

Cal Poly During World War II:  
Financial Decisions and Campus Life 1943-1945

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**Abstract:**

*World War II would bring many hardships to the country and the lives of citizens within the United States. Specifically, those of higher education would be greatly impacted. Cal Poly originally had been fortunate enough to not feel these hardships when war initially started. However, due to a huge financial loss; Cal Polys main source of income, the college would be amongst others struggling to maintain normal school operations. Julian McPhee; President of Cal Poly during WWII, would begin to scramble for financial answers; meanwhile, the school's admissions continued to decline. The explorations of McPhees reactions to the financial distress of WWII will be explored throughout the paper. It will further be demonstrating McPhee's solution and motives to save the college from a global crisis. Ultimately, this paper will illustrate the contrast of reactions from other institutions of higher education and how they differentiate from that of Cal Poly. Overall, McPhee's response to relieve Cal Polys' financial burden would drastically alter everyday campus life for students and faculty members.*

**Introduction**

“A date which will live in infamy,” famously spoken by Roosevelt these words have an unlimited amount of meaning. It is in reference to the date of December 7, 1941, it is connected to where many people lost their lives at Pearl Harbor, and it is symbolic for the United States entry into World War II; the war to end all wars. The years that follow this dreadful date would linger in the lives of United States citizens and those Globally. World War II continued as a tragic global issue that impacted the livelihood of those who served, citizens at home, at work,

and often overlooked, the institutions of higher education. Former president of Oklahoma University; George Cross, stated, “World War II had a profound effect in practically every facet of life in the contending nations. In our own country perhaps no human activity or institution felt its impact more strongly than higher education.”<sup>1</sup> Cross’s statement seems to hold true in regard to Cal Poly and its financial matters.

Higher education was once again dealing with a financial crisis; prior to that being the Great Depression. Like other colleges and universities Cal Poly too was unable to ignore the world at war. Precedent to WWII, the Great Depression proved Cal Poly’s financial state was unpromising when President McPhee took office in 1933.<sup>2</sup> The school had struggled tremendously, and McPhee successfully kept the university afloat through various programs. Cal Poly had begun a state of expansionism under President McPhee and the initial years of WWII had only moderately affected the university.<sup>3</sup> The college had continued with normal operations from 1939-1942 and McPhee was able to keep his primary focus on the establishment of baccalaureate degrees<sup>4</sup> with little attention to the world crisis of war. McPhee’s priority was to create an institution that would attract more students due to having degrees for employment. However, in 1942 the university would begin to feel the burdens of war, interrupting the institutions’ state of expansionism and prosperity.

## Historiography

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<sup>1</sup> George Lynn Cross. *The University of Oklahoma and World War II: A Personal Account, 1941- 1946* (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Morris Eugene Smith, “History of California State Polytechnic College, 1901-1951” (PhD dissertation, University of Oregon, 1957).

<sup>3</sup> Smith, 244.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, 243.

A few scholars have written on the topic of Cal Polys' history during World War II. In particular to those of similar focal points Morris Eugene Smith demonstrates in his dissertation, "A History of California State Polytechnic College: The First Fifty Years, 1901-1951" the college throughout its initial years of operations and mentions that of wartime. However, Smith gives a statistical and factual account of events that occurred as opposed to an opinionate and insightful perspective for purposes of wartime activities on campus. Smith's dissertation had not explored the outcomes of McPhees response to war dilemmas.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to Smith's writings, former president Robert E. Kennedy also provides great overall understanding of events taken place during wartime at the college, through the use of his personal encounters while under McPhees' presidency.<sup>6</sup> Although his writings are personalized and validated it too failed to demonstrate a connective response of McPhee's reasoning for turning to the United States War Department for relief of financial issues as opposed to patriotism during war time.

Amongst Kennedy and Smith other scholars have written about the overall hardships higher education faced during WWII such as enrollment decline due to drafting- Selective Service. One being former president George Cross of Oklahoma University in his dissertation of "The University of Oklahoma and World War II: A Personal Account, 1941-1946" he discusses the impact of World War II at the university from his perspective. Similar to Kennedy he contributes to an overall understanding by his personalized encounter of war at the college. The other being Charles Dorn, assistant professor of education at Bowdoin College, in his journal article "Promoting the Public Welfare in Wartime: Stanford University during World War II" he researched the history of education in regard to civic functions adopted by higher education.

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<sup>5</sup> Smith.

<sup>6</sup> Kennedy.

Dorn explores Stanford's response to wartime and stated the college had, "responded by identifying alternative sources of revenues in wartime contracts with the federal government, the U.S. military, and the defense industries."<sup>7</sup> Although, both Cross and Dorn demonstrate war training programs at the universities it had not argued that the financial crisis were major contributing factors for war time implementations on their college campuses.

## Argument

Though other scholars have touched on the topic of World War II at other higher education institutions, none have focused primarily on the financial aspects under President McPhees' administration at Cal Poly. This paper will demonstrate the financial hardships at Cal Poly that encouraged the means of military training on campus for stability as opposed to patriotism. Prior to WWII the college had been financially supported by horse racing and the initial years of war had little to no effect on the college's normal operations.<sup>8</sup> However, in the year of 1943 the United States War Department had banned all horse racing in California.<sup>9</sup> The colleges loss of income placed McPhee, in a nightmare of scrambles. Other small intuitions were left with no options other than foreclosure or to merge with other institutions due to hardships.<sup>10</sup> The campus was in dreadful need of revenue to avoid the same fate. McPhee had actively made the school look presentable for military training, illustrating a major contributing purpose of the Naval Preparatory Pre-Flight School was to financially save the college during a time of crisis. Cal Poly had become a puppeteer for money placing military training above all other facets of

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Dorn. "Promoting the Public Welfare in Wartime: Stanford University during World War II." *American Journal of Education*, vol. 112, No. 1, 107.

<sup>8</sup> Smith 243.

<sup>9</sup> Smith 244.

<sup>10</sup> Kathleen M. Sister. *Can the Small College Survive?* (Catholic Educational Review 64), 612-617.

the school. The college had supplied all means for Navy; such as, turning faculty members into Navy instructors, providing classes, classrooms, housing, and dining for all cadets enrolled. In return the school received an all paid for expense by the federal government.<sup>11</sup> This agreement with the Navy essentially gave the federal government all control over the campus with the power of money with no complaints from President McPhee as long as revenue kept coming in. This leaves very little room to doubt that military training took precedent over all campus life making civilian students and faculty members second to cadet training.

### **Naval Preparatory Pre-Flight School**

To further understand why the Navy had stepped onto the campus in 1943 it is important to explore the financial status of Cal Poly during the early years of WWII. As mentioned earlier the school had been involved in horse racing, which had been the university's sole source of income since 1937.<sup>12</sup> Cal Poly received funds by betting placed by the state, the school then would receive shares from the state through the pari-mutuel agreement.<sup>13</sup> However, horse racing had been banned on the coast due to the "military danger" during WWII.<sup>14</sup> Although the ban would not take place until 1943 the burdens of war began to be felt in 1942 showing interruptions of the schools' state of expansion. Smith states that's during the first decade, Cal Poly was under McPhees' administration that the "Polytechnic project system widened and expanded."<sup>15</sup> The project system had educational and commercial value for students that

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<sup>11</sup> "Annual Report to the States Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School" (January 1944), Julian McPhee manuscripts, Special Collections and University Archives, Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, 244.

<sup>13</sup> "Help Cal Poly." *San Luis Obispo Telegram- Tribune*, 8 January 1942.

<sup>14</sup> "Help Cal Poly," 1.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, 214.

according to McPhee was the schools' "most important single function" in the period of 1935-1942 for it allowed students to practice the schools philosophy of "learn by doing."<sup>16</sup> However, a decline of student admissions began to show the first implications of war effecting the campus. Between the years of 1940-1941 there had been minimal decline in student attendance from 762 to 711. Although in 1942-1943 student attendance had fallen to 570 enrolled for classes.<sup>17</sup> As war continued a sense of patriotism and duty had begun to flood the United States; many men had actively headed to recruiting stations for war, instead of waiting to be drafted. Students heading to war had been the principal reason for fallen attendance. Nancy Lowe describes in her book *Cal Poly: The First Hundred Years* that, "McPhee had the challenge of trying to retain students who were heading to recruiting stations"<sup>18</sup> The diminishing of student tuition and Cal Polys' main source of income absent, left the college with little hope remaining. Thus, leaving Cal Poly acceptable to outside resources.

Prior to the Naval Preparatory school on campus Cal Poly had already been in compliance with some war time federal agencies. Those were the National Youth Administration, National Defense Training, and the Civil Pilot Training Program from 1939 to 1942. Preceding financial deficit and naval involvement McPhee proudly stated that the school had been doing well and was resilient to issues faced by others of higher education. McPhee prided his administration in the Annual Report to the State Board of Education stating that, "when many other higher educational institutions are frantically trying to adjust... Cal Poly

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<sup>16</sup> Smith, 215.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, 243.

<sup>18</sup> Nancy Lowe. *Cal Poly: The First Hundred Years* (San Luis Obispo: Robert E. Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, 2001), pg. 52.

school is fortunately providing the very type of training so valuable to the total war effort and is doing it on a large scale without having to alter in any way the educational philosophy...”<sup>19</sup>

However; according to Morris Eugene Smith, just days after military authorities made it known to the public horse racing had been banned McPhee appeared before the state legislature for the request of funds.<sup>20</sup> Rumors had emerged stating that without proper funding the school would be closed the following term and closed by April 9, 1942.<sup>21</sup> President McPhee had summoned and influenced “all alumni and friends of the Cal Poly to pressure Governor Olson and the Legislature to provide emergency funding from the general fund.”<sup>22</sup> State legislation had agreed to “provide the college with adequate funds for its war time activities”<sup>23</sup> and for the years of 1942-43 allotted the school \$344,000 and another \$485,871 for the “biennium ending June 30, 1945.”<sup>24</sup> Since Cal Poly had a nature of defense training programs the school was granted the money to continue operations.<sup>25</sup> McPhee had stated that the total amount of money needed was \$36,400 to run the school through April and \$336,216 for a period of two years, according to *El Mustang*. Although the school had been promised enough aid to withstand war President McPhee actively pursued another source of income.

Therefore, the Navy had become McPhees next focus of priority for a training facility on campus. Robert E. Kennedy had personally been chosen to market the college to show that it was suited for military. In his personal account of events taken place at Cal Poly he states,

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<sup>19</sup> Annual Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School” (January 1941), Julian McPhee manuscripts, Special Collections and University Archives, Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, 244.

<sup>21</sup> “Cal Poly Won’t Close; Assembly Unanimously Votes Emergency Funds.” *El Mustang*, 16 January 1942.

<sup>22</sup> Robert E. Kennedy *Learn by Doing: Memoirs of a University President: A Personal Journey with the Seventh President of California Polytechnic State University* (San Luis Obispo: California Polytechnic State University, 2001), 77.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, 244.

<sup>24</sup> Smith, 244.

<sup>25</sup> “Cal Poly Won’t Close; Assembly Unanimously Votes Emergency Funds.” *El Mustang*, 16 January 1942.

I was called into McPhee's office for a meeting and was told to develop several identical reports describing and illustrating all the facilities we had, including dorms, barracks, cafeterias, classrooms, labs, library, and anything and everything that might possibly be of use to a military training facility. I stopped every other project and began taking view photos of all facilities inside and out. Mr. Aston made 8 x 10 enlargements and they were assembled into several volumes with appropriate descriptive statements.<sup>26</sup>

McPhee had strongly wanted Cal Poly to be a part of Naval training to receive extra funding that the school was not in need of. He had personally delivered the books that Kennedy had collected to Navy contacts and had received their attention in October 1942.<sup>27</sup> A group of Naval Officers had marched onto the campus for inspection and two months after their visit declared Cal Poly "had been selected as one of 17 United States Naval Flight Preparatory Schools" in December 1942.<sup>28</sup>

Within a few weeks from the Navy's announcement President McPhee had terminated all other former wartime activities. From January of 1943 to the end of 1945 Cal Poly would be consumed by two naval preparatory programs being the new "fleet school" and the Naval Academic Refresher Unit Program. The Naval Flight Preparatory School prepared young navy cadets for war lasting from February to November of 1944. From 1944 to 1945 the Navy Academic Refresher program had taken its place providing additional training for cadets. This new era of wartime duties at Cal Poly, "took precedence over all activities at the Polytechnic."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Kennedy, 77.

<sup>27</sup> Kennedy, 77.

<sup>28</sup> Kennedy, 77.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, 245.

### **Alteration of Campus Life: Cadets, Civilian Students, and Faculty Members**

The overload of naval cadet training had taken a toll on campus. Most of those of attendance were for military training and those who were left of civilian students felt the pressures of prioritizing Naval operations. Smith describes that most of all men wanted to be a part of the Navy program and those who were not often were excluded due to being rejected by the program and other armed services for physical defects or “they were youths”<sup>30</sup> The Navy had occupied almost all of the campus, pushing civilian students to the wayside. Most of students had already had a feeling of rejection from not being able to serve their country and others felt the morality of campus hit a low. According to *El Mustang*, “...uncertainty of world events and the status of men students from day to another had attributed to an all time low in student morale.”<sup>31</sup>

Since Naval operations had taken priority over student activities there had been little done to help lift student morale. McPhee had argued that although Navy programs were on campus that “there has not been any slackening in the regular educational program, but rather that a great deal of attention effort is being made to make the defense training program successful.”<sup>32</sup> However, this did not seem to hold truth with regard to civilian student education, which had altered tremendously. Cadet training and instructional class time had occupied faculty members from 7:00 a.m. to around 4 or 5 in the afternoon.<sup>33</sup> This left civilian students with no other options but late class times

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<sup>30</sup> Smith, 249.

<sup>31</sup> “Morale on Polytechnic Campus Declared to Be Very Low.” *El Mustang*, 6 January 1942.

<sup>32</sup> “Annual Report” (1941)

<sup>33</sup> “Annual Report” (1944), 12.

starting at 6 p.m. and ending at 10 at night.<sup>34</sup> Civilian students were not allotted the same fair in classroom treatment and were often given inadequate learning environments, “for classes and labs for non-military persons were quite small.”<sup>35</sup> This proves McPhee’s statement to the Board of Education was not all valid. There had been great attention for cadets, but regular student affairs had not been maintained as promised.

Military and war had taken over all of Cal Poly further alerting a civilian student’s course of education. During war, Cal Poly had changed its graduation requirements depriving students of a full education. Reducing college time for men became of importance to the school and students were being rushed to complete their requirements for graduation. The *Circular of Information and Announcement of Courses of 1942* stated “Cal Poly has established a plan which will provide the greatest amount of training feasible in the shortest lapse of time.”<sup>36</sup> This implicates that although the school had adequate funding to maintain a proper non-militaria education McPhees’ administration had chosen to not do so.

Navy Cadets had been given the best classrooms, labs, halls and dorms. They had been placed above regular students in almost every facet. There is no doubt that trainees had been the majority of those in attendance at Cal Poly and housing became selective. Within the months of February and March of 1943 the “the school reached a complement of 600 trainees.”<sup>37</sup> The increasing amount of housing needed for cadets had exemplified once again that they were above non-military students. McPhee had moved 120 students

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<sup>34</sup> Smith, 249.

<sup>35</sup> Smith, 249.

<sup>36</sup> “Bulletin California State Polytechnic Circular of Information and Announcement of Courses,” *Special Collections and Archives*, Series 24, (1943-1944), pg. 50.

<sup>37</sup> Smith, 244.

from there on campus homes to house 200 cadets a part of the March 3<sup>rd</sup> battalion of trainees.<sup>38</sup> It is arguable to say that McPhee; a former Navy Seal himself, could have been promilitary. However, as President of the college his motives should be in the best interest of his students that run alongside military needs. Despite tuition paid by non-military students for their housing they were still second to cadet necessities. They were moved to “temporary housing quarters in classroom units or to some other unit which might be made available”<sup>39</sup> as stated by President McPhee. Poly students were forced to leave their dorms to suit new Navy trainees. New trainees could have easily been placed in the same available rooms that non-military students were but instead were given better environments. Rooms that were deemed unsuitable for cadets further proving that Navy programs took precedent over regular campus life.

Faculty members; as well, had been victims of this trend. Those who were not drafted or volunteered for the armed forces were turned in Navy instructors.<sup>40</sup> Cal Poly instructors had a heavy workload with little room for error. Instructors had been ordered to follow all of the Navy’s protocols and to stay in “accordance with proper military” teachings “according to the book”<sup>41</sup> in reference to the Navy manual. Faculty was “cautioned not to deviate from the ‘Navy way’ of doing things.”<sup>42</sup> Kennedy refers to the extensive work load he had while dealing with the Navy programs on campus. He mentions, “I taught continuously the year around in Navy programs...what was

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<sup>38</sup> “National Defense Act to Overtime Schedule,” ADS 81, McPhee Collection, Folder: Naval Flight Program, Naval Preparatory School California Polytechnic School San Luis Obispo, February 9, 1943, Special Collections and University Archives, Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California.

<sup>39</sup> “National Defense Act to Overtime Schedule.”

<sup>40</sup> Kennedy, 84.

<sup>41</sup> Kennedy, 84.

<sup>42</sup> Kennedy, 84.

considered a full-time load...I continued to have responsibilities as librarian, publications adviser, photographer, and public relations director.”<sup>43</sup> Cal Poly teachers were working all day with cadets while maintaining outside of Navy operations, normal school functions. In addition to teaching regular civilian students in the evenings. An instructor workday started at 7 a.m. with cadet training and ended at 10 p.m. working ten plus hour days. The new Navy “fleet school” had not only affect students but its faculty members as well.

### **Differences Between Cal Poly and Other Institutions During Wartime**

As George Cross stated, institutions during WWII had suffered greatly in similar ways to that of Cal Poly. Most institutions of higher education were scrambling to deal with the rapid decline in student tuition as a source of income. Although, many colleges were struggling to maintain normal school functions colleges responded to war in different facets. Higher education facilities such as Stanford University and the University of North Carolina went under changes that were unavoidable during wartime. Similar to that of Cal Poly the schools had worked alongside the military for a source of income. Stanford’s goal was to align “the university work with national defense priorities.”<sup>44</sup>

In this aspect it is similar to Cal Poly reaching out to Naval contacts; however, it differs in motives. Cal Poly had placed all Naval operations over all civilian student life and Stanford had many faculty members who “strove to maintain prewar obligations to

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<sup>43</sup> Kennedy, 87.

<sup>44</sup> Dorn, 107.

undergraduate liberal education.”<sup>45</sup> Cal Poly’s President McPhee had been financially motivated to keep Navy revenue entering the school and Stanford placed its priority in student education. Stanford’s administration believed “maintaining future peace required a commitment to conceptions of higher education that transcended the immediate national crisis.” These priorities of Stanford differ to that of Cal Poly. President McPhee had placed all attention to cadet life and failed civilian student education.

The University of North Carolina also had a different response to war time. Former officer in the Marine Corps during World War I and President of the university Frank Graham, had determined that the school should support war effort prior to U.S. involvement. Graham announced that the college would contribute “all its resources to the nation for the defense of the freedom and democracy it was founded to serve.”<sup>46</sup> The universities president had a strong source of patriotism that was emulated by students and faculty members. Although college had suffered its own downward spiral of low student enrollment the university’s president encouraged his students and staff to serve the country during a time of national distressed. The University of North Carolina had also been a chosen as host of the Navy Pre-Flight training school and it too helped maintain the school remain open. Although, Cal Poly and the University of North Carolina both received financial funding for having military on campus the schools prided itself in different ways. President Graham had been patriotically motivated to use the school for the country in whatever ways seemed fit and President McPhee had prioritized Naval programs for maintaining more school revenue.

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<sup>45</sup> Dorn, 107.

<sup>46</sup> Josh Harper, “A Campus Transformed: UNC during the Second World War,” *NorthCarolinahistory.org*: An Online Encyclopedia, North Carolina History Project

President McPhee had arguable used the Navy to his advantage solely for financial purposes. During WWII Cal Poly had not been mindful of students or patriotically influenced and it is questionable if McPhee would have left the military on campus if there had seemed to be another option. Within a year after May 1945 President McPhee had terminated all war time training programs. Although the Navy wanted to keep training on campus and had requested to start another program president McPhee had declined. In his Annual Report to the State Board of Education of 1946 he stated, “the urgent need by returning servicemen for housing accommodations in connection with instruction in agricultural and industry made it necessary for the college to decline the invitation to continue navy training.”<sup>47</sup> One can argue that President McPhee declined their request because he knew the school would receive the funding back from veterans returning to school using the G.I Bill to pay tuition. For on June 22,1944 “President Roosevelt had signed Congress’ monumentally important G.I. Bill of Rights, authorizing educational and other benefits for World War II veterans.”<sup>48</sup>

## **Conclusion**

World War II had affected the lives of many people. While American citizens, both students and non-students left for the armed services the nation being to feel the burdens of war quickly. Former University of Oklahoma Cross perhaps concluded it best, no other institutions were hindered more than those of higher education. As students enrolled in college courses declined, American institutions of higher education had found themselves in shambles to deal with financial problems. The absentee of students and

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<sup>47</sup> “Annual Report”, 1946.

<sup>48</sup> Kennedy, 97.

tuition led Cal Poly's President McPhee rushing for answers which resulted with the Naval Flight Preparatory School on campus from February 1943 to November 1944. The fleet school was then replaced by the Naval Academic Refresher Program until February of 1946. Although, Navy had no doubt secured the school's existence during war it had been prioritized over student affairs. The attributes of greed had led to Naval Programs taking precedence over most if not all of Cal Poly's campus.

Naval activities on the campus altered the lives of non-military students and faculty. Student education had been pushed to the side with little attention and faculty lost their voice while teaching as all teaching and learning needed to be of the "Navy Way". Navy trainees were given priority in housing, dining, classes, and classrooms leaving what little was left for civilian students. While other colleges of higher education had chosen to closely tie war time activities with student mindfulness such as Stanford University or with patriotic duty like University of North Carolina. Cal Poly had other ulterior motives.

Even though, Cal Poly might not have been patriotically led to protect U.S. democracy, or chosen to keep student mindedness, and moral in retrospect the secured existence of the school today is arguably in thanks to the Navy. According to Nancy Lowe the downward turmoil of enrollment and continuation of school operations would have been extremely difficult during war.<sup>49</sup> World War II had brought many uncertainties around both the nation and globally and the secure income of the Navy had brought a sense of ease to the college. Although civilian attendance had fallen rapidly, they had

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<sup>49</sup> Lowe, 52.

been replaced by a great number of trainees allowing the college to keep doors open and practice its philosophy of “learn by doing.”

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