

CONTRIBUTOR BIO



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THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AT CAL POLY

Megan Manning

From 1955 to 1968, racial tensions and African Americans' fight for more equality reached a new height in much of the United States. African Americans fought discrimination in a variety of forms from bus boycotts to the March on Washington in 1963. At times during the Civil Rights Movement, some educational institutions fiercely resented integration. Some instances of permitting and accepting non-Whites into higher education resulted in fatally violent outcomes, as with the case of James Meredith. In 1962, James Meredith, an African American, had to win a lawsuit to gain admission into the previously segregated University of Mississippi. Two people were killed and about 300 suffered injuries at the riot that tried to prevent Meredith from entering the campus on his first day of school.¹ Although some parts of the country and some colleges were particularly adamant in vocalizing their disapproval of integration and allowing discrimination to persist, the civil rights atmosphere at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo appeared considerably less racially charged than it had the potential to be. During the Civil Rights Movement, the student reporters of Cal Poly's newspaper, the *Mustang Daily*,

¹ Fred Powledge, "Mississippi Give Meredith Degree," *The New York Times*, August 18, 1962.

illustrated the relatively calm but trying efforts of the Black Student Union to expand equality for African Americans on campus. The *Mustang Daily* chronicled how African American students sought to reduce discrimination and have an expanded curriculum to reflect the increasingly diverse student body at Cal Poly. Although Cal Poly was, and still is, a predominately White university, the efforts of students, principally those of the African Americans who were a part of the Black Student Union during the late 1960s, catalyzed a change in Cal Poly that would bring awareness to racial tension and discrimination.

While African Americans only made up about one percent of Cal Poly's student body throughout the Civil Rights Movement, the student population did take an active role in bringing progressive changes to the campus.² African Americans participated in bringing the Civil Rights Movement to campus largely through the efforts of the Black Student Union (BSU), which was founded at Cal Poly in the fall of 1968.

Throughout the Civil Rights movement the Black Student Union worked on bringing more diversity to campus. The main goals and requests the BSU asked for were an African American centered major, more African American students as well as professors, recruitment of more African American females, special classes for African Americans only, and an African American only dormitory.³ The BSU tried to accomplish bringing diversity to Cal Poly largely by working with administrators, specifically Cal Poly president, Robert E. Kennedy and the dean of students, Everett Chandler. Most of the BSU's appeals were heard by the administration, but the majority of their requests either did not become approved by Cal Poly or were slightly altered from the original idea the BSU presented.

Out of the suggestions the BSU presented, President Kennedy rejected the idea for segregated dormitories saying, "I find it hard to believe that you actually want separate dormitories for black students" and that "we do not segregate at this college."⁴ Kennedy's response was critical of the BSU's requests, especially since Kennedy told the BSU he did not even "believe" that African Americans wanted to be segregated into different dormitories. Although Kennedy's reaction was not very compassionate, he did provide an understandable reasoning

² L.H. Dunigan, "Report on Enrollment Trends and Institutional Characteristics, 1976," California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo, CA.

³ C.E. Jackson, "BSU, administration discuss black issues," *Mustang Daily*, April 2, 1969.

⁴ *Ibid.*

in his rejection of the BSU's ideas to diversify Cal Poly. If African American dormitories were allowed, it would appear that Cal Poly was discriminating against African Americans by segregating them into separate quarters from Whites. President Kennedy also rejected implementing an African American Studies major, particularly because he "could not see the value of a degree in black studies."⁵ Even though it seems somewhat inflexible of Kennedy to disregard an African American Studies major, it may not have been a viable option for a president of a polytechnic university to add another liberal arts program. In addition, it took until 1994 for Cal Poly to offer an Ethnic Studies degree and it still does not have African American Studies.⁶ However, President Kennedy did try to hire more African American professors, although it may have been just a gesture. At first he said he "would welcome any black instructors who were qualified" but then stated he could not find any qualified African American instructors during his recruitment tour.⁷

Despite the fact that the BSU was not able to obtain all of the changes they vocalized, they continued to work collaboratively with the administration to help reduce discrimination. Richard Jenkins, member of the executive committee of the BSU, commented in a letter to the editor of the *Mustang Daily* that the BSU has "never come to the administration with clenched fists, but with creative and productive ideas to improve race relations at Cal Poly, and to eradicate the inequalities of the race relations that prevail on this campus."⁸ Jenkins's letter highlights the use of nonviolent means to promote a progressive education that worked towards equality. The nonviolent methods of Cal Poly's BSU also reflect the same nonviolent values and tactics promoted by Martin Luther King Jr.'s philosophy for the Civil Rights Movement. The newspaper letter also underscores how there was a sense of racism that could be felt on campus. Through the BSU's efforts they signaled the lack of diversity on campus and worked towards building more equality on campus.

Although strides were made in bringing diversity to Cal Poly during the Civil Rights Movement, the *Mustang Daily's* articles help reveal the social culture and sentiments regarding racism on campus. The *Mustang Daily's* article

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "Ethnic Studies," *California Polytechnic State University*, last modified February 15, 2013, <http://cla.calpoly.edu/es.html>.

⁷ Jackson, "BSU".

⁸ Richard Jenkins, "Letter to the Editor," *Mustang Daily*, April 18, 1969.

“Are you Negro or Afro-American?” chronicled how incoming students in the Class of 1968 were asked to indicate if they were African-American, Caucasian, Mexican, Negro, etc. on their registration papers. 32 students answered African American while 19 answered Negro. Darryl Brady, an electronic engineering major and BSU Information Minister, voiced out to the Cal Poly newspaper about the split in the proper term for racial identification. Brady stated, “White men use the word Negro in a derogatory manner” and “it is only their polite way of calling us niggers!”⁹ The article reveals not only the internal identity conflict African Americans faced, but also depicts how others regarded African Americans. The title’s usage of “Negro” highlights how it was still an acceptable term to use; however, as Brady commented, the word Negro bared a negative connotation with it being associated with roots to the pejorative term “nigger.”

The *Mustang Daily* also captured students’ sentiments regarding racism as well. In a survey conducted by the *Mustang Daily* in 1969, about 50% of surveyed students contacted “admittedly discriminate because of race, religion, and national origin.”¹⁰ It is also interesting to note that there was still a large percentage of students admitting to racism after Cal Poly President Robert E. Kennedy implemented the Discrimination Committee a year earlier in 1968 to combat discrimination on campus. Subtle backlash against the BSU was also evident from some of the *Mustang Daily* writers. In one article, the newspaper reported how the BSU might better obtain its objectives by stating, “The *Mustang Daily* believes...the BSU must realize Poly is not subject to urban solutions. Since this college is rural oriented, it seems logical that the BSU may have to be more flexible in its approach. If it isn’t, the administration may be forced by the conservative elements to take a more hard line stand, which is favored by Governor Ronald Reagan.”¹¹ The article cites how Cal Poly is a rural campus as a way to justify the lack of equality at Cal Poly and cannot be as accommodating to the BSU’s requests since it is not a college in the city with progressive ideals. The article continues with an indirect statement to African Americans that they should appreciate what they have now at Cal Poly because if they are not flexible in what they are asking for from the administration, Cal Poly might be “forced” to “take a more hard line stand.”¹² Although the

⁹ Ray Morawski, “Are you Negro or Afro-American?” *Mustang Daily*, October 30, 1968.

¹⁰ Jackson, “BSU”.

¹¹ George Ramos, “BSU needs flexibility,” *Mustang Daily*, February 12, 1969.

¹² *Ibid.*

editorial's suggestions towards the BSU appear somewhat unsympathetic towards African American students' work towards equality, the writer of this editorial was George Ramos. George Ramos was the first Latino editor-in-chief of the *Mustang Daily* and would later be awarded three Pulitzer Prizes, one of which was for an article covering the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles.¹³ Although Cal Poly had a majority of White students, the *Mustang Daily* provided a source that also captured a Latino's perspective regarding how African Americans were working towards equality.

During the Civil Rights Movement African Americans at Cal Poly were able to address discrimination on campus and were able to help institute more ethnically inclusive changes to Cal Poly. The Black Student Union facilitated most of the work in bringing about these changes, such as their meeting with administration. Throughout the transitions Cal Poly experienced, the student reporters of the *Mustang Daily* chronicled the progress of the BSU and also provided insight into the discriminatory sentiments on campus.

¹³ Victoria Billings, "Mourning the loss of journalism legacy," *Mustang Daily*, July 28, 2011.

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