Marketing a College: Cal Poly’s Marketing Evolution from the 1960s-1980s

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By
Tesia Wilson
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Abstract

The concept of marketing is easily understood today because it is everywhere, but back in the 1950s and 1960s marketing was a relatively new concept. Specifically college marketing, as attending college became more popular from the 1960s to the 1980s. This paper is focused around Cal Poly’s promotional materials including pamphlets, brochures and course catalogs, emphasizing how pictures and words were used to market the school. Through exploration it is clear these materials focused on some majors more than others, specifically agriculture and engineering. From the 1960s to the 1980s, there is a clear change in how marketing became more intentional based off what the university was looking for in its students. These marketing strategies played a major role in the demographics that shaped Cal Poly during this time.

Introduction

Why do people come to Cal Poly? Do people come here because of pamphlets Cal Poly sent in the mail or because of something they learned on a tour or saw online? Those interested in studying at Cal Poly were likely advertised to in some way. Today, people live in a consumerist society and everything a college produces should be seen as an advertisement. How a college decides to market itself has a huge impact on who will make up the student population. Marketing is likely at least one reason why people choose to attend or not to attend a college. It can also help them decide what colleges they want to apply to. A college is always marketing
itself whether they know it or not. If the marketing is tailored towards one type of student, then it is not likely that everyone will want to go to that school.

This paper will discuss how Cal Poly marketed itself from the late 1950s to the early 1980s by exploring what groups of people, in relation to gender, race, and ethnicity, were targeted through marketing and advertisements. The materials that will be analyzed include paperwork intended for prospective students such as Cal Poly’s pamphlets, brochures, and course catalogs. The main purpose of this paper is to explain why it is important to know what students the university was targeting during these decades, so that we can better understand why the demographics looked the way they did. Knowing the strategies of college advertisements from the past will also help us understand why there was more of one type of student over another. I will argue that, through the evolution of marketing at Cal Poly, promotional materials largely influenced the school’s primarily white and male demographic from 1950-1980.

With any type of marketing, there are strategies that help a business target what they would consider to be the right consumer. Although a college is not technically a business, it does have a goal to bring students to the school. Today, it is believed that the best way to do this is through advertising. Pelletier states, “Before 1970 the marketing concept in higher education was relatively new.”¹ He continues to state prior to 1970, advertising was not something colleges thought about in depth.² However, according to Tokuhama, advertising was common during the 1960s due to the popularity of consumerism.³ During this time advertising was everywhere and this led to consumer culture. Tokuhama even explains the college application process was an

² Pelletier, 56-60.
advertisement from the applicant to the university, further proving the large scale that advertising existed during this time.⁴

Wærass and Solbakk explain universities need to develop a meaning and identity.⁵ The university decides what it stands for and what it represents. Pelletier also touches on this same idea stating, “Programs and policies were established that best served the college, and the burden fell on the consumer to fit into those constraints - or seek another university.”⁶ In Cal Poly’s case it historically represented a “learn by doing” philosophy primary targeted towards individuals interested in agriculture or engineering. Based on what Pelletier wrote, by the university setting standards of what it takes to get into the college, it is creating the idea that a specific type of student belongs there. If a university creates a unique identity and tells applicants of this identity, then that is advertisement. Though that advertisement may not have intended to exclude students, it only matters what is interpreted. Any information regarding a university that is distributed to the public is meant to persuade a prospective student into attending. Although marketing has become a more conscious act over time, it was still at the forefront of all universities from their start. During the 1960s-1980s, Cal Poly’s identity of being a practical agriculture and engineering college had a huge influence over the type of students they were targeting.

Initially when I started research for this paper, I wanted to compare the marketing strategies of Cal Poly to other popular colleges during the 1950-1980s. I looked into both the California State Universities and the University of California system. However, I was unable to

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⁴ Tokuhama, 35.
⁶ Pelletier, 57.
find or have access to the promotional materials that were comparable to Cal Poly’s during this time. As a result, I could not compare Cal Poly’s marketing strategies to other universities.

**Historiography**

The idea of marketing a college may seem strange because the focus is not the college itself but rather an education. Because of this difference, it may be unclear how to properly advertise an education. As stated by Wæraas and Solbackk, marketing a college is marketing a brand rather than a physical object.\(^7\) A brand is, “something that exists more in the minds of consumers than in the product or the organization itself.”\(^8\) For a college, its brand is based on a multitude of factors; school identity, reputation, philosophy, campus, and location. This process shows marketing a college is no easy task and it requires great deal of attention to detail and responsibility. Today, we are all conscious of the concept of marketing, but during the 1960s, this concept was relatively new. Not only was it new for the consumer, but it was also new for the advertiser.

As mentioned earlier, Pelletier states college marketing was not as popular or common as it is today. However, that does not mean college marketing was not used, it simply means it may have been used less. It is also important to mention these universities were always marketing themselves whether they knew it or not. Just by developing an identity the university was branding itself, therefore marketing itself. Pollay states in his article that there are many ways people go about advertising a product. One tactic he focuses on is advertising through women:

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\(^7\)Wæraas and Solback, 451.

\(^8\) Wæraas and Solback, 451.
Advertising, for almost as long as it has existed, has used some sort of sexual sell, sometimes promising seductive capacities, sometimes more simply attracting our attention with sexual stimuli, even if irrelevant to the product or the selling point. To a small extent this is shown in advertisements presented by Cal Poly. He further explores the idea of implicit marketing by stating, “It is argued…that to find fault with advertising is simply to display a cultural alienation.” This shows marketing simply does not reach everyone, and it never will. If a person takes offense to an advertisement that means they were not the target audience. Pollay follows up this statement by explaining it is impossible to advertise towards everyone due to the large number of characteristics that need to be taken into account. This also explains why we often notice flaws in past advertisements due to the change in our society. Advertisements of the past typically do not reflect what we, as a society, value today. This further shows why it is so important for us to look at college marketing of the past. It can give us answers as to why certain colleges, including Cal Poly, market the way they do today.

Promotional Materials From the 1960s

I began my research about Cal Poly’s marketing system, in the late 1950s to see exactly when the university became conscious of their marketing strategies. I will start by introducing the course catalogs; these are still around today, but they are used differently now than they were then. During the 1950s to 1980s, these were used as the main source of advertisement of colleges for perspective students, and they were often sent to high schools and junior colleges. During this

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10 Pollay, n.p.
time, this form of advertisement was a way for people to receive the bulk of their information about colleges. This means course catalogs were likely a determining factor, for many students, in picking a college. Cal Poly often highlighted agriculture and engineering by including more sections and pictures dedicated to these programs compared to other majors. This implies that Cal Poly, during this time, offered more support in these programs.

The brochures and pamphlets from the 1960s largely consisted more of agriculture and engineering compared to other majors such as liberal arts, confirming through different types of advertisements, Cal Poly’s priority in marketing was towards agriculture and engineering. These brochures and pamphlets also often used the words “he” and “man” as mentioned in the “Opportunities in Agriculture” brochure. By using these words in brochures and pamphlets, this university was advertising agriculture was for men, not for women. With that said, this specific brochure was made shortly after Cal Poly readmitted women to the university, so it is possible that this brochure’s wording had yet to be adjusted. However, there were similar findings throughout the engineering brochures and pamphlets, meaning this campus was not particularly welcoming to female students. In the brochure, “Your Future Career in Industry,” a section advertises “Rewarding careers in industry for men with Cal Poly Technical Arts degrees” The language used in this brochure clearly targets men, but it includes a picture of women sitting on benches (Figure 1). These women are not photographed doing anything

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engineering related which means it is possible the existence of this picture was placed there to entice men with the idea of women’s presence on campus.

Aside from the clear emphasis on agriculture and engineering at Cal Poly during the 1960s, the university also spent a lot of energy advertising their campus location. Both “Challenge” and “San Luis Obispo, California, Gem of the Central Coast” describe the neighboring areas as tourist destinations through emphasizing climate, recreation, beaches, and Hearst Castle. Advertising a college as a tourist destination gives the impression that the college is less about learning and more about having fun. In the 1960s, this type of advertisement likely appealed more to an upper-class white person than a person of color due to their financial status. To further show this was the type of student that Cal Poly was advertising to, “San Luis Obispo, California, Gem of the Central Coast” also states under “A High Cultural Background” that San Luis Obispo was “made possible by a larger-than-average percentage of families in higher income brackets.” This brochure conveyed this university was not advertising towards low-income students, rather it discouraged them by pointing out they would not belong in San Luis Obispo or on campus.

Although Cal Poly’s demographics were primarily made up of whites and males during this time, they did have an international student program. Heilbron mentions this program in an address that he delivered at the Sixty-Fifth Anniversary Convocation. In this address he states, “approximately 350 students from more than 60 foreign countries are in attendance [at Cal Poly]

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16 “San Luis Obispo, California, Gem of the Central Coast,” n.p.
each year in programs leading to the bachelor of science degree.”¹⁷ Cal Poly was able to spread their name to other countries through this program.¹⁸ Although this address was not intended for prospective students it does state Cal Poly’s awareness, regarding advertising to students in other countries. Through this source, it is apparent that the university did have a small population of students of color who were from outside the United States (Figures 2 and 3) despite its lack in diversity among students’ races and ethnicities from within the United States.¹⁹ According to Pelletier advertising did not exist among colleges during the 1960s; however, through examining Cal Poly’s course catalogs, brochures, and pamphlets this does not appear to be true.²⁰ Although I understand the university may not have been aware of its advertising strategies to the same degree as today, it still did present materials that were intended to increase student population. As a result of these materials, Cal Poly’s demographics were primarily white and male.

**Promotional Material From the 1970s-1980s**

In the booklet that was intended for advertisers, “The Story of California State Polytechnic College its Remarkable Growth in Student Body, Faculty and Staff, Buying Power,” it explicitly states, “Cal Poly students spend over $600,000 for recreation and entertainment activities on and off campus during the school year.”²¹ The purpose of this booklet was to show advertisers that the universities’ population mainly consisted of students from high-income

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¹⁸ Heilbron, n.p.

¹⁹ Heilbron, n.p.

²⁰ Pelletier, 57.

brackets, expressing that it would be valuable for advertisers to target these students because they have the luxury of spending money on recreation and entertainment. The pamphlet, “Welcome to Cal Poly” continues to show that through the 1970s surfing and beach activities were still used to advertise the school (Figure 4). It is important to note this pamphlet also mentions international education as well as financial aid. By advertising these options, it shows the university was beginning to target low-income students and possibly trying to increase its population diversity.

Overall, there is a clear difference in advertising from the 1960s pamphlets and brochures to the 1970s pamphlets and brochures. This difference is mainly shown through the pictures that are displayed. This is evident in all the brochures found throughout this research, starting with “Welcome to Cal Poly” which has pictures of women throughout the pamphlet (Figures 5 and 6). Unlike the photos of women that were included in pamphlets during the 1960s (that used words targeting men) it is clear these photos of women were intended to target female students because they depicted women participating in educational activities rather than before when the pamphlets randomly placed photos of women. This shows that Cal Poly was making strides to advertise to women and show that they belonged there. To further emphasize the universities’ attempt to be more inclusive, Campus Living states Cal Poly was easily accessible by train, bus, or plane, showing that anyone who had access to these modes of transportation would be able to get to there.

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“Cal Poly…An Introduction” is a brochure that discusses the general requirements for the university during the 1980s. Interestingly, this brochure included one picture of a Black woman (Figure 7), showing that Cal Poly may have been conscious of its lack of diversity in regards to race and ethnicity and it was trying to change this.25 By using a picture of a Black woman, a possible student or faculty, Cal Poly was advertising that Black women were welcomed. Further focusing on the 1980s, “Cal Poly Life” put in a lot of effort to advertise that the university had many females as well as students of color in attendance (Figures 8 and 9), expressing Cal Poly wanted women and students of color to feel welcomed.26 This implies the university was continuing to make a conscious effort to include more groups of people in their advertising, made apparent through their increased attention in targeting a variety of people. The brochures of the 1970s had an abundance of pictures with people of color compared to the brochures of the 1960s. This conscious change of advertisement to perspective students in the 1970s-1980s fully supports Pelletier’s statement about the 1970s having an increase in college marketing.27

Although it appeared that the pamphlets and brochures changed through their wording and pictures, Cal Poly’s course catalogs were still not up to date. Considering the they were the main source of advertisement due to the way they were dispersed to high schools and junior colleges, it is alarming that they were so far behind in terms of marketing. These course catalogs took until the 1980s to completely catch up with the improvement of advertising. In 1958-1965, these catalogs included a limited number of photos in general. However, by 1970-1971, the


27 Pelletier, 57.
number of photos increased, including those of women.\textsuperscript{28} As decades passed, these course catalogs began to represent more women, but they still struggled to represent people of color with the first photo of a person of color showing up in 1981-1983.\textsuperscript{29} Interestingly, this photo included at least two people with physical disabilities (Figure 10).\textsuperscript{30} This photo was near the admissions section, with no mention of disabilities. It is likely this photo was included to show inclusivity and advertise that Cal Poly was a place for students with disabilities to feel welcomed and accepted. This could also be a result of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, because due to this new law Cal Poly may have felt the need to advertise more towards students with disabilities. Although the course catalogs took more time to change according to the social standards of the time, in the 1980s it appears Cal Poly became aware of its advertising and as a result adjusted all forms of advertisement.

Women at Cal Poly

“Because California State Polytechnic College is a men's college, it borrows a Poly Royal queen each year from some other California college.”\textsuperscript{31} Through the Cal Poly Queen Contest Cal Poly had female representation without actually admitting female students.\textsuperscript{32} This begs the question: were the advertisement of women on campus designed to target male students?

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{29}California Polytechnic State University Announcements 1981-1983 Catalog Issue, Vol. 60, 5 (May 1981): 1-524. Digital Commons @ Cal Poly. \url{https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/catalogs/76/}
\item \textsuperscript{30}California Polytechnic State University Announcements 1981-1983 Catalog Issue, 18.
\item \textsuperscript{31}California State Polytechnic College Bulletin: Catalog Issue 1954-1955, Vol. 34, 3 (July 1954): 46. Digital Commons @ Cal Poly. \url{https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/catalogs/53/}
\item \textsuperscript{32}Anna Johnson, “The Poly Royal Beauty Pageant at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo: How Queens Reigned Over their Empire,” (2016).
\end{itemize}
According to Pollay, from the very beginning of marketing women were used to get a man’s attention, and it is possible that Cal Poly applied this strategy in its marketing towards men.\textsuperscript{33} The women who acted as Queens for the university were a representation of Cal Poly despite them not actually being students. This is interesting because it shows the university was aware of advertising tactics as early as the 1950s. Anna Johnson attributes this awareness of marketing women to men as a result of the war as well as men wanting to surround themselves with women. \textsuperscript{34}

Because Cal Poly was recently reopened to women in 1957, it is not surprising that the marketing would have neglected to mention women often or at all during the 1960s due to its “27-year ascetic bachelorhood” as stated in “Business Week.”\textsuperscript{35} Women were mentioned very little especially in the beginning of the 1960s. For agriculture during the 1960s, men were always pictured doing labor intensive jobs, but the only time women were pictured was when an award was presented (Figure 11).\textsuperscript{36} Because Cal Poly does not show these women participating in the labor-intensive parts of the agriculture major, it implies the university does not fully support women in their participation in agriculture. However, the brochure, “There’s Room For You…,” advertises that Cal Poly built new dorms with 400 spots reserved for female students. \textsuperscript{37} Through this brochure the university expresses that there is space for female students. Women were most

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{33} Pollay, n.p.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Johnson, n.p.
\item \textsuperscript{37} There’s Room For You… (February 18, 1956), n.p. 721.03 Public Affairs, Publications official University Publications, Promotional Brochures and Pamphlets 1960-current, Folder: Promotional Literature General 1960s. University Archives and Special Collections.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
often targeted in advertisements about Liberal Arts, specifically in education and home economics as these brochures were filled with several pictures of women (Figures 12 and 13). In these brochures, Cal Poly was targeting women to come to their school and show them there was a great education program for them to be a part of. These were the only brochures that presented no difficulty in finding women in pictures.

Overall, the course catalogs took longer to include pictures of women compared to the brochures and pamphlets. In 1985-1959, Cal Poly included the first picture of a woman in a course catalog (Figure 14). This is also the only picture of a woman in this catalog, and it was the same picture that was used in the “Your Future Career in Industry” brochure that was aimed at men (Figure 15). However, by the 1970s women were represented on almost every page of the catalog. Comparing Cal Poly’s ability to market towards women and its ability to market towards different races and ethnicities, it was much better at improving its marketing towards women.

**Poly Royal**

Poly Royal was a major event put on by Cal Poly to showcase its students and their projects. This event was popular among people from all over the state and was referred to as a “county fair on a college campus.” Poly Royal was another way aside from brochures and

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course catalogs that Cal Poly chose to market itself. Julian A. McPhee was very active in his role as Cal Poly president to get publicity out about this event to future students. He wrote a letter to his publicists describing who should be informed about Poly Royal. Through this letter he explains he wants “farm advisors,” “vo-ag teachers,” and “high school principals” to receive information regarding Poly Royal. This letter shows not only that McPhee was active in the advertising decisions of Cal Poly, but also that his outreach was geared toward agriculture students. Another letter sent from Douglass Miller, the publicity director, to McPhee showed Douglass was actively looking for ways to reach prospective students by making plans to visit Santa Maria High School and finding ways to distribute pictures for Poly Royal that included the Queen.

McPhee was instrumental to the advertisement of Cal Poly and because he knew Poly Royal was a huge event, he was always trying to find new ways to get more people to come. He even asked the District Freight and Passenger Agent to advertise on the train, of course making it clear that Poly Royal was a free event, and everyone was welcomed to come. By advertising on the train, it is clear McPhee wanted anyone and everyone to attend this event making this advertisement the most inclusive and promising towards creating a diverse campus. Through these letters it is evident that McPhee, Cal Poly president from 1933-1966, worked hard to market the campus and was conscious of the idea of advertisement. These marketing strategies did target specific types of students which ultimately had influence over Cal Poly’s

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demographics. Although advertising was not the only factor that determined the campus’ demographics, it did have a huge impact. Based on how marketing evolved it is clear Cal Poly became more aware of its strategies over time.

Conclusion

Today, Cal Poly is aware of its marketing strategies possibly because it has a reputation for being a predominately white university. It appears they are actively working to change this reputation, and this is shown through recent marketing tactics such as increased use of pictures featuring women and people of color. Although Cal Poly’s marketing goal is more inclusive today than it was in the past, that does not mean its campus is welcoming to all students. The images from advertisements do not always reflect the reality of students’ experiences. A 2019 Cal Poly Experience (CPX) Student Campus Climate Survey on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion states there is an increased number of students of color compared to their white counter parts that feel discriminated on campus “with African American/Black and Hispanic/Latinx students reporting the highest levels of perceived discrimination among all racial groups.” It is clear that many students of color still do not feel welcomed at Cal Poly despite its inclusive advertisement.

Cal Poly is still fighting its excluding reputation that is likely due to its marketing history and overall inadequacy in targeting a diverse population in relation to gender, ethnicity, and race. Through great exploration, it was surprising that there was little evidence of Hispanic and Latino representation in these promotional materials considering Cal Poly’s surrounding cities were and are largely made up of Hispanic and Latino residents. However, this may have been common of

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https://diversity.calpoly.edu/cpx/final-report/
many other colleges during this time period. Despite Cal Poly’s overall lack of diversity, it did show evolution in its marketing throughout both its pamphlets and brochures as well as its course catalogs. Through the decades, there is a visible change both in the images that were presented and the wording that was used. It is important to remember though marketing strategies did improve over time to become more inclusive, the main target audience was remained white and male.
Appendix

Figure 1 “Your Future Career in Industry” California State Polytechnic College, n.d. 721.03 Public Affairs, Publications official University Publications, Promotional Brochures and Pamphlets 1960-current, Folder: Promotional Brochures Engineering and Industry. University Archives and Special Collections. (words cut off “THE FUTURE…BELONGS TO…YOU)

Figure 2 Luis H. Heilbron, *Cal Poly...Right Side Up* (March 1966), n.p. 721.03 Public Affairs, Publications official University Publications, Promotional Brochures and Pamphlets 1960-current, Folder: Promotional Literatures General 1960s. University Archives and Special Collections.
Figure 3 Luis H. Heilbron, *Cal Poly...Right Side Up* (March 1966), n.p. 721.03 Public Affairs, Publications official University Publications, Promotional Brochures and Pamphlets 1960-current, Folder: Promotional Literatures General 1960s. University Archives and Special Collections.

Figure 4 “Welcome to Cal Poly,” n.d. 721.03 Public Affairs, Publications official University Publications, Promotional Brochures and Pamphlets 1960-current, Folder: Promotional Brochure General 1970s. University Archives and Special Collections.
Figure 5 “Welcome to Cal Poly,” n.p. 721.03 Public Affairs, Publications official University Publications, Promotional Brochures and Pamphlets 1960-current, Folder: Promotional Brochure General 1970s. University Archives and Special Collections.

Figure 7 “Cal Poly…An Introduction” (September 1984) n.p. 721.03 Public Affairs, Publications official University Publications, Promotional Brochures and Pamphlets 1960-current, Folder: Promotional Brochure General 1970s. University Archives and Special Collections.


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