

## **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

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Emily is a first-year History major from Roseville, California. Her research interests include presidential history, 1960s America, and comparative politics. Outside of academics, Emily enjoys the beach and is involved in Open House Committee and SLO Days Summer Crew.

# Foundational Dissent: The 1965 Quota Controversy

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Over its history, Cal Poly has fiercely adhered to and subsequently strayed away from its commitment to technical education and professional disciplines. What began as a school with very limited fields of study expanded into a college of technically focused coursework and is now a comprehensive polytechnic university that has implemented and expanded academic and liberal subjects.<sup>1</sup> This transition did not come easily, and it was not often welcome by the school administration. President Julian A. McPhee (1933-1966) especially struggled against the growth of the liberal arts departments in a crusade fueled by his loyalty to the polytechnic doctrine of the college.<sup>2</sup> But students pushed back at his efforts, demanding more attention for the school's liberal arts programs.

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1 Nancy E. Loe and Dan Howard-Greene, *Cal Poly: First Hundred Years* (San Luis Obispo, CA: Robert E. Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, 2001) 84.

2 Ibid.

This paper argues that student backlash to President McPhee's 1965 "Emphasis for Tomorrow" enrollment policy demonstrated the student body's resistance to Cal Poly's polytechnic foundation and its desire for a more robust liberal arts program.

In 1901, the California legislature passed a bill to establish the California Polytechnic School for the purpose of training students in the "practical application of knowledge," a focus maintained by school officials throughout Cal Poly's early decades.<sup>3</sup> When President McPhee took office in 1933, he planned on preparing Cal Poly's students for careers in industry and agriculture, carrying on the distinct educational legacy of the school.<sup>4</sup> In 1960, the California legislature passed the Donahoe Higher Education Act. This bill placed specific emphasis on applied learning and teacher education in the California State University system; this concerned McPhee because it forced him to implement a more complete liberal arts program.<sup>5</sup> Apprehensive about this "Master Plan," McPhee believed a liberal arts curriculum would "creat[e] an imbalance" that would contrast Cal Poly's learn-by-doing origins.<sup>6</sup> Up until this time, the liberal arts curriculum functioned more as a supplement to the other majors rather than its own complete and exhaustive program. In 1965, President McPhee made his most discernible attempt to halt the liberal arts at Cal Poly. He created a policy entitled "Emphasis for Tomorrow,"

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3 Nancy E. Loe and Dan Howard-Greene, *Cal Poly: First Hundred Years* (San Luis Obispo, CA: Robert E. Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, 2001) 15.

4 Ibid., 41.

5 Ibid., 84.

6 Julian A. McPhee to Senator Vernon Sturgeon. March 20, 1965. California State Polytechnic College, San Luis Obispo, CA.

which placed an enrollment quota on the English, Education, and Social-Science departments.<sup>7</sup> Despite these three departments only occupying 13% of the school's enrollment, it was President McPhee's belief that those departments were "developing too rapidly" and that Cal Poly's technical origins should dictate its curriculum.<sup>8</sup>

Possibly to the surprise of President McPhee, the student body did not widely accept his new enrollment policy. In the book *Cal Poly: The First Hundred Years*, President McPhee's strife with liberal arts is discussed at length by authors Nancy E. Loe and Dan Howard Greene, but there is no mention of how students responded. This lack of mention suggests that the general student response to the enrollment policy was minor and insignificant. On the contrary, it was the controversial center of attention for nearly six months after the initial policy announcement. The student-run newspaper, *El Mustang*, communicated the student response. Within weeks of the policy announcement, irate Cal Poly students slammed the policy as "arbitrary and prejudicial" in a letter to the editor.<sup>9</sup> They went on to list the negative effects that the enrollment limits would create, including the loss of faculty, higher per-student fees, and a decrease

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7 Julian A. McPhee. *Emphasis For Tomorrow: A Long Range Educational Plan*. January, 1965. Box 144.01, Folder 2. Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

8 Memorandum from Julian A. McPhee to Senator Vernon Sturgeon. March 20, 1965. Box 23, Folder 24. Julian McPhee. Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

9 James R. Silliman, John D. Mitchell, Robert J. Wilson, Alfred C. Granados, Michael H. Hayes. "Mailbag." *El Mustang* 27, no. 21 (January 15, 1965): 2, accessed November 14, 2018, <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2190&context=studentnewspaper>.

in the “well-roundedness” of other majors.<sup>10</sup> Such a quick reaction from the students came largely as a surprise because the defense of liberal arts was not a usual occurrence for the decade, especially at a polytechnic school. The students also made note of how President McPhee was wrong to believe that a shift towards liberal arts caused the growth in these departments. This growth was “illusory” and only due to a structural change in the Education major.<sup>11</sup> The students’ argument was well-constructed and calculated, displaying how passionately they felt about beating the unpopular policy.

Not long after that letter to the editor was published, *El Mustang* published another article that spoke of how the Student Affairs Council passed a “resolution urging the administration” to eliminate the enrollment quotas as its pending implementation would result in a “reduction of academic standards” in each of the affected departments.<sup>12</sup> This resolution had the backing of the majority of the student body and was resoundingly passed, then sent to the McPhee Administration. It must be noted that even though the liberal arts departments only accounted for a small percentage of the school, a greater portion of the school reacted and mobilized in their defense.

The authors of both the letter to the editor and the Student Affairs Council resolution fiercely advocated against President McPhee’s policy, demonstrating the value they saw in the liberal arts programs. This intrinsic value of the liberal arts stood in contrast

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10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Robert Boyd. “SAC OK’s Student Resolution.” *El Mustang* 27, no. 17 (January 29, 1965): 1, accessed November 14, 2018, <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2194&context=studentnewspaper>.

to President McPhee's steadfast vision of an exclusively career and industry centered university. The students placed worth where worth had not been placed before. This shift away from Cal Poly's origins is demonstrated by the persuasive empirical points of the students' letter to the editor and by the Student Affairs Council's resolution. These students believed that a college-level education was meant to encompass more than a singular professional skill, that it was meant to also grasp academic and intellectual disciplines as to holistically enrich the minds of students. With this in mind, the students contradicted what President McPhee had fought to preserve.

On account of this observation, *Cal Poly: The First Hundred Years* correctly suggests that President McPhee did all that was in his power to keep Cal Poly strictly polytechnic. He attempted to de-emphasize the departments that did not fit within his vision for the college. *Cal Poly: The First Hundred Years* fails to mention the student pushback against the policy, implying that the policy went without conflict. That fallacy buries the students who stood up for liberal arts at a time when those subjects were not valued by higher administration officials. By resisting this single enrollment policy, these students showed the first signs of contending with Cal Poly's deep-rooted polytechnic nature. These students created a shift in the dynamic of how Cal Poly was to be identified. What had been founded as a uniquely technical school finally began the slow transition towards expansion into academic and intellectual fields of study. McPhee's efforts to keep Cal Poly on a strictly polytechnic track fell through to the growth of a comprehensive set of liberal arts curriculum.

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