

RUTGERS IN WORLD WAR II

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The story of the impact of World War II on American higher education has been all but ignored by American historians. Indeed, the only attempt at a comprehensive survey of that experience, made under the auspices of the American Council of Learned Societies, was published as far back as 1948. Why this subject has remained so neglected need not detain us now. Hopefully, it will some day be brought under careful scrutiny, and we may then gain yet another fruitful perspective on both the place of higher education in our culture and on the policies of the federal government in wartime.

When the war came, no comprehensive plans had been made for utilizing universities, and the next three-and-a-half years brought confusion, hasty improvisation, and abrupt changes to American campuses. Somehow the structure of higher education survived, and by surviving, made useful contributions to the war effort. One may wonder though whether there might not have been acceptable alternatives to the muddling course that was followed.

American educators gave serious thought to the developing crisis even before the defense build-up assumed momentum following the fall of France. Leading the way was the American Council on Education (A.C.E.), which had come into existence in 1918 to represent the educational constituency in World War I. As early as March 1940, A.C.E. began to press federal agencies to define a role for higher education in the new emergency. Through its Committee on Education and National Defense and in a series of conferences that brought together hundreds of academic administrators, A.C.E. urged governmental authorities to define what was expected of colleges and universities. At the same time, it put forth proposals designed to minimize the disruptive effects of mobilization efforts on higher education. Although A.C.E. came to have an important role as a liaison agency between colleges and the government, its influence in policy matters was negligible.

In May 1942, the situation was seemingly clarified when the Army and the Navy announced plans for their enlisted reserve corps. College students who enlisted in these programs had the understanding that they could be deferred until they had completed their undergraduate requirements, and then they

might qualify for commissions. But in August of the same year, a new policy was set forth: all able-bodied students were to be inducted into the armed services. In November 1942, the draft age was reduced to eighteen years old. By January 1943, the enlisted reserves were being called to active duty. With the departure of the reservists and the operation of the eighteen-year-old draft, colleges were rapidly drained of male students.

At this point, the Army brought forth its Specialized Training Program and the Navy its V-12 program. By July 1943, men in uniform were flowing back to the campuses. Within a few months, there were over 350,000 men in 350 institutions in the Army Specialized Training Program (A.S.T.P.) and about one-third that number of Navy trainees. Then, as final preparations were being made for the invasion of France, all but a small fraction of these young men were sent to combat units in the spring of 1944. In the meantime, the Army Specialized Training Reserve Program, which enrolled seventeen-year-old high school graduates, made its appearance, and colleges once again adapted to new requirements.

This brief, introductory overview scarcely suggests the vicissitudes of wartime experience. To cite just one crude measure, Rutgers' male enrollment by mid-1945 was down to 30 percent of what it had been in 1939. Student deferments had been virtually eliminated. Graduate training was all but suspended, research not related directly to the war effort was halted, and faculties were decimated as professors left for many types of service.

The impact of the war on higher education was not uniform. Only about one-third of colleges and universities were selected for various Army and Navy training programs. In some of those not favored, male enrollments fell as low as 10 percent of the prewar figures. Even with respect to the government's investment in war-related research, 90 percent of funds were allocated to eight institutions. Women's colleges were, on the whole, little affected. Looking back on the war years soon after peace had returned, one university president summed up what was a common impression. "Higher education has come out of the war somewhat frustrated, bewildered, and depleted, but at least with a sound confidence that it has not failed."

The experience of Rutgers University in the war years may be taken as representative of those colleges and universities that were selected to participate in the various service-sponsored training programs. The university in 1940 was a relatively small institution. There were about 1,700 undergraduates enrolled in the so-called men's colleges, 1,000 in the College for Women, and 200 in the College of Pharmacy. Rutgers was the land-grant college of New Jersey, but it had not yet acquired the status of the state university, although much of its funding was provided on a contractual basis from state sources.



Figure 1.1 Soldiers studying at Rutgers University in the Army Specialized Training Program

In the two years after Hitler's assault on Poland, the war in Europe gradually intruded on campus. At first, strongly under the spell of the isolationism of the 1930s, faculty and students tried to view the conflict as remote from American concerns. Then, as governmental policy shifted toward providing assistance to Great Britain, there ensued a prolonged debate between isolationists and interventionists. Even as late as June 1941, although the students supported "measures short of war," they remained overwhelmingly opposed to American entry into the fray.

The president of the university, Robert C. Clothier, viewed the prevailing cynicism among the undergraduates with regret. "We all dread the thought of war," he was saying in mid-1941, "but there comes a time in the life of every nation, as in the life of every man, when we must be willing to fight for those things in which one believes." When the University Council convened in December 1940 to discuss "Rutgers and National Defense," several speakers expressed alarm at the apathy and indifference that prevailed on campus. It was agreed that the president should address meetings of several faculties "in order to arouse the active thought of all faculty members and to encourage them to use every effort to direct the thinking of their students along sound lines." All divisions of opinion disappeared abruptly with the attack on Pearl Harbor, however, and the entire university community accepted the vigorous and perceptive leadership of President Clothier in dedicating every resource to the nation's service.

Already there were many signs that Rutgers was being caught up in the national emergency. One of the first was the establishment in September 1939 of a unit of the Civil Pilot Training Program, which provided basic flight instruction to nearly two hundred students, many of whom proceeded directly into military service. As the Army began to expand, increasing numbers of ROTC graduates went on active duty. On October 16, 1940, 334 students registered in the gymnasium under the recently enacted Selective Service Act. As yet, only those who were twenty-one or older were eligible for the draft.

To meet the rising demand for skilled personnel in New Jersey's booming defense industries, the College of Engineering, in association with the Extension Division, launched in January 1941 the government-financed Engineering Defense Training Program. Another sign of the approaching crisis was the drop of about 8 percent in male enrollment when the academic year opened in September 1941.

When at last war became a reality, immediate measures were taken to place the university in position to meet any eventuality. President Clothier addressed each of the classes, urging upon them a calm attitude rather than hasty or impulsive actions. Regulations were quickly adopted to assure that students who were called into service would receive appropriate academic credit. A Defense Council was organized to safeguard university property.

Another committee was charged with handling problems connected with requests for draft deferment. Plans were made to alter the regular curriculum by introducing certain courses, chiefly of a technical nature, that would be of direct usefulness in war service. The second term was shortened by five weeks and an expanded summer session, in which the faculty volunteered to teach without compensation, was scheduled in order that students might be able to graduate in three years. With a view to the demands of military service, a rigorous compulsory physical education program was instituted. Having taken these steps, Rutgers authorities then looked to Washington for further guidance.

Along with one thousand college and university executives from forty-six states, President Clothier journeyed to Baltimore early in January 1942 to attend an emergency conference arranged by the American Council on Education. What would the federal government expect of higher education in this time of crisis? Aside from calling for various studies, the meeting contributed little to clarifying the situation. Months went by during which the campus adhered substantially to the normal routines. Finally, in May 1942, the Army and the Navy announced their plans, holding out the prospect that students who enlisted in their reserve programs might be able to remain in college indefinitely.

When the new academic year opened in September 1942, the upper classes had lost more than a quarter of their members, but the largest freshman class in history kept enrollments near peak level. Then, quite suddenly, the whole scene altered. The Selective Service Act was amended to reduce the draft age to eighteen. Almost simultaneously, it was announced that those in the enlisted reserve programs would be called into service. In the second term, withdrawals proceeded at an accelerated rate until by May there were fewer than eight hundred civilian undergraduates remaining in the men's colleges. National policy now decreed that college students, with rare exceptions, would not be permitted to complete their education as civilians. Instead, the military would make use of selected institutions to provide specialized training for those who had been inducted into service.

When the Army announced its Specialized Training Program late in 1942, Rutgers was selected as one of the pilot schools. In March 1943, the first contingent of A.S.T.P. trainees arrived; others soon followed in mounting numbers. Selected on the basis of tests and educational background from Army enlisted personnel, these men were to receive both basic and advanced training in civil, mechanical, electrical, and sanitary engineering. Another group, comprised of commissioned officers, was to have intensive training in foreign language and area studies. Later, premedical and pre dental contingents were added. With little time for adequate planning, the university had to adapt its personnel and facilities to these new demands.



Figure 1.2 Army Specialized Training Program students at Christmas dinner, December 1944

By the fall of 1943, with over 1,300 A.S.T.P. students in residence, in addition to civilian students, the men's colleges had the largest enrollment ever: 1,855. But then, as final preparations were made for the invasion of the Continent, manpower requirements led to the withdrawal from campus of all but a small fraction of the trainees. Male enrollment fell from the high point of over 1,800 in October 1943 to one-third that number in April 1944.

Meanwhile, in August 1943, the Army Specialized Training Reserve Program (A.S.T.R.P.) was inaugurated. High school graduates who had not attained the age of eighteen were eligible to enroll and continue their education in a prescribed program of study pending their induction into the Army. The first of these young reservists arrived in January 1944, and by early 1945 there were over four hundred attending classes in English, history, geography, mathematics, and science. This program survived until March 1946. Altogether, Rutgers provided training for nearly four thousand A.S.T.P. and A.S.T.R.P. enlistees.

As male civilian enrollment plummeted and constantly shifting programs for military personnel were introduced, the university was obliged to revise its entire mode of operation. In order to adapt to the A.S.T.P. routine, the men's colleges went on a schedule of four twelve-week terms in April 1943. The regular curricula were largely set aside and replaced by two basic standardized curricula for entering students. The few remaining upperclassmen were hard pressed to find appropriate courses and of necessity many attended classes at the College for Women. New students were admitted at the start of each of the terms, and degrees were awarded to graduates whenever they had completed their requirements.

The campus took on the aspect of a military post. Students in the Army training programs were under military discipline. From reveille at 6:15 a.m. to taps at 10:00 p.m., their only free time was between 5:30 and 6:30 in the evenings. Marching in uniformed ranks to and from classes, sleeping in double-decked beds in sparsely furnished quarters, and gathering for mess in the College Avenue Gymnasium, they were almost entirely segregated from the civilian students and had no opportunity to experience what had once been known as college life.

Almost every vestige of undergraduate activities disappeared from campus. Virtually all student organizations had disbanded by the end of 1943. All but a handful of the fraternities suspended operations. Several of their houses were taken over to provide accommodations for the Army trainees who, at their peak, occupied all the dormitories as well. The athletic program survived on only a limited basis because the Army trainees were barred from participating. The average age of the football team that played a modest schedule in 1944 was seventeen years, which may help explain why it lost to Brooklyn College. The baseball team in the spring of 1944 started out with three

pitchers. A month later there was only one, and he had not participated in the sport in high school.

For the faculty, the war years brought insecurity, unfamiliar burdens, and bewilderment, along with an often frustrated eagerness to make a meaningful contribution to the war effort. Within a year, more than fifty members of the teaching and administrative staff had entered military service, and others left to take posts with civilian war agencies. Teaching assignments changed frequently, as did staff requirements. In the late spring of 1944, following the departure of most of the A.S.T.P. cadre, there was a moment of near panic when it seemed that all non-tenured teachers—and some of the senior staff as well—would be without employment. Although many were let go before the crisis passed, others were retained and assigned to nonteaching duties. Soon the addition of the A.S.T.R.P. students and a trickle of returning veterans turned the tide.

Because the wartime programs stressed particular fields, many instructors found themselves obliged to teach unfamiliar disciplines. Historians, botanists, and classicists struggled with classes in mathematics, mechanical drawing, and navigation. As an illustration of the fluctuating requirements, there were seventeen teachers of mathematics in the fall of 1943; by spring, there were only four. Hardest hit were the humanities, which had little place in the war-oriented curriculum and all but disappeared from the course offerings. Along with their academic duties, most faculty members gave liberally of their time to serve as members of civil defense units and similar agencies, and some worked night shifts in nearby war industries.

The greatest impact of all, of course, was on students. At first, there were the questions of whether to remain in school, enlist, or opt for one of the attractive reserve programs. By 1942, and especially after the draft age was lowered to eighteen, the options were narrowed, but there was the choice of services to be weighed and calculations about the best course to follow to secure commissions. Many of those who continued in civilian status grew uncomfortable as they saw their friends in uniform. Rationing, blackouts, accelerated schedules, limited academic offerings, and minimal extracurricular diversions dulled the tone of life on campus; the exciting action was elsewhere. The environment was anything but conducive to serious intellectual effort.

The war services of the university were not confined to undergraduate training. Through the Engineering, Science, and Management War Training Programs, courses designed to enhance the effectiveness of personnel in New Jersey's war industries filled a real need. During the four and one-half years the program was in operation, 90,000 men and women from more than 1,500 companies were trained in every part of the state. University scientists in engineering, biology, and agriculture conducted research on war-related

projects and served as consultants in aiding war industries to solve technical problems.

Outwardly, the College for Women seemed to be little affected by the war, as its enrollments remained stable and its regular academic schedule was maintained. In actuality, however, the college was very involved. A War Service Committee mobilized students and faculty for participation in fund-raising appeals and for volunteer service in a host of community projects. A program of noncredit courses in such subjects as mechanical drawing, nutrition, and radio and auto mechanics met an enthusiastic response. Instead of the conventional social activities, the young women devoted their time to wrapping bandages, knitting sweaters, and packing gift boxes for veterans' hospitals. Most poignant of all was the correspondence with loved ones in training camps and on battle fronts around the globe.

The real impact of the war on the university cannot be communicated in terms of disrupted routines or statistical summaries. Its effect was intensely emotional, for it touched everyone with the agony of death and the fervor of sacrifice. Meaningless as the bare statistics now sound, some must be recorded. Altogether, 5,888 Rutgers men—1,700 of them undergraduates whose college careers were interrupted—served in the armed forces. This was 36 percent of the living alumni population. In addition, 173 women—alumnae or students of the College for Women—entered military service. There were thirty-four men and two women who gave their lives in the line of duty.

In almost every sense, the war threatened disaster for the university. Its students and many of its staff were scattered to every part of the world. Its academic program, built up over the course of decades, was changed beyond recognition. The traditional humanistic values that gave it meaning were set aside in the interest of providing the technical training needed to win a war. Freedom of inquiry became irrelevant when the paramount objective was survival. Fortunately, the damages did not prove to be irreparable. Fortunately, too, the ultimate victory, to which Rutgers and other universities had contributed so much in terms of men and knowledge, redeemed the losses that had been incurred.

Disruptive, chaotic, and damaging as the war experience was for Rutgers, those who guided it through those difficult years were imbued with the conviction that they were contributing to a wholly worthy cause. At the same time, they displayed remarkable confidence, optimism, and foresight in looking to the future. Administrators and faculty committees were more imaginative or more energetic in developing plans that were to eventuate in the complete transformation of Rutgers.

It is relevant to take note of these signs of forward movement. In the midst of the war, negotiations were initiated with state authorities that resulted early

in 1945 in the designation of Rutgers as the state university of New Jersey, a development that was to have a decisive effect on the future of the institution. At the same time, discussions were under way with what was then the University of Newark, which resulted in the merger of that institution with Rutgers in 1946. In another area, the Committee on Educational Policies reexamined the educational objectives of the university and formulated new curricular requirements, which remained in place until the upheaval of the late 1960s. A Committee on Personnel Procedures brought about sweeping changes in faculty governance and for the first time codified personnel policies. The establishment of a Research Council represented a new commitment to encourage and support scholarly activity on the part of the faculty. Not least of all, sound and generous plans were made to ensure that the anticipated hordes of discharged veterans could be accommodated.

The war brought a sharp break with the past, but the break was not the sterile interlude of an unmitigated catastrophe. It was rather a time for well-conceived decisions made when change was easy to contemplate and when thought about the meaning of the war's sacrifices spurred positive action toward large and inspiring goals. The abrupt transition in 1945 to the abnormal conditions created by the returning veterans left no interval during which to meditate on the wartime experience; there were immediate challenges to be confronted. Now, fifty years later, memories have dimmed, and it remains a task for historians to address the problem of assessing the impact of World War II on American higher education.