

The Great Depression and its Effects on Cal Poly:
As Compared to Other Higher Educational Institutions Across the Nation

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Abstract

Then California Polytechnic School did not fare well under the years of the Great Depression and under President Crandall. Cal Poly was in steep decline and eventually Crandall resigned during the peak of the economic crisis. However, President McPhee took over and brought with him a complete overhaul of the school into a vocational college. Not only did McPhee bring Cal Poly out of the Depression, but he expanded the college as well in terms of funding, projects, and buildings. By the advent of World War Two Cal Poly failed as an institution only in having been unable to supply the country with more graduates than it already had. Other institutions in the nation struggled assisting students in need of financial aid as well as themselves. Cal Poly had neither issue while the local horse track and Project Operation helped fund itself year to year with a profit. Enrollment grew rapidly as well, all this leading to Cal Poly having been unique in its situation during the Great Depression.

Introduction

The Great Depression of the 1930s is single-handedly the worst economic crisis to have struck the United States. Within several years of the infamous stock market crash, the economic ruin afflicted most if not all of the globe. New economic ideologies emerged globally to face the crash, while in the United States President Roosevelt began the New Deal to save that generation of Americans. That aided the populace, but what of American universities, colleges, and vocational schools?

This paper will look into how the Great Depression affected higher educational institutions across the nation as well as their attempts to mediate the downturn focusing on then

California Polytechnic School. A comparison will also be made between ‘Cal Poly’ and the other institutions on this subject. Seemingly Cal Poly struggled with a lowered budget, not unusual to other schools of the time. However, Cal Poly’s greatest issue wasn’t staying open, but meeting the financial demand of a higher student population year after year through the thirties.¹ Most schools struggled making ends meet at all, while then president, President McPhee, dealt with the inability to expand their resources to all students versus rationing resources to students. The Great Depression merely delayed and in some cases obstructed Cal Poly’s expansionary efforts.

Historiography

No such other writings exist on this topic specifically on Cal Poly. Past students have written about the Great Depression on San Luis Obispo as a whole as well as other locations. Research upon the social dynamics has been made regarding various ethnic groups within the US during the crisis, but not on Cal Poly itself.. Alumni aside, Cal Poly does have two helpful published histories. The first is *Learn by Doing: Memoirs of a University President* by former Cal Poly President Kennedy, and the second is a “History of California State Polytechnic: the First Fifty Years, 1901-1951” an Ed.D. dissertation by Morris E. Smith.² Both of them tell the history as it is chronologically and have no real arguments to present. The last Cal Poly focused sources used extensively throughout the paper are various year to year reports to the State Board of Education approved by President McPhee and Biennial Reports of Cal Poly by the State

¹ Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School San Luis Obispo, California, January 1935. Box 8 Folder Annual Report to the California State Board of Education Cir. 1935-1943, 144.02 McPhee Papers, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA, 4.

² Morris E. Smith, “History of California State Polytechnic: the First Fifty Years, 1901-1951” (Ed.D. diss., University of Oregon, 1957).

Board of Education. Together the two present a timeline of Cal Poly's financial records, expansional accomplishments, and setbacks through the 1930's.

On a broader note, the Great Depression's effects upon other schools and universities nationally speaking have been recorded and delved into; none of which cover Cal Poly though. Together they reveal that Cal Poly's issues were different than other schools. Cal Poly appears to be unique in its situation. However, the historiography of the topic is limited in articles and journals about the topic as a whole— although deeper research reveals more writings of the depression upon individual schools mostly created by themselves. They take the form of school newspapers, periodicals, and self-made histories most similar to the two on Cal Poly as stated above. One such periodical from 1935, "Students of the Depression" by Fred H. Turner who was the Dean of Men for the University of Illinois tells how some students "[were] living on crusts of bread, in garrets, without sufficient clothing to keep them warm, without any of the comforts of ordinary life."³ He then went on to discuss a "special welfare committee" created for the students and ended describing how the newly appointed federal aid worked to alleviate issues for only those most in need.⁴ A self-made history of Humboldt State University is examined as well. *A View from the Hill: A History of Humboldt State University* by William R. Tanner, unlike the two aforementioned Cal Poly histories, is not told chronologically and has various photographs in it. Instead he wrote it in various sections. Some of them for example being: "Hard Times", "Campus Changes", "Not-So-New Deal Students", and even "Athletics."⁵

³ Fred H. Turner, "Students of the Depression," *Saturday Evening Post* 207, no. 31 (February 2, 1935): 12. Accessed January 31, 2020.

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ulh&AN=18226990&site=ehost-live>

⁴ Turner, 12, 72-73.

⁵ William R. Tanner, *A View from the Hill: A History of Humboldt State University*. (Arcata, CA: University Graphic Services, Humboldt State University, 1993), 37-46, Accessed February 29, 2020.

<https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/reprint/5>

My paper will make one primary argument, that Cal Poly was different than most institutions during the Great Depression thanks to its principle of staying true to the slogan ‘learn by doing’ and simply being a vocational school at the time. This allowed for a project where students took employment ‘contracts’ through the school.⁶ Such a project contrasts other institutions that started charity funds to provide students with basic life needs.⁷ Cal Poly grew whereas others struggled to fund themselves.

President Crandall

Before Cal Poly expanded and reorganized under President McPhee starting in 1933, it was run by President Benjamin R. Crandall. In the final years of Crandall’s presidency the school declined. It was in decline before the Great Depression was even in full effect as seen here in the Biennial Report of the State Department of Education for the School Years ending June 30, 1927 and June 30, 1928,

The hasty survey of [California Polytechnic School] made in February, 1927... did not reveal conditions as satisfactory as one might hope to find them in a school which had been in existence for nearly a quarter of a century. Although I found the president and faculty earnest and sincere, they were not quite sure what functions the state wished the school to discharge and were somewhat discouraged by lack of equipment and poor housing conditions for students.⁸

⁶ Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School San Luis Obispo, California, January 1935, 9-10.

⁷ Turner, 12-13.

⁸ Biennial Report of the State Department of Education for the School Years ending June 30, 1927 and June 30, 1928, Part One, Box N/A Folder Annual Reports, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA, 284.

As for a show of numbers on enrollment in the school years 1929-30 there were 407 students.⁹ Less than five years later in the school years 1931-32 an enrollment policy came into effect that did not allow more than 350 students at any given time for any reason.¹⁰ While it was a significant cut in enrollment, it got worse for President Crandall as in the next biennium there were only 117 students, a drop of 290 students from enrollment in a mere two years.¹¹ In a backwards sense this plummet in total students helped Cal Poly as there was an on-campus housing problem— there simply was not enough housing before the decline in students. A few students lived in the horse barn, dairy barn, farrowing pen, and the dining hall attic.¹² To make President Crandall’s issues severely worse than they already were, not only did student numbers drop but there was also a “drastic cut from \$352,600.00 for the 1931-32 biennium to \$150,000.00... [that] resulted in the discharge of a considerable number of faculty members, office and farm employees.”¹³ This remaining \$150,000 to spend was less than the total expenditure of the years 1928-29 and 1929-30.¹⁴ This drop in the budget was caused by McPhee, at that time he was the chief of the Bureau of Agricultural Education, after having hearings with two Senate committees about shutting down Cal Poly. Crandall’s use of the budget proved ineffective, but McPhee convinced the committees the school could properly function on a

⁹ Division of Research and Statistics, Biennial Report of the State Department of Education for the School Years ending June 30, 1929 and June 30, 1930, Part Two, Box N/A Folder Annual Reports, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA, 413.

¹⁰ Biennial Report of the California State Department of Education [for the School Years ending June 30, 1931 and June 30, 1932], Part One, Box N/A Folder Annual Reports, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA, 143.

¹¹ 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), 18.

¹² Biennial Report of the State Department of Education for the School Years ending June 30, 1927 and June 30, 1928, Part One, 286.

¹³ Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School San Luis Obispo, California, January 1935, 4.

¹⁴ Division of Research and Statistics, 414.

lowered budget.¹⁵ That drop in the budget was during President Crandall's final year as president before resigning.¹⁶ Crandall resigned and left his presidential job to become the principal of a highschool.¹⁷ His successor would be McPhee after proving himself to do a better job than Crandall; at that point onward Cal Poly would be revitalized and improved upon like at no other time in its history up to then.

President McPhee

While his presidency began in 1933, McPhee was involved with Cal Poly before then. In 1931 Julian A. McPhee created a plan for Cal Poly to follow so as to properly utilize all its agricultural instructors. The plan was approved and implemented in the same year, but all agriculture professors were under the jurisdiction of the State Department of Education. Later that same year, California Polytechnic School ceased being a high school/junior college and became a true two-year vocational college.¹⁸ This was during Crandall's presidency but McPhee was already making improvements to the then new vocational college. Coincidentally as McPhee accepted the presidential job in 1933 Cal Poly was gifted multiple donations such as \$25,000 to loan to students from Leopold Edward Wrasse and \$50,000 granted from someone's will.¹⁹ In 1938 the grandest of donations was made; the San Dimas Voorhis Unit was donated and the 167-acre farm and school was estimated to be worth \$1,500,000.²⁰ The San Dimas unit would eventually evolve and grow alongside Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, and separate into what we

¹⁵ Kennedy, 22.

¹⁶ Smith, 174.

¹⁷ Kennedy, 22.

¹⁸ Kennedy, 19.

¹⁹ Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School San Luis Obispo, California, January 1939, Box 8 Folder Annual Report to the California State Board of Education Cir. 1935-1943, 144.02 McPhee Papers, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA, 3-4.

²⁰ Kennedy, 23.

know as Cal Poly Pomona. Before this change however, the San Dimas Voorhis Unit held groves of citrus fruits which provided money when harvested and sold.²¹ This sum was likely high as the San Dimas area and surroundings once produced crates upon crates of citrus fruits. Neighboring city, Glendora, at one time housed the “largest citrus packing house in the world.”²² This was fantastic for Cal Poly. President McPhee knew that “the vulnerability of Cal poly [was] because of fluctuating financial support”, so through the right people McPhee legalized horse track betting in California. This mattered as a portion of the proceeds would go to the state of California as well as agriculture schools in the state, Cal Poly being one of them.²³ President McPhee did all that it took to keep Cal Poly afloat, and this money funded from the horse track soon was more than all the total expenditures spent by Cal Poly in a year.²⁴ This may have been Cal Poly’s greatest source of income, but another existed that too provided mass funding; a source that embodied Cal Poly’s slogan ‘Learn by Doing’.

Project Operation

Project Operation was the before mentioned system where students learning a trade could work while learning. The students would be accessed and given funds to work on their respective project whether it be raising cattle, selling eggs, maintaining fruit trees, and fixing broken airplanes. The money the students make would be divided where they get some, the school gets some, and one-third goes back into the funding pool for Project Operation.²⁵ Cal Poly did not

²¹ Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School San Luis Obispo, California, January 1939, 3.

²² Culver Heaton Jr., “Infrastructure Grows,” City of Glendora, Accessed March 12, 2020.

<https://www.cityofglendora.org/departments-services/library/about-us/history-of-glendora/infrastructure-grows>

²³ Kennedy, 22-23.

²⁴ Kennedy, 23.

²⁵ Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School San Luis Obispo, California, January 1935, 9-10.

pull this money out of thin air to start the project; the money originally came from a bank but due to its success and growth it funded itself for multiple years as of 1939. The collective pool of money was called Project Fund.²⁶ Project Operation, unlike funds from the horse track, fulfilled the duties of the then vocational Cal Poly. The one to two years after McPhee became president are when Cal Poly really got itself off the ground and back in business. It is when Project Operation was in full effect and it cannot be considered more important to the school's survival than when it was said that "No institution has suffered more from warring political interests or adulteration of its original principles. Had not the school been founded on sound educational philosophy, it would have long since perished."²⁷ This was no small program at all, as 85% of eligible students had a 'job' or project to work thanks to Project Fund in 1935.²⁸ That is during a year when 236 students were enrolled at Cal Poly.²⁹ That means that roughly 200 students got hands on experience working on projects, were paid in the end, assisted the school financially, and refilled the funding reservoir greater than when they started giving future students more opportunities with projects. This is a kind of system that universities could not replicate or make use of as this something only vocational schools, Cal Poly, could take advantage of.

By the end of the decade in 1939 students were working on projects in fields such as livestock, dairy cattle, poultry for consumption and for egg-laying, crops, orchards and vineyards, aeronautic repairs, electrical work, running and maintaining the on campus power plant, and air conditioning installations. By this time as well students owned some of these

²⁶ Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School San Luis Obispo, California, January 1939, 20.

²⁷ Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School San Luis Obispo, California, January 1935, 1.

²⁸ Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School San Luis Obispo, California, January 1935, 11.

²⁹ Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School San Luis Obispo, California, January 1935, 5.

projects after paying back the loan and buying or leasing the animals, orchards, and private repair contracts.³⁰ In that year students of agriculture projects made on average \$18.84, more than students working on industry projects made.³¹ The total amount held in Project Fund was \$31,000.00 as well meaning that Cal Poly had enough funds to source out to near most any student whose project was accepted.³² Accepted proposals must have been submitted to the Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee. This committee met weekly to approve or disapprove student proposals in getting funded; the committee also may help amend student proposals or put students with similar projects together to save money instead of needless individual projects.³³ Cal Poly had an organized system where students could ‘Learn by Doing’ or as said then “Earn While You Learn”.³⁴

President McPhee Continued

This section will briefly cover other aspects of Cal Poly that were improved upon under President McPhee from the beginning of his office in 1933 until 1940. Enrollment was discussed during Crandall’s presidency. It was revealed to have dropped suddenly in his last year before his resignation to 117 students.³⁵ Also stated prior, President McPhee had brought enrollment up to 200 plus in his first year.³⁶ By the end of the decade enrollment had nearly tripled with 480 in

³⁰ Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School San Luis Obispo, California, January 1939, 12.

³¹ Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School San Luis Obispo, California, January 1939, 23.

³² Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School San Luis Obispo, California, January 1939, 20.

³³ Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee, 144.02 McPhee Papers Box 27 Folder Project Funds, 1937-51, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

³⁴ Biennial Report of the State Department of Education for the School Years ending June 30, 1927 and June 30, 1928, Part One, 289.

³⁵ Kennedy, 18.

³⁶ Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School San Luis Obispo, California, January 1935, 5.

1938 and 675 in 1939.³⁷ Cal Poly was growing, maybe even prospering during such a terrible economic crisis. An increase in enrollment also meant that Cal Poly has built more dormitories to house all these students. Not only did new dormitories get built but also farm units, two needed classrooms, a multi-purpose workshop and warehouse, bleachers for the football field, improved existing fences for fields and pastures, and something technically unnecessary—the landscaping of much of the college.³⁸ Lastly, President McPhee truly cared about Cal Poly. To the best of his ability he found and improved financing for the school as the state department cut the budget. Cal Poly went from nearly closing to becoming a blossoming agricultural vocational school on the west coast.

As Compared to Other Institutions

Now that much of Cal Poly’s history has been addressed, the general history and happenings during the Great Depression of other educational institutions across the nation will be brought up for comparison. A key argument against Cal Poly and its unique situation during the Depression may be that Cal Poly was small and therefore mattered less in the state’s eyes. It wouldn’t hurt as many people to cut its budget and force it to find funding elsewhere. Size and importance of an institution did not solidify their budget as “Even Ohio State University, one of the biggest schools in the nation, experienced salary cuts, a sizable reduction in faculty, and other problems related to the Depression.”³⁹ Most other institutions had the most trouble financially

³⁷ Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School San Luis Obispo, California, January 1939, 8.

³⁸ Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School San Luis Obispo, California, January 1939, 10, 17.

³⁹ Kevin P. Bower “‘A Favored Child of the State’: Federal Student Aid at Ohio Colleges and Universities, 1934-1943,” *History of Education Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 367, Accessed February 9, 2020. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=15076704&site=ehost-live>

themselves or aiding students in the first half of the 1930's, but by 1934 Cal Poly had reorganized and was already improving whereas others did not. Cal Poly did not have a student-aid program which says a lot about its situation during the Depression. On the other hand, other institutions such as the University of Cincinnati, Miami University, and Ohio State University did have their own or programs through the federal government for aid thanks to the New Deal.⁴⁰ On this note Cal Poly provided for itself more than anything as the state reduced budgets and no federal aid for students was mentioned in research.

Being a smaller institution could have meant reorganizing and finding funds (less needed) was easier. On the other hand, it could be hard as there were less connections to make for funding and less worry if it closed. Closing was an option and statistically was more likely than a bigger institution. Only 31 institutions closed their doors for good between the years 1934-36; a majority of them had less than 150 students in their final year too.⁴¹ Amongst smaller institutions Cal Poly really is an outlier, as it almost closed before McPhee became president and then did not have any worries of shutting down after.

Cal Poly also thrived because students wanted to go there, the college couldn't meet the demand for graduates to fill the voids in the workforce.⁴² This piece of info directly goes against Thorne's own knowledge on the workforce where she said that "upon graduation [from Brigham Young University], there would be no highschool teaching position for me."⁴³ This could be for two reasons: teaching positions were full versus agricultural and industrial positions that were

⁴⁰ Bower, 367-84.

⁴¹ Elaine El-Khawas, "The Impact of Economic Crises on American Universities: Lessons from the Past," *Higher Education Management and Policy* 23, no. 2 (September 8, 2011): 31, Accessed January 31, 2020.

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ946476&site=ehost-live>

⁴² Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School San Luis Obispo, California, January 1939, 25.

⁴³ Alison Comish Thorne, *Leave the Dishes in the Sink: Adventures of an Activist in Conservative Utah*, Foreword by F. Ross Peterson, (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2002), 23.

not, and or there were more job openings of all kinds in California as compared to Utah. The same issue arises at the university of Illinois, in this case being unable to repay loans as students couldn't find jobs.⁴⁴ Regardless of the reasons and circumstances of others, Cal Poly's graduates did not have difficulty getting jobs upon their graduation thus making Cal Poly different and more well-off at the time. Nearly all students had jobs after their experience at cal Poly likely in part due to hosting Poly Royal which was essentially a campus wide open house; by the late 1930s about 4,000-5,000 farmers mostly from around the state would attend the event each year.⁴⁵ This is a lot of publicity for students and the college itself considering that throughout the 1930's Cal Poly's student population never exceeded 1,000 students.

Finally, in summation of one California college to another, Humboldt State College will be compared to Cal Poly. Humboldt almost closed down in 1933 too, but their then President Gist convinced the State Department of Education to keep the institution open.⁴⁶ The two institutions survived and grew out of the Great Depression; Humboldt had 286 students in the years 1931-32 and 424 students in the years 1939-40.⁴⁷ This is an improvement but small if Cal Poly's enrollment is recalled: 117 students in the years 1932-33 and 675 students in 1939.⁴⁸ The growth by Cal Poly is simply much greater. Cal Poly grew as a vocational college and was aided by its own Project Operation while Humboldt was not a vocational college, but it had implemented "a renewed emphasis on vocational education."⁴⁹ This lends itself to showing that vocational focused institutions had more opportunities to improve themselves out of the Great

⁴⁴ Turner, 72.

⁴⁵ Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School San Luis Obispo, California, January 1939, 31.

⁴⁶ Tanner, 37.

⁴⁷ Tanner, 39.

⁴⁸ Kennedy, 18; Report to the State Board of Education on the Progress of the California Polytechnic School San Luis Obispo, California, January 1939, 8.

⁴⁹ Tanner, 39.

Depression. With Cal Poly at the time being strictly a vocational college that explains how it did even better than most other institutions.

Conclusion

Overall, Cal Poly struggled at the advent of the Great Depression and its own president resigned. However, Julian A. McPhee came in as president and put the newly reorganized college back to work—literally with Project Operation and Project Fund. The college grew whereas others strived to provide their students with financial aid. Cal Poly's students did not worry about getting work after graduation; it brought in more and more students each year to fill the demand for trade work. Cal Poly was most definitely unique in how much it grew during the Great Depression.

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