesis presented to the faculty of Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo called "But Not in Vain:" The Civil Rights Movement in San Luis Obispo, California 1947-1969, he detailed the race relations in San Luis Obispo at the time being a constant struggle with the growing population of African American citizens to find equal opportunities to find housing. He goes on to claim that "Settlement became more restrictive, racism more virulent, and distance between whites and blacks more pronounced" once more African Americans settled.¹⁴ Also, using San Luis Obispo as a case study he stated "The small size of the African American population of San Luis Obispo County has limited the amount of political power it has expressed as a community and has been one of its enduring characteristics."¹⁵ This translates over to the racial relations at Cal Poly as the demographic statistics of San Luis Obispo are very similar to those of Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo. In the south where the black population was innately larger than that of San Luis Obispo, there were televised events of people being beaten and sprayed with fire hoses while in the west people had only begun to realize the wrongs that had been committed against them through less obvious racism. These issues, however important were less pressing to the students at Cal Poly. This was perhaps partly due to the fact that there was a very small population of African American students enrolled at the time.

¹³ Quintard Taylor. "The Civil Rights Movement in the American west: black protest in Seattle, 1960-1970." *The Journal of Negro History* 80, no. 1 (1995): 1+. Academic OneFile (accessed March 3, 2017).

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¹⁴ Harmon, Joshua. M. December 2009. Joshua Harmon, "BUT NOT IN VAIN:" THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN SAN LUIS OBISPO, CALIFORNIA 1947-1969, California Polytechnic University San Luis Obispo California, 2009, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

¹⁵ Harmon, Joshua. M. December 2009. Joshua Harmon, "BUT NOT IN VAIN:" THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN SAN LUIS OBISPO, CALIFORNIA 1947-1969, California Polytechnic University San Luis Obispo California, 2009, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

A major turning point in the nation in regards to leveling the playing field for African American citizens was the introduction of the affirmative action program in regards to college admissions. With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965,¹⁶ affirmative action was born. Affirmative action played a large role in allowing African Americans to become students at universities across the nation for which they were previously excluded. Blacks were able to assimilate into popular culture and the work force by having equal access to education. However, at Cal Poly affirmative action took longer to happen. It appears many administrators felt other matters were more pressing at this time. In the *Mustang Daily* published on January 27, 1975, a headline rang out: “Affirmative Action Group Finishing Plan.”¹⁷ This headline shows that the Cal Poly affirmative action initiative was an entire ten years behind many other schools in the nation. For example: in a journal article showcasing the accounts of affirmative action and its implications at the University of Michigan:

Between 1964 and 1978, the University adopted a two-track system; white students were evaluated based on numeric merit criteria and students of color were evaluated based on a holistic assessment. Between 1978 and 1998, the University adopted separate grids of requirements for minority and non-minority

¹⁶ Lisa M. Stulberg and Anthony S. Chen. “The Origins of Race-conscious Affirmative Action in Undergraduate Admissions: A Comparative Analysis of Institutional Change in Higher Education” *Sociology of Education*, Vol. 87 No. 1 (JANUARY 2014): 36-52. Accessed (March 2017) chrome-extension://oemmnecbldboiebfnladdacbfmadadm/http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/43186797.pdf

¹⁷ “Affirmative Action Group Finishing Plan.” *Mustang Daily*, January 27, 1975. Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

students, with numeric thresholds. In 1998, the University transitioned to the more legible points system.¹⁸

The authors later go on to explain mainstream applicants were expected to have a 3.3 GPA and be in the top 25% of applicants based on SAT scores while the African American students need only have a recommendation letter from a recruiter showing they showed promise in becoming a strong student. Again, we see the predominantly conservative view at Cal Poly pay a toll on the civil rights movement as African Americans were not given the help to enroll at Cal Poly like they were at other universities, forcing them to seek out education elsewhere.¹⁹ The authors of this article argue that the use of affirmative action at the University of Michigan aided African American students in their pursuit of a college degree by making the requirements for their enrollment less than the main population. In comparison to Cal Poly, in the first ten years since the birth of affirmative action, no such changes were made. To connect this with my interview with Dr. Venerable, when he came to Cal Poly as an African American professor in 1971, many were under the impression that he was “given” the job and he was less qualified for the position based on the idea that affirmative action made it easier for him to be hired. When in fact, affirmative action at Cal Poly at that time was still non-existent.

Conclusion

The white population, not nearly as affected by the civil rights movement as minorities, were more interested in the events happening in Vietnam. This leads me into one of my main arguments, that the war in Vietnam far overshadowed the civil rights movement at Cal Poly due simply to its demographics at the time. The student protest highlighted above was coined a “sit-

¹⁸ Daniel Hirschman, Ellen Berrey, and Fiona Rose-Greenland, "Dequantifying diversity: affirmative action and admissions at the University of Michigan," *Theory and Society* 45, no. 3 (2016): , doi:10.1007/s11186-016-9270-2.

¹⁹ Daniel Hirschman, Ellen Berrey, and Fiona Rose-Greenland, "Dequantifying diversity: affirmative action and admissions at the University of Michigan,"

in” by the newspaper writers which is ironic because the term sit-in was used for a much different context in the south. Could this term “sit-in” and how it is used be an insight into what the person using it for thought was most important? If so, that would mean in the South the protesters felt the civil rights movement was more important than the Vietnam War, while at Cal Poly, they felt the opposite.



The civil rights movement was very different at Cal Poly than other parts of the nation. The population at Cal Poly as well as the surrounding areas was lacking diversity making the civil rights movement less of a priority for many.

When the Vietnam War started becoming a major topic of discussion for all Americans, the civil rights movement at Cal Poly was almost entirely swept under the rug and forgotten. Perhaps if the civil rights movement was taken more seriously during its time of relevance, more African Americans would have become inclined to attend Cal Poly and get involved in what was happening. However, in a city and college with little African American presence, little was done.

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Picture of Robert Kennedy <http://sloblogs.thetribunenews.com/slovault/2010/12/remembering-cal-poly-president-robert-e-kennedy/>