

Cal Poly and WWII: A Time of Change

Matthew Schivo

History 303

Dr. Morris

March 2, 2020

Cal Poly History Research Paper

Keywords

College
World War II
Education
Cal Poly

Abstract

The goal of this paper is to examine the effects of World War II on higher education, specifically California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. WWII completely changed the dynamics of the school from the years 1939-1946 bringing in various federal programs as well as Naval programs to help support the school during financial hardship. Although the changes were not always liked by the students, or by the faculty and staff, they were necessary to keep Cal Poly up and running. Similar processes were happening at other colleges around the country as many of them faced similar financial problems as Cal Poly. The war ushered in a period of change that is interesting to look back on in the present day as a unique time in our nation's history.

Introduction

"There is one front and one battle where everyone in the United States... is in action... that front is right here at home, in our daily lives." ¹ This quote from President Franklin D. Roosevelt in April of 1942 encapsulates the fervor of most people in the United States in regards to World War II at the time. The United States' sudden involvement in WWII in 1941, after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, came as a surprise to many. WWII had become a massive, global conflict that began to

¹ "On Our National Economic Policy: Radio Address of the President on the Subject of Total War and Total Effort," delivered 28 April 1942, Washington DC, *Fireside Chats of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/042842.html>

encompass many areas of civilian life in the United States. Many aspects of normal daily activities were drastically altered in response to the outbreak of war. Of course home life and work life were deeply affected as efforts for the war began to mobilize. Men and women alike were called upon to either join the war directly, or help in any way they could from the homeland. Specific jobs in war industries became a major filter for a lot of young to middle aged adults. Many people were asked to sacrifice things such as getting a job they wanted or other things such as going to school. An important area of life where these changes were seriously felt was the avenue of higher education.

Colleges and universities across the nation were radically changing their curriculum and the ways their schools operated caused by the worry of preparing young men and women to go off and fight or aid in the war effort. The California Polytechnic School, San Luis Obispo was one of these schools that turned toward focusing on the war and how they could contribute in some way. Also, financial troubles that began to plague many colleges at this time led many of them, such as Cal Poly, to work with the government to establish various programs in exchange for federal funding. The question is then, how did schools around the United States such as Cal Poly go about making these changes? Were these drastic changes effective in assisting towards the war effort? Would these changes have an overall positive or successful impact on the students and Cal Poly as a whole? And also, what effects would these changes have on Cal Poly, mainly financially, in the years during and following the end of WWII?

This paper will attempt to answer these questions and get to the heart of the issue of higher education and its relationship to WWII, especially as it pertains to Cal Poly. This paper will examine some secondary sources that address the ways in which

WWII affected higher education and what these effects meant for schools and students who were apart of it, many of whom had little to no choice in the matter. Other materials that will be examined include primary sources such as brochures from Cal Poly at the time that “advertised” the appeal of becoming a naval officer.² Letters and speeches from then Cal Poly President, Julian McPhee, will also be very useful in understanding the feeling and motivations for implementing such major changes on the campus of Cal Poly. While the changes made to Cal Poly and other college campuses around the United States from 1939 to 1946 were drastic and advertised as “good” choices for incoming college students, these changes completely modified the way the school was operated and altered the kinds of programs and classes that suddenly became of utmost importance, creating a unique period of change in Cal Poly’s history.

Historiography

Many historians have analyzed the reverberating effects of WWII a thousand times over. Many, yet less than those previously mentioned, have also analyzed the effects of WWII on higher education. However, few have drawn the connection to the specific case of Cal Poly. One of these sources is former Cal Poly professor, Eugene Morris Smith who details the history of Cal Poly from 1901 to 1951 in his dissertation, “A History of California State Polytechnic College, The First Fifty Years.” He illuminates some of the negative effects of the war on the school by arguing that the financial strain at the time was due to low enrollment. He also talks about many facts that are essential

² “Be a Naval Officer” Brochure, 1942. Folder 2, Box 452. Robert E. Kennedy Library, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

to the understanding of Cal Poly's relationship to WWII during the years 1939 to 1946.³ Another very useful source on the topic of Cal Poly and WWII is Nancy Lowe's book, *Cal Poly: The First Hundred Years*.⁴ She talks about some of the issues President McPhee dealt with at the time of the war and argues why these decisions were necessary to keep the school afloat. This includes trying to retain students who were leaving to recruitment stations. It is interesting to read this book in tandem with Eugene Smith's book to compare the two histories and see where they differ and connect. It is great, as well, to read two viewpoints regarding McPhee's solutions to understand the two authors' arguments for the reasons why McPhee did what he did.

More recent works on this topic include student written research papers from the last five years or so. Tyler Eelsing, a History 303 student from 2014, wrote a paper concerning Cal Poly and WWII. He argues some of the reasons why the naval programs were established at Cal Poly. He also argues some of the negative effects that arose from this including the mistreatment of non-Navy students (civilian students) and some clubs and sports being suppressed or even shut down during the war years.⁵ Another student paper on this topic was written by Elena Sullivan in 2016. She argues some of the effects women had on Cal Poly and the war effort and how they contributed despite not being allowed at the school for a number of years.⁶ Both of these papers contain great insights into the same topic of WWII and higher education. They have a similar

³ Morris Eugene Smith, "A History of California State Polytechnic College, the First Fifty Years, 1901-1951" (Ed.D. Thesis, University of Oregon, 1957).

⁴ Nancy Lowe, *Cal Poly: The First Hundred Years*, (San Luis Obispo, Robert E. Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, 2001).

⁵ Tyler Eelsing, "Cal Poly and World War II" (Unpublished, February 25 2014).

⁶ Elena Sullivan, "Cal Poly Women: Roles and Depictions during World War II" (Unpublished, March 7 2016).

argument or point to what this paper will try to make regarding why the Navy came here, changes that occurred as a result of the programs they established, and the effects of these programs on Cal Poly following the end of the war.

V.R. Cardozier's book, *Colleges and Universities in World War II* has been insightful for seeing the total impact of the war on higher education, not just at Cal Poly, but all around the country. He states that "colleges and universities struggled with budgets throughout the war."⁷ He brings the issue to all colleges in the country and it is great to get such a detailed overview of the situation most colleges faced at this time.

Many of the sources on this topic were written in the fifty years following the war, 1945 to 1995. A lot of the secondary sources on this topic do not necessarily make an argument whether or not WWII and its effect on higher education was good or bad. They simply state facts and talk about the historical aspect of the war on an informational level. This paper's objective is how this information can be used to analyze the effects of the war on higher education. Several conclusions about the war's effect on higher education, specifically Cal Poly, can be drawn from this information, be it good or bad, positive or negative.

In order to analyze some of the effects of WWII on higher education following its end, an article written by John Bound and Sarah Turner, economists from the University of Michigan and University of Virginia respectively, has been very useful. They argue the effects of the G.I. bill on higher education and whether or not it is as massive of an impact as it is made out to be. They argue that the "war service increased college

⁷ V.R. Cardozier, *Colleges and Universities in World War II* (Westport: Praeger, 1993), 212.

completion rates by close to 50%.”⁸ As in the case of Cal Poly, this argument rings true as Cal Poly’s enrollment levels soared in the years following the war.

I. *Why War Production Training Classes and the Navy Came to Campus*

There are a few reasons that played a part in the establishment of various programs at Cal Poly from 1939 to 1946. Enrollment levels drastically dropped during this time. In 1940-1941, 980 students had enrolled for classes as full-time students. In the 1941-42 school year, 828 students had enrolled.⁹ This number dropped to 570 in 1942-1943.¹⁰ McPhee, in his annual report, states that the decrease was caused mainly by the National Selective Service Act, which “hit the school harder than co-educational institutions...”¹¹ Cal Poly at this time was not co-educational, so men leaving to support the war effort directly affected the enrollment totals. In 1939, when the war broke out, federal agencies sought out schools to support national defense. In the first years of the war, 1939 to 1942, Cal Poly carried out normal school activities but now with the addition of federally funded war-preparedness training programs.¹² Among these programs was the National Youth Administration for California. The NYA Public Service

⁸ John Bound and Sarah Turner, “Going to War and Going to College: Did World War II and the G.I. Bill Increase Educational Attainment for Returning Veterans?,” *Journal of Labor Economics* 20, no. 4 2002. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w7452>.

⁹ “Annual Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School” (January 1943), Julian McPhee manuscripts, Special Collections and University Archives, Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California. 3-4.

¹⁰ Smith, 214.

¹¹ “Annual Report to the State 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. 4.

¹² Smith, 239.

Program was active at Cal Poly from 1939 to 1942. Its purpose was “to give eligible undergraduate and graduate students the opportunity for a work experience in a Federal, State or local governmental agency.”¹³ Due to the steadily declining enrollment levels at Cal Poly, programs such as the NYA were allowed to come to the campus in an effort to regain the lost student population (mainly males leaving for the war). The opportunity to work for a governmental agency certainly attracted many young students and enticed parents to send their kids to a school with such opportunities. The information booklet even had a dedicated section titled “Parents Enthusiastic About Opportunities in V-1.”¹⁴ The section details why parents would be proud of their kids seizing such an opportunity while still being able to remain in college.

Besides getting drafted, many men would voluntarily enlist. The selective service was extended to include eighteen and nineteen year olds. Another enrollment depleter was men who were “enticed into war industries... who might otherwise be seeking admissions to college”.¹⁵ A college education for most young men at this time was not a primary concern. This is where one could argue that the war had a negative impact on the overall intellectual growth of students during wartime, which directly affects the average intellectual levels of people in the United States as a whole. Students cannot learn if they are not going to school, and the war prevented many from going to school, particularly college, and obtaining that higher education which is so coveted (nowadays, but maybe not so much back then).

¹³ NYA Public Service Program Information Book 1941-42. Folder 2, Box 452. Robert E. Kennedy Library, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

¹⁴ NYA Public Service Program Information Book 1941-42.

¹⁵ Fred B. Millett, “The Small College in Wartime,” *The Journal of Higher Education*, (1943): 227.

Another important program within the NYA Public Service Program in 1942 was the United States Air Depot classes. These classes were notable because female students were allowed to be admitted and attend these classes. This was the first time since 1930 that female students were able to attend Cal Poly as students. They worked alongside men and trained for civilian employment in the United States air depot learning things such as radio mechanics and radio operation, welding, as well as aircraft sheet metal work.¹⁶ These programs however, were not enough in the effort of student retention and were discontinued by February of 1943 due to a lack of housing facilities brought on by the incoming naval programs.¹⁷

With the attack of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese in December of 1941, more financial problems began to accumulate as even more students left to join the war effort. President Julian McPhee had important choices to make regarding the future of Cal Poly. In 1942, with nowhere else to turn, McPhee requested funds from the California state legislature who in turn decided to meet his request by funding the school for “wartime activities”.¹⁸ This means that the school would be funded solely for its cooperation with the Navy who would essentially take over the school a short two months after McPhee’s meeting with the state legislature.

II. Naval Programs Established and Resulting Changes

¹⁶ NYA Public Service Program 1941-42.

¹⁷ “Annual Report” (1944), 11.

¹⁸ Smith, 244.

In December of 1942, Cal Poly “signed a contract with the U.S. Navy and became one of 17 Naval Flight Preparatory Schools”.¹⁹ It is interesting to see how willing Cal Poly and president McPhee were to completely overhaul what the school had been since its beginnings around the turn of the century, although he had no real choice due to the school’s financial situation. This Naval Flight Preparatory School, or NFPS, operated on the campus of Cal Poly from February of 1943 to 1946.²⁰ For the (about) 3 years that the NFPS was operating on Cal Poly’s campus, it completely changed the dynamics of the school. Every class in the NFPS came with the according “proper military protocol”.²¹ The whole school fully took on U.S. Navy customs and culture. It was a true immersion for the many young students or cadets as they were referred to. The school provided instruction, classroom, housing and dining hall facilities “for which it was reimbursed by the Navy.”²² This means the Navy was essentially keeping the school from closing in exchange for a place to house and train young cadets, and McPhee knew this.

Despite the low enrollment totals prior to the naval program, Cal Poly “became the largest NFPS program in the country, graduating 3,500 cadets between January, 1943, and October, 1944.”²³ So even though enrollment totals had dropped, it seems Cal Poly was very successful and positively impacting the war effort through its number of cadet graduates. Other schools across the country experienced similar lower levels of

¹⁹ Robert Kennedy, *Learn By Doing: Memoirs of a University President* (San Luis Obispo, CA: California Polytechnic State University, 2001), 83.

²⁰ Kennedy, 83.

²¹ Kennedy, 83.

²² “Annual Report” (January 1944), 13.

²³ Kennedy, 83.

enrollment. For example, Hobart College, a men's college in Geneva, New York, had "only 50 civilian students in the autumn term 1943." Naval programs contributed 393 students the following year helping Hobart stay afloat.²⁴ Wabash College in Indiana fared quite well thanks to military contracts. They received more money from the Navy in tuition fees than the sum of their civilian tuition fees.²⁵ DePauw University reported that with income from the Navy, they did not find it necessary to dismiss faculty or staff.²⁶ This is mentioned by Kennedy and McPhee as well as they were able to retain many of the faculty members and staff during this time. Cardozier also mentions that co-educational institutions suffered less in this period of struggle. He said the decline in enrollment at these schools "resulted in less than average financial loss."²⁷ That being said, it is easier to see why Cal Poly struggled so much due to their lack of a female student body, something that would return in small amounts under the NYA program.

Another program, in addition to the NFPS, was added in 1944 called the Naval Academic Refresher Program, or NARU.²⁸ This program continued until January of 1946 and operated alongside the NFPS. Kennedy, a teacher at this time, talks about when the NARU program came to the school, he was "transferred from NFPS communication to NARU English, but was still required to teach from a Navy manual."²⁹ It seems as if Kennedy was not in favor of sticking to the "Navy" way of doing things and even said that teaching the NARU classes was a "welcome relief" because "there was

²⁴ Cardozier, 213

²⁵ Cardozier, 213

²⁶ Cardozier, 213.

²⁷ Cardozier, 213.

²⁸ Kennedy, 86.

²⁹ Kennedy, 87.

latitude.”³⁰ Most of the teachers who had already been at Cal Poly before the naval programs must have felt this way, suddenly having to teach according to military protocol. There was a Quartermaster Handbook that was handed out to all instructors in 1943 detailing “The Teaching Process” talking about all the ways teachers must administer their classes.³¹ Along with the handbook, Director of Instructions Eugene A. Egan, gave teachers an “Instructions for Instructors” booklet that listed all of the Navy terminology and nomenclature that was to be used at all times.³² These are other ways that the Navy drastically changed the operations of the school and decided for everyone what was important and how to do things.

Some of this frustration can be seen in a student made cartoon that pokes fun at the uptight nature of the Naval program. Two Naval officers are drawn lecturing a young student who is sitting down drawing the cartoon. They say to the student,

Cadet Wheatley! You are cordially invited to join our exhilarating naval activities of the day! First a hearty breakfast... then a whirl of a college education all crammed in a few hours given by world class famous instructors ... Then a 2 minute lunch break... Followed by life and death physical training to strengthen our bodies and our character... and all for the good cause of creating valiant navy airmen out of stupid civilians...³³

It’s clear the student who made the cartoon is being very sarcastic pointing out the very serious nature of the Navy officers and how uptight they are. The student responds by simply saying, “Not now sir... I’m busy doing cartoons for Dr. Kennedy.”³⁴ It seems fair

³⁰ Kennedy, 87.

³¹ “Quartermaster Handbook: The Teaching Process (1943). Folder 144, Box 40B. Robert E. Kennedy Library, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

³² “Instructions for Instructors, Cal Poly (1943). Folder 144.02, Box 40B. Robert E. Kennedy Library, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

³³ Naval School Cartoon, Cal Poly (1942). Folder 452.02, Box 452. Robert E. Kennedy Library, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

³⁴ Naval School Cartoon (1942).

to say that this student's feelings represented many other civilian students at Cal Poly, as well as some of the faculty members' thoughts. This is evident when Kennedy talks about McPhee's dislike for Lt. Robert Bruce McPhail, a new commanding officer who came on board in late 1943. The two disagreed about whether or not alcohol should be allowed at one of the monthly graduation dances. McPhee wanted to continue the "peacetime prohibition of alcoholic beverages on campus."³⁵ In another instance, McPhail insisted that the campus recreation hall be turned into an officers' club, where liquor could be served.³⁶ McPhee did not want any facility on campus to discriminate against non-officers and also opposed the idea of alcohol being served on campus and repeatedly refused to give permission. However, McPhail "got a ruling from Navy higher-ups that declared McPhail had the authority to use the... hall in the way he proposed."³⁷ This is a perfect example that shows McPhee's discontent with the Navy and how they were coming onto the campus with no regard for the authority of the President of the school.

III. Effects of Programs on Cal Poly and the Postwar Period

The programs that came to Cal Poly had many effects on the student body and certain activities that were in place prior to their establishment. One area that changed significantly was the journalism department. Cal Poly's weekly newspaper, *El Mustang* was replaced by a Navy-financed newspaper, the *Mustang Roundup*. Cal Poly's yearbook, *El Rodeo*, was also removed. Kennedy says, "it was obvious we could no

³⁵ Kennedy, 91.

³⁶ Kennedy, 91.

³⁷ Kennedy, 91.

longer afford or staff both a weekly newspaper and a yearbook.”³⁸ The Navy had the funds, therefore they decided what stayed and what got removed. Surely this was not to the liking of McPhee as well as Dr. Kennedy and others, but again, they had no choice.

When the war ended, and with the newly drafted G.I. Bill in place, enrollment levels returned to normal, and even exceeded the capacity for the school, a welcome problem considering the years of requesting funds due to financial hardship. The number of full-time students for the 1945-46 school year was the largest number of full-time students in the history on the Cal Poly campus at 809.³⁹ And by the 1946-47 school year, the school actually had to limit the enrollment amount at a cap of 1809 students, which was more than double the normal enrollment. McPhee writes, “Because of a lack of facilities, dormitories, classrooms, laboratories, etc., it was necessary to limit the Fall quarter enrollment.”⁴⁰ Bound and Turner write that “The end of World War II brought a flood of returning veterans to America’s colleges and universities, with veterans accounting for about 70% of all male enrollment.”⁴¹ This was clearly seen at Cal Poly following the end of the war. The Navy had requested that another navy training program be implemented after the war, but McPhee declined.⁴² With the option

³⁸ Kennedy, 89.

³⁹ “Annual Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School” (January 1946), Julian McPhee manuscripts, Special Collections and University Archives, Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California. 6.

⁴⁰ “Annual Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School” (January 1947), Julian McPhee manuscripts, Special Collections and University Archives, Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California. 3.

⁴¹ Bound and Turner, 1999.

⁴² “Annual Report” (1947), 1.

to continue with another naval program, McPhee yearned to get the school back to normal operation.

IV. Conclusion

When it was all said done, the war production training classes and naval programs that came to Cal Poly during the years 1939 to 1946 had an overall positive impact. It is easy to say this considering that without them, the school may very well have closed down due to extremely low enrollment totals that caused a severe lack of funds. The programs did have some negative impact as well however. The school during these years partially lost its identity due to the overwhelming presence of the Navy who essentially took full control of the school. Navy customs had to be followed during these years which affected the faculty and the way classes were administered. Civilian students were also overshadowed by the Naval students who took precedence on the campus in many areas. The school advertised the programs as “good” ways to continue getting an education while also attaining the goal of being an officer in the Navy.⁴³ These goals were not necessarily what everyone wanted, but the school had to push these goals as something everyone was trying to obtain, essentially choosing the students’ paths for them. These changes denied many of these students a chance to pursue their own interests in place of mandatory classes that revolved around military training as well as decided what was “important” on campus.

⁴³ NYA Public Service Program Information Book 1941-42.

Bibliography

- “Annual Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School” (January 1943). Julian McPhee manuscripts, 141.01. Special Collections and University Archives, Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California.
- “Annual Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School” (January 1944). Julian McPhee manuscripts, 141.01. Special Collections and University Archives, Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California.
- “Annual Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School” (January 1946). Julian McPhee manuscripts, 141.01. Special Collections and University Archives, Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California.
- “Annual Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School” (January 1947). Julian McPhee manuscripts, 141.01. Special Collections and University Archives, Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California.
- “Be a Naval Officer” Brochure, 1942. Folder 452.02, Box 452. Robert E. Kennedy Library, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California.
- Bound, John, and Sarah Turner. “Going to War and Going to College: Did World War II and the G.I. Bill Increase Educational Attainment for Returning Veterans?,” *Journal of Labor Economics* 20, no. 4 (2002). <https://doi.org/10.3386/w7452>.

Cardozier, V. Ray. *Colleges and Universities in World War II*. Westport: Praeger, 1993.

Eelsing, Tyler. 2014. "Cal Poly and World War II." HIST 303 Paper, Cal Poly, 2014.

Unpublished.

"Instructions for Instructors", 1943. Folder 144.02, Box 40B. Robert E. Kennedy Library, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California.

Kennedy, Robert Edwin. *Learn By Doing: Memoirs of a University President*. San Luis Obispo, CA: California Polytechnic State University, 2001.

Lowe, Nancy. *Cal Poly: The First Hundred Years*. San Luis Obispo: Robert E. Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, 2001.

Millett, Fred B. "The Small College in Wartime." In *The Journal of Higher Education* 14, no. 5 (1943): 227. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1975164>.

"Naval School Cartoon/Cal Poly", 1942. Folder 452.02, Box 452. Robert E. Kennedy Library, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California.

NYA Public Service Program Information Book, 1941-42. Folder 452.01, Box 452. Robert E. Kennedy Library, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California.

"Quartermaster Handbook", 1943. Folder 144.02, Box 40B. Robert E. Kennedy Library, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California.

Roosevelt, Franklin D. "On Our National Economic Policy: Radio Address of the President on the Subject of Total War and Total Effort." *Fireside Chats*. Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum.

<http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/042842.html>

Smith, Morris Eugene. "A History of California State Polytechnic College, the First Fifty Years, 1901-1951". Ed.D. Thesis: University of Oregon, 1957.

Sullivan, Elena. 2016. "Cal Poly Women: Roles and Depictions during World War II." HIST 303 Paper, Cal Poly, 2016. Unpublished.