

How did Cal Poly get a Political Science major?

In 1958 when I arrived at Cal Poly, the Social Science Department was a department of miscellaneous. Our teaching was limited to state BS degree requirements—specifically required instruction which could not be avoided even in Agriculture and Engineering programs. An aggregation of these courses created a Social Science major. Honoring President McPhee's polytechnic emphasis" meant keeping the Social Science profile low. Nevertheless, in state budgeting, counting majors was important, and in the Cal Poly growth years Social Science became the largest department on campus.

By 1965 Economics had split out to establish the School of Business. Other disciplines—History, Political Science, and Sociology—hoped for majors too. In 1966 directions received from the Chancellors Office to establish MS degree programs were passed down to the Social Science Department. Without degrees in several of the well establish Social Science fields, a Social Science Masters did not make sense. We expected Cal Poly administrators (there was only a faculty-staff council at that time) to be unhappy with our straight forward response—first establish History, Political Science, and Sociology majors and then implement a Masters program. History is a common element in all instruction making a History major hard to oppose. For Political Science, we proposed the discipline title, Government—we would make our discipline more hands on, more polytechnic. The Chancellors Office didn't like Government as an academic label—all other state colleges taught Political Science, and Cal Poly couldn't quite reach to Sociology. History and Political Science became majors. The implementation of polytechnic-emphasis admissions limited by major has held initiatives for other Social Science disciplines at bay for 40 years.

I recall in January 1972, we celebrated our first year as a Political Science Department. Our 13 full-time teachers held Political Science doctoral degrees from 10 universities—not common at Cal Poly at that time. When President Kennedy commented that a birthday party should have a cake, right on cue, a one-candled birthday cake appeared.