

## *Disparity or Equality: How Were Female Students Treated from 1917-1920*

*By Charlie Williams*

For years, a girl's place was in the home. Days and nights were spent cooking, cleaning, and waiting on the hand and foot of their families. There was very little, if any, room to advance and make a career while trapped inside the body of a woman. This view on female sexuality and gender roles started to improve during the Progressive Era between the 1890s and 1920s. At this juncture in time, women gained the right to vote and even started to leave the house. Many women also took a leap of faith and started the journey of earning a college degree on campuses across the United States. California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo was one of those schools where women found a place to study. During World War I, female involvement in academics may have been seen as groundbreaking due to the fact that women were relatively new to higher education; however, women on campus were treated as substandard. Their ability to grow as intellectuals and innovate new technologies and ideas was halted by the patriarchal, male dominated, nature of the college institution at the time. By looking at the course catalogs and yearbooks released by Cal Poly between the years 1917 and 1920 one can easily come to the conclusion that male students were the top priority of the institution.

The Progressive Era was a time full of change. Social reform was popular during the 1910s and 1920s, and more liberal times allowed women an opportunity to rise up. It seemed that this groundbreaking culture would continue to be a catalyst, granting more and more reform to continue and allow women to enter fields never before seen as fitting or possible; however, males were afraid that their sacred institutions, such as higher education and the work force, were going to be ruined due to female influence. Because of this, panic spread throughout society. This point is best exemplified by an article from

## Good Housekeeping in 1917:

*"In the lifetime of girls even twenty years old, the tradition of what girls should be and do in the world has changed as much as herefore in a century. It used to be that girls looked forward with confidence to domestic life as their destiny. That is still the destiny of most of them, but it is a destiny that in this generation seems to be modified for all, and avoided by very many..."<sup>1</sup>*

The article suggests that women were fleeing domestic life in droves in search of a way to help them join the work force; however, there was no real epidemic and the amount of females actually attending college was rather small.

Linda Rosenzweig, author of "The Anchor of My Life: Middle-Class American Mothers and Their College Daughters," suggested that those in charge of higher education during the Progressive Era offered a degree in the Household Arts in order to keep the idea of domesticity a top priority while also allowing women to grow and branch out from the household.<sup>2</sup> Rosenzweig stated that "new women," or women who resisted tradition, wanted to broaden their horizons and apply for clerical or sales jobs; at Cal Poly during WWI, these women would be searching for a job as a nurse or homemaker.<sup>3</sup> In order to attain these jobs, secondary school offered what was considered an educational experience and a variety of women's organizations.<sup>4</sup> Rosenzweig may have been generalizing college campuses when making this assertion, because in contrast, Cal Poly only had one club specifically for women according to Cal Poly's yearbook, the *Polytechnic Annual*. As "Anchor of My Life" extends, the "scope, scale, and speed of change" characterized the Progressive Era, specifically in the areas of industrialization and technology.<sup>5</sup> College campuses were, and are today, a center of this innovation. Yet, despite their ability to create productive change, college campuses and society as a whole hindered a woman's ability to conduct research and innovate by confining them to the

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1 Linda Rosenzweig, "The Anchor of My Life: Middle-Class American Mothers and College Educated Daughters, 1880-1920," *Journal of Social History* 25, no. 1 (1991): 5.

2 Rosenzweig,.

3 Rosenzweig, 5.

4 Rosenzweig, 5.

5 Rosenzweig, 6.

majors of Household Arts and Academics. These degrees could do no more than prepare a nurse at the highest level and left women without the ability to create change in the fields of science and mathematics.

The course catalogs from Cal Poly's Special Collections and Archives exemplifies the point that only supporting a woman's effort in gaining Household Arts and Academic degrees stifled innovation. First, under the section titled "Purpose", the Cal Poly catalog from 1916-1917 specifically stated that "It [the campus] offers a strong course in Engineering-Mechanics which trains young men for life in the shops, power plants and the various branches of the electrical industry" and "to the young woman it offers practical training in housekeeping and homemaking; in fact in all phases of Household Arts."<sup>6</sup> The catalog from this year continued to use gender specific pronouns when referring to certain programs, as does the course catalog from 1918-1920. Besides using restrictive language, the curriculum suggested for Household Arts majors was far less rigorous than that of an engineering degree and thus, did not challenge women to be ambitious and achieve. For example, in the 1916-1917 catalog a woman in the Household Arts program would study Mathematics 1 during her sophomore year. Her male counterpart on the other hand, who studied science or agriculture, would start off with Mathematics 3 his freshman year.<sup>7</sup> This trend was very similar in the 1918-1920 catalog; however, World War I was reflected more during these later years because Hygiene and First Aid was taught for the specific purpose of leading women to a career in nursing.<sup>8</sup> It is clear that women were not seen as having academic potential, and were generally ignored on campus as illustrated by the *Polytechnic Annual*.

The *Polytechnic Annual* undoubtedly illustrated the under appreciation of female involvement on campus. In order to even know how many female students attended the university at this time, one must precisely count how many

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6 "Bulletin on Information," 1916-1917, Course Catalogs, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA, 5.

7 "Bulletin of Information," 1916-1917, 35-41.

8 "Bulletin on Information," 1918-1920, Course Catalogs, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA, 4-32.

women there were in the actual yearbook. This proved that females were not important enough to note in any other format, whether in course catalogs or in the student newspaper. In addition, there was no major growth in female graduation rates. In fact, the number of female graduates actually decreased from the years 1917-1920. For example, in 1917, out of 24 graduates only eight were female and in 1919 out of eleven graduates only two were women.<sup>9</sup> The fact that there was such a drastic decrease shows that the university did not focus on helping women through graduation. It appears that if female students fell behind, then they were left to fail and not encouraged to pick themselves up and try again. Post graduation, the places where female graduates chose to continue on varied. A few women continued their education in the hopes of becoming a nurse. In this sense, Cal Poly did prepare female students enough to allow them to continue their education. During the World War I, helping women become nurses was very important; however, Cal Poly failed to encourage the continued success of other female students who were not joining the nursing field. It can also be implied that society did not encourage this success as well, considering the time period. As stated in the yearbooks from 1917-1920, women that did not become nurses would often return home to become homemakers.<sup>10</sup> Even though universities were educating women, their degrees could not launch them into intellectual jobs and kept them with in the home.

Cal Poly treated the women on campus as second-class students in comparison to men. The course catalogs illustrated that the rigor of coursework for women did not allow ambitious students to excel. In addition, the gender pronouns used in these catalogs strongly associated science degrees to men and household degrees to women. Continued disparity was illustrated by the fact

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9 "Polytechnic Annual 1917," June 1917, California Polytechnic State University Annuals, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA, 6-14. "Polytechnic Annual 1919," June 1919, California Polytechnic State University Annuals, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA, 5-7.

10 "Polytechnic Annual 1917," 71-72. "Polytechnic Annual 1920," June 1920, California Polytechnic State University Annuals, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA, 46-47.

that the only documentation to the amount of women on campus was shown by the pictures of female students in the yearbook. Institutions, such as Cal Poly, did not overtly encourage women to continue their education as shown by the small amount of alumni who decided to continue studying at other universities. It is disappointing to think that women were not given the opportunity to fulfill their true potential, especially with the momentum gained from the Progressive Era. While Cal Poly did succeed in generating qualified nurses for the war effort, it would have been much more encouraging if the institution encouraged female students from the very beginning.

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