

Welcome Back: The Return of Women at Cal Poly

HIST 303 Research and Writing Seminar in History: Cal Poly History Project

Presented to

The course instructor Professor Andrew Morris

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

A Course Taken in Partial Fulfillment of My Bachelor of Arts Degree in History

By

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Introduction

After a nearly 30-year absence from California Polytechnic State University, female students were readmitted to campus in the fall of 1956. Student reporters could hardly contain themselves from writing about the amazing reappearance of these “coeds.” One *El Mustang* article, “Coeducation Time-Turning Event,” even went so far as to state that, “Coeds are... a breathtaking change if you’re the emotional type, for Poly has been without the charming sex for nearly 30 years.”¹ Although campus was abuzz with excitement, one cannot help but ponder the reason for this somewhat sudden change of heart on the part of the administration. Why did President McPhee only start to show interest in coeducation during the mid-1950s? Also, what was the process like to readmit women onto campus, both financially and logistically? Lastly, what was the perception of women by their male counterparts, faculty, and administration and how involved were they on campus?

To help answer these questions and gain broader context for the time period, one can compare Cal Poly to other institutions across the United States. For example, in 1972, which was about 15 years after the re-integration of women at Cal Poly, Rutgers University made the decision to co-educate. Although women were not formerly a part of the campus community at Rutgers, both institutions had to “usher in adjustments small and large,” such as refurbishing old dorms for female students.² In contrast to Cal Poly, however, Rutgers “coeds” appeared to face more opposition from male students. Melanie Willoughby, for example, mentioned in her interview with *Rutgers Today* that while there may have been less resistance from administration, “men would come knock on my door and say, ‘This could have been my

¹ “Coeducation Time-Turning Event,” *El Mustang*, September 18, 1956, accessed February 4, 2017, goo.gl/g2noCQ.

² Fredda Sacharow, “Celebrating 40 Years of Coeducation at Rutgers,” *Rutgers Today*, September 7, 2012, accessed February 5, 2017, <https://goo.gl/9WDWF1>.

room.”³ No direct evidence shows that situations arising from such strong resentment occurred at Cal Poly. This may be due to the fact that events such as Poly Royal, and the influence such as McPhee’s largely female dominated family, exposed Polyites to more positive male-female interaction.

Other historians have taken interest in the topic of women’s education and it is important to note their observations while examining Cal Poly as well. For example, Leslie Miller-Bernal and Susan L. Poulson, the editors of *Going Coed: Women’s Experiences in Formerly Men’s Colleges and Universities, 1950-2000*, studied the history of coeducation since the '50s through the comparisons of Catholic universities, historically black colleges, Ivy League campuses, and more.⁴ One argument the editors made throughout their book was that most state colleges opened up their doors to women in reaction to demographic, financial, and cultural changes within the United States.⁵ While each college may have looked vastly different from Cal Poly, the changing finances of universities in reaction to the G.I. bill, or the state’s need to turn out accredited teachers to teach classrooms full of Baby Boomers in Poly’s case, eventually led to the re-integration of female students.⁶

However, there is one statement from *Going Coed* that must be addressed when looking at Cal Poly: coeducation does not mean gender equality.⁷ While “coeds” in San Luis Obispo may have experienced a more relaxed transition to college as compared to other universities, the

³ Sacharow, “Celebrating 40 Years.”

⁴ Leslie Miller-Bernal, “Introduction: Coeducation An Unforeseen Progression,” in *Going Coed: Women’s Experiences in Formerly Men’s Colleges and Universities*, ed. Leslie Miller-Bernal and Susan L. Poulson (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014), 3-16.

⁵ Miller-Bernal, 1.

⁶ Julian A. McPhee to Roy E. Simpson, November 27, 1954, Office of the President, Julian A. McPhee, Box 11, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

⁷ Miller-Bernal, 1.

underlying paternalism and prejudice of the era must be recognized and evaluated. Student historian Kaylin Embrey's perspective will also be examined, especially since her paper focuses directly on the case of Cal Poly. For example, this paper will try and argue that the treatment of women students were not the mal-intended "discriminatory boundaries and limitations" as Embrey mentioned, but instead were set up in order to navigate unfamiliar territory.⁸

Cal Poly had a generally positive and welcoming attitude towards the re-admittance of women, despite there being a large gap since "coeds" were last on campus in 1927 or condescension due to the popular paternalistic philosophies at the time. I will investigate the logistic process of readmitting students, the classes taken, the reactions of male students and administration, and the involvement of coeds. The role of women on campus has greatly changed since 1956, with the student female population jumping to about 47% in 2015.⁹ It is important for alumni and future Mustangs to know how Cal Poly got to the place it is today, and that education was not originally open to everyone. Cal Poly could have looked vastly different if it wasn't for the re-admission of the opposite sex.

Background and Transition

In order to gain perspective on the re-admittance of women in 1957, it is important to first look back on the original reasons for their disappearance from campus. Since Cal Poly's founding in 1901, the purpose of the school was to "furnish to young people of both sexes mental and manual training in the arts and sciences." This tradition continued well into the 1920s. However, according to former Cal Poly President Julian A. McPhee, financial difficulties when the school switched from vocational training to junior college status caused Cal Poly and the

⁸ Kaylin Embrey, "Coeds Come to the Cal Poly Campus: The Return of Female Students to Cal Poly," (2016), accessed March 3, 2017, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cphistory/14>, 5.

⁹ "California Polytechnic State University—San Luis Obispo," *US News and World Report*, accessed February 15, 2017, goo.gl/Hkupjk.

state of California to pass a statute that limited the registration and enrollment of students to exclusively men.¹⁰ Robert E. Kennedy reiterated this point in his memoir, *Learn By Doing*, by stating that these financial issues coupled with the lack of interest by girls caused the school to restrict enrollment.¹¹ For the next 40 or so years, Cal Poly operated as a single sex-institution. Curiously though, another statute from 1937 repealed the ban on “coed” students, well before the 1950s. Kennedy recounted in his book that Margaret Chase, a former teacher and administrator, knew about this ban and was surprised that other faculty were unaware. In addition, Chase stated that the legality of the enrollment issue could have been pushed, “but ‘women’s lib’ activists were few and far between in the period between 1930-1950.”¹² Why then, did the administration wait so long to readmit “coed” students?

According to Miss Chase, McPhee thought that the school was simply not ready. At the time, McPhee was trying to establish the San Luis Obispo campus as a statewide college and thought the local issue of “coeds” returning was counterproductive to this goal.¹³ *Cal Poly: The First Hundred Years* further explains this by quoting McPhee saying, “when the legislation demands that I admit women they’ll also provide all the financial resources and new facilities that we’ll need.”¹⁴ This idea of waiting to readmit women as a way to leverage financial gain is an interesting one, popular among many other institutions at the time and is shown as a common theme throughout *Going Coed*. As *Going Coed* argued, institutions across the United States

¹⁰ Julian A. McPhee letter to A.A. Erhart, November 27, 1954, Office of the President, Julian A. McPhee, Box 11, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

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), 8, 15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 17.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁴ *Cal Poly: The First Hundred Years* (San Luis Obispo: California Polytechnic State University, 2001), 76.

turned to coeducation in order to compete for funding to “build and maintain new facilities.”¹⁵

University of Rochester’s president Cornelius de Kiewiet for example, anticipated that coeducation would attract new revenue and garner prestige among the university.¹⁶

Besides the opportunity for financial gain, Cal Poly decided to resume coeducation during the mid 1950s because of a shortage of accredited California teachers. In a letter to the State Superintendent, Roy E. Simpson, dated November 27, 1954, McPhee stated that San Luis Obispo County had placed pressure on the school to allow teachers to enroll and take classes for state credential regulations.¹⁷ This idea continued to gain momentum in 1954. In a letter from state Senator A.A. Erhart to Simpson (see Appendix A), Erhart stated that 100 women school teachers petitioned to be readmitted, because barring enrollment was, “not only illegal, but ‘unfair, unjust, and un-American.’”¹⁸ While Cal Poly and the state school system could have ignored these teachers, creating a negative climate towards women in higher education, the college decided to settle for readmission instead, creating a welcoming attitude which would prove helpful in the creation of a new coeducational school. Erhart reaffirmed this notion in his letter by writing, “Personally, I would oppose any legislation that would attempt to limit the future enrollment at Cal Poly to men only.”¹⁹ It should also be noted that the state did not force the issue of coeducation, but worked closely with McPhee and Cal Poly to make re-admission a

¹⁵ Miller-Bernal, 12.

¹⁶ Christine Lundt, *et al.*, “To Coeducation and Back Again: Gender and Organization at the University of Rochester,” in *Going Coed: Women’s Experiences in Formerly Men’s Colleges and Universities*, ed. Leslie Miller-Bernal and Susan L. Poulson (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014), 65.

¹⁷ Julian A. McPhee letter to Roy E. Simpson, November 27, 1954.

¹⁸ A.A. Erhart letter to Roy E. Simpson, Undated, Office of the President, Julian A. McPhee, Box 11, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

¹⁹ Erhart letter to Simpson, Undated.

reality. In correspondence with Simpson, McPhee said that he couldn't get the process of coeducation going until the plan was approved by the Department of Education.²⁰ Through this final push to get teachers accredited as soon as possible, Cal Poly finally became coeducational starting in 1956. Once the decision was made, the welcoming attitude towards women students continued to be fostered through the building of new facilities, the enrollment of students and the establishment of a new curriculum.

One of the first parts of the re-admission process was the planning required for housing new "coed" students. In a letter from the Dean of Students Everett M. Chandler to McPhee, it was illustrated that the school budgeted to update the College Avenue dorms for "coed" housing as well as build three new dorms for women titled Chase, Heron, and Jespersen halls.

Interestingly, Chandler hinted in his letter that he spent more time crafting the new dorms since women would spend more time there. Chandler was quoted saying he "would not want them just wandering around any old place, any old time."²¹ While this is perceived as a chauvinistic instinct in some ways, the intent of Chandler's statement was not to keep "coeds" in inferior conditions or completely secluded from campus. In the course catalog from 1956, for example, the dorms established programs focused on providing leadership and guidance within the community, which kept "coed" students involved in housing and on campus.²² In order to accommodate the admission of more students, Cal Poly equipped classrooms for home economics laboratories, added more female restrooms, and expanded physical education

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Everett M. Chandler letter to Julian A. McPhee, October 11, 1954, Office of the President, Julian A. McPhee, Box 11, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

²² "California State Polytechnic College Bulletin," July, 1956, Course Catalogs, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA, 15.

facilities.²³ All of these new additions added to a more welcoming and necessary space made to accommodate the entry of new students.

Another positive aspect of the reintegration of “coeds” was the number of enrolled new students and the establishment of a new curriculum. It appears, by looking through the Annual Reports for 1955-56 and 1956-57, that women integrated themselves immediately within the college. Under emergency measures in 1955-56, seven female students enrolled, with one as an undergraduate in education and six as graduates in education.²⁴ The following year, 197 women enrolled, expanding to majors in agriculture, the arts and sciences, and even engineering.²⁵ While these numbers started out small, it is encouraging to know that the numbers grew rapidly in size yearly and continued to do so for decades. McPhee even stated that seeing the expansion of the elementary education department as “gratifying.”²⁶ With the growth of female students on campus, specifically teachers seeking accreditation, the curriculum of specific majors changed and expanded, and new majors were even added. For example, in the 1955 course catalog, Education and Psychology existed as a combined department.²⁷ However in 1956, this department split and became known as the Education Department.²⁸ In addition, in 1956, the Home Economics Department emerged, offering classes like Meal Management, Family Relations, and American Government, with the purpose of preparing the student holistically for

²³ California State Polytechnic College, *Annual Report 1955-56* (San Luis Obispo: California State Polytechnic College, 1956), 13.

²⁴ *Annual Report 1955-56*, 6.

²⁵ California State Polytechnic College, *Annual Report 1956-57* (San Luis Obispo: California State Polytechnic College, 1956), 4.

²⁶ *Annual Report 1956-57*, 2.

²⁷ “California State Polytechnic College Bulletin,” July, 1955, Course Catalogs, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA, 3.

²⁸ “California State Polytechnic College Bulletin,” July, 1956, 3.

jobs in fields from journalism to experimental foods and to teaching.²⁹ Kaylin Embrey argued in her paper that “Home Economics... reveals the idea that female students were largely expected to join this department, and that the department would not be useful without female students.”³⁰

While this department focused on women students and reflected the paternalistic philosophies of the era, I would argue that the department became very useful over time. For one, according to *The First Hundred Years*, the program successfully spun off into the dietetics and child development majors, popular among both sexes today.³¹

Reactions

One of the best ways to examine the re-enrollment experience of “coed” students in 1956-57, is to evaluate the reactions of male students, faculty, administration and the community. While opinion varied slightly between each group, the overall impression given by *El Mustang* articles and annual reports was that the women were welcomed and created a positive environment on campus. For example, the administration’s view of the transition was represented in the annual report from 1956-57, which stated that readmitting women was “a happy experience,” and that women, “have fitted into the campus life without confusion or the creation of serious problems.”³² McPhee even mentioned in an *El Mustang* article from September of 1956, that the campus was excited to admit women and that the purpose of the college was to supply an education to all.³³ While *in loco parentis* attitudes were apparent with the administration’s adoption of *Cues For Coeds*, a handbook about campus life and regulations directed towards women, I would argue that without the approval of Cal Poly’s governing body,

²⁹ “California State Polytechnic College Bulletin,” July 1956, 166-168.

³⁰ Ebrey, 9.

³¹ *Cal Poly: The First Hundred Years*, 77.

³² *Annual Report 1956-57*, 2.

³³ Julian A. McPhee, “Official Welcome,” *El Mustang*, September 18, 1956, accessed February 4, 2017, goo.gl/g2noCQ.

women would have never succeeded or felt wanted on campus.³⁴ The community also reacted positively to the presence of women students, with a local Business and Professional Women's Club welcoming and acquainting new students with the town.³⁵

While the majority of groups on campus and around San Luis Obispo appeared to accept and welcome women, one faction reacted in a surprisingly negative manner. According to "Student Wives Offer New Thoughts On Poly Coeducation Movement," many who were interviewed by *El Mustang* did not like the idea of other women coming to campus. Some people from this group believed that the purpose of "coeds" was solely to get an "M.R.S. degree". In addition, because of the influx of the opposite sex on campus, it was felt that men wouldn't study as hard and wives would be pressured to dress up for their "hubby" more.³⁶ Why some of these wives felt so strongly in opposition is uncertain, especially since they had the opportunity themselves to apply to the school. However, the overwhelming positive reactions of male students outweighs the negative reaction to coeducation, further showing that women had a relatively relaxed experience adjusting to campus life. For example, one man defended the "coed" students against the opinions of the wives by saying that the wives shouldn't be angry, but instead have faith in their husbands' loyalty. In addition, this male contributor called on Cal Poly to be courteous to the new students.³⁷ In another article by student Ron Greenslate, opinion

³⁴ *Cues For Coeds*, California State Polytechnic College, September 1957, 670 Student Affairs, Folder 1, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

³⁵ "Local Womens Club To Host Students," *El Mustang*, October 5, 1956, accessed February 4, 2017, goo.gl/akqMmH.

³⁶ "Student Wives Offer New Thoughts on Poly Education Movement," *El Mustang*, May 18, 1956, accessed February 20, 2017, <https://goo.gl/Azi6gn>.

³⁷ "Sour Grapes With Bravos," *El Mustang*, May 25, 1956, accessed February 20, 2017, <https://goo.gl/tk83Lw>.

showed that “girls are really brightening up the campus.”³⁸ Again, as more evidence of the positive reaction of male students, the article “The End of All Male Rule Has Arrived,” stated that having “coeds” on campus meant a complete new wardrobe.³⁹ While this anecdote may seem unnecessary, the fact that men felt motivated to be more presentable reveals that the male students had respect for their new companions and did not see them as enemies. On the other hand, faculty appeared to have some problems with the new “coed” students, but the experience of women at Cal Poly compared to other universities was much more positive. Kennedy noted in his memoir that older faculty in agriculture and engineering opposed re-admission, because they thought that this presence would change the focus of the college. Women engineers picked up on these feelings stating that they didn’t feel welcome in the major.⁴⁰ However, at universities such as Rutgers, hostilities were more prevalent. For example, student Laurie Goodman stated that sexism penetrated the classroom setting when during her laboratory instruction, “she was expected to clean up after the mess.”⁴¹ With this vision of other universities, again in comparison, Cal Poly “coeds” were treated with much more respect and were more welcome on campus.

Involvement

Women were involved in a number of clubs on campus, showing that they re-integrated themselves well into campus life, and were readily accepted. The *El Rodeo* yearbook showcased

³⁸ Ron Greenslate, “Too Few Females’ Lament Many Men; Barefeet On Campus in Fast Fade Out,” *El Mustang*, October 5, 1956, accessed February 4, 2017, goo.gl/akqMmh.

³⁹ “The End of All Male Rule Has Arrived,” *El Mustang*, October 5, 1956, accessed February 4, 2017, goo.gl/akqMmH.

⁴⁰ Kennedy, 182

⁴¹ Susan L. Poulson, ed., “A Religious and a Public University: The Transitions to Coeducation at Georgetown and Rutgers,” in *Going Coed: Women’s Experiences in Formerly Men’s Colleges and Universities*, ed. Leslie Miller-Bernal and Susan L. Poulson (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014), 230.

this involvement by depicting photographs of clubs which involved women. For example, Boots and Spurs, the California Student Teachers Association, Canterbury Club, Poly Chi, the Press Association, and many other clubs had an active female population.⁴² The environment on campus continued to encourage this growth through the years as well, creating a thriving and vibrant community. The *El Rodeo* yearbook from 1958 supports this attitude by showing that the women's presence in officer roles increased. One woman became an officer of the math club and several others had good representation on various councils and committees. In addition, a women's intramural basketball team was established showing involvement in both co-curricular and academic areas.⁴³ However, looking back at *Going Coed's* comment about gender inequality, not every moment in these clubs were gleeful. As *Going Coed* mentions, at most universities women were expected to be spectators in extracurricular institutions, supporting men's superiority rather than standing out as leaders.⁴⁴ This idea is supported by the yearbooks, since in the photos, men outnumber women in all cases and no record shows a majority of women in officer holding positions. Nonetheless, I would blame the paternalistic philosophies of the 1950s for this reality, mentioning that over the next several decades women eventually became involved in more activities and grew in number.

Another aspect of "coed" involvement which showed a welcoming attitude is the case of Week of Welcome orientation. As soon as 1957, women became members of the governing committee and were able to shape the future of this formative program. The "Welcome Week Guide" from May 1958, for example, listed about half of the Fall 1957 committee members as

⁴² *El Rodeo 1957*, 1957, California Polytechnic State University Annuals, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA, 125-130, 148, 152.

⁴³ *El Rodeo 1958*, 1958, California Polytechnic State University Annuals, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA, 86, 216, 175.

⁴⁴ Miller-Bernal, 7.

women.⁴⁵ Duties of female committee members included organizing the week's sports events or having oversight over the selection of WOW counselors.⁴⁶ Each of these factors point out that women were able to create a feeling of acceptance for new female students and normalized coeducation for male students. Also, these points illustrate Cal Poly's commitment to female involvement on campus. In addition to WOW, Poly Royal also helped produce an attitude of acceptance among students. This college fair of sorts was established in 1933, and featured a livestock show and beauty pageant.⁴⁷ The beauty pageant, before 1956, featured queens from local high schools and other colleges within California.⁴⁸ Once coeds were readmitted to campus, however, the *El Mustang* reported that coeds would henceforth be chosen for the queens court.⁴⁹ While our current homecoming court features both men and women and highlights academic merit instead of beauty, it is worth mentioning that these new queen candidates were welcomed with open arms and enthusiasm, and cherished among all within the Cal Poly community. With the support needed to succeed, women continued to become involved and helped create a changed campus.

Conclusion

Many colleges and universities across the United States adjusted to coeducation around the 1950s. Cal Poly, in addition to these other schools, decided to re-integrate both sexes under

⁴⁵ James Curtis, "Welcome Week Guide," May 23, 1958, 630.07 Week of Welcome, W.O.W.1953-1963, Box 1, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA, 35. I would like to thank Kristina Carroll for this source.

⁴⁶ Curtis, 10.

⁴⁷ Morris Eugene Smith, *A History of California State Polytechnic College, The First Fifty Years*, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA, 173.

⁴⁸ "Queens at Poly Royals," Undated, 2010.07 History, Box 1, Folder 10, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

⁴⁹ "Homecoming Queen Will Be from Poly's Own Co-eds," *El Mustang*, September 18, 1956, accessed February 4, 2017, goo.gl/g2noCQ.

similar pretenses. Both the University of Rochester and Poly, for example, decided to coeducate in order to increase revenue and gain funding for school projects.⁵⁰ On the other hand, many of these universities struggled deeply to accept their new reality. Rutgers “coed” students for one, experienced hostility in the dorms and sexism in the classroom.⁵¹ In comparison, Cal Poly was able to endure the transition in a positive way and created a welcoming space for “coed” students. While students experienced the paternalistic philosophies popular at the time, as Embrey had shown in her paper, women on campus were able to integrate well, and in a generally relaxed manner. The administration took care in constructing new dorms. New curriculum and courses for the “coeds” were added, which would later become vibrant departments in dietetics and child development. In addition, enrollment increased over the years, with diversity among several majors, showing that there was a desire to study at the San Luis Obispo campus. Overall, male students, administration, and the community reacted positively to coeducation, as seen in the newspapers and annual reports. Lastly, women immediately got involved on campus and found a place to belong, through either clubs or even Poly Royal. Cal Poly would not be where it was today without the re-coeducation of women students. While women are still a minority on campus, around 47%, they are, and were, accepted with open arms at Cal Poly.

⁵⁰ Lundt, 65.

⁵¹ Poulson, 230.

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"Student Wives Offer New Thoughts on Poly Education Movement." *El Mustang*, May 18, 1956. Accessed February 20, 2017. <https://goo.gl/Azi6gn>.

Appendix A

Dr. Roy Simpson
State Superintendent of Public Instruction
State Department of Education
721 Capitol Avenue
Sacramento 14, California

Dear Dr. Simpson:

I am writing to you for advice as to how we can best handle a situation involving a request for admission of women students to Cal Poly. The problem was presented to me officially as a legislative representative of this county by a group of San Luis Obispo county and city school teachers.

A petition signed by 100 women school teachers of this area was presented to me on Tuesday, November 16th, at a meeting which I was asked to attend. They claim they have been denied the right to admission at Cal Poly only because they are women and that they believe this action to be not only illegal, but "unfair, unjust, and un-American."

Located in McPhee. Box 11. University Archives, Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, CA.