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The Effects of the Depression at West Chester State Teachers College

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The Great Depression had a negative impact on many aspects of American life. This paper explores how the Great Depression impacted West Chester State Teachers College (WCSTC) and what if any changes occurred at this time. The areas researched include enrollment, administrative decisions, programs to help students, and cultural life. It also looks at how WCSTC fared when compared to other colleges around the nation.

To research the changes that occurred at the State Teachers College during the Depression, I used West Chester State Teachers College catalogs for 1929-1933⁽¹⁾ to gather enrollment information. The catalogs show how many students were enrolled for each fall semester as of October 15. The college's yearbook The Serpentine was used to find the number of seniors graduating each spring.⁽²⁾ I used the yearbooks for the graduating classes of 1931-1934, unfortunately the 1930 book was missing. By comparing 4th year students enrolled in the fall to the yearbook issued in the spring semester, I was able to see what effects the Depression may have had on enrollment. The college catalogs also show a change in boarding fees. The college newspaper *Quad Angles* was helpful to see how the culture of campus life was impacted.⁽³⁾ I found information on administrative changes and additional information in the Centennial History of West Chester State College by Russell Sturzebecker.⁽⁴⁾

Figure 1: Enrollment Data For State Teachers College From 1929-1934. (Number of students enrolled as of October 15th of the fall semester)

Term	1st Year	2nd Year	3rd Year	4th Year	Total
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1928	566	523	102	48	1239
1929	562	527	138	138	1330
1930	562	517	158	139	1376
1931	509	505	190	158	1362
1932	379	421	221	187	1208
1933	328	365	221	223	1137

Figure 2: Number of 4th year students enrolled in the fall and spring semesters

Term	Fall	Spring	Change	Percent Decline
1930-1931	139	132	- 7	5%
1931-1932	158	149	- 26	17%
1932-1933	187	171	- 38	22%
1933-1934	223	143	- 46	32%

The most noticeable change at the college was the drop in enrollment during the worst years of the depression. Looking at the data in Fig. 1, there is slow steady growth in enrollment from 1929-1931. Then in 1932 enrollment drops 1362 to 1208. In 1933 enrollment drops by another 71 students. If we break the numbers down by 1st to 4th year students, we see a different pattern. The numbers of first and second year students decreased during the period of 1932-1933, but the numbers increased for third and fourth year students during the same time period. The number of first year students in 1932 is 130 less than in 1931. The steep drop in freshmen enrollment indicates that cash strapped families determined that survival was more important than higher education. There is also a drop in second year students. The numbers aren't quite as drastic. Perhaps families with students enrolled decided it was best for their children to stay in school and wait for the depression to end.

Numbers for the 3rd and 4th year students continue to rise during the 1932-1933 period. These students had already spent two or three years working towards their Bachelor's Degree. It may have made more sense for these students to stay in school and try to finish since they were already halfway finished, rather than delay their education. Another factor in the growing size

of the 3rd and 4th year classes is that the four-year curriculum was implemented in the 1930-31 year.(5)

Changes in enrollment also occur from semester to semester. Fig 2 shows the number of 4th year students enrolled in the fall semester and the number who graduated the following spring. As the depression worsens the loss rate for 4th year students rises dramatically from just 5% in the spring of 1931 to 32% in 1934. These numbers show that deepening Depression had a negative impact on enrollment.(6)

One factor that would have affected these numbers is enrollment during the summer semesters. According to Sturzebecker, 1931 had the highest summer enrollment. This was because many students were trying to finish sooner when they realized how scarce teaching jobs were.(7) Another factor that interfered with enrollment at WCSTC during the depression was the State government. According to the October 21, 1932 edition of *Quad Angles*, the state cut appropriations to state teacher colleges including WCSTC. In response to the cuts in 1932 the college administration began to limit enrollment by requiring higher academic standards for incoming freshmen.(8) Eventually this didn't matter when things got so bad that the school sent teachers out on their own time and money to enroll students.(9)

The 1933 catalogue lists an increase in fees for room and board, health education, and music education. The payments in the 1933 catalogue were broken into two separate contingency payments during the course of the semester. This change may have been made to help students and their families that had to live from check to check, unable to make the full payment at the beginning of the semester.(10)

The Depression even effected where students boarded. According to the Centennial History of West Chester State College, some students who were renting from families in the neighborhood could no longer afford to live there and had to move into dorms. However the converse was also true according Jack Waldron, whose family offered room to students as part of a program at the college to provide living quarters for the students. In return for room the only requirement of the students was to help out around the house.(11)

Even though the economics of the time prevented some students from finishing, or attending WCSTC, not everything was so bad. Many aspects of student life went on unchanged. Sports, club meetings, and plays continued as usual. Some extravagant events were held during the worst parts of the

depression. In December of 1932 the Day Student Division of The Women's Cooperative Association held a carnival in the recreation hall with fortune telling, freaks, animals, ring tossing and professional clowns.(12) The March 24, 1933 edition of *Quad Angles* notes that the education department was able to hold its annual festival replete with animals, including elephants, a parade, and a circus.(13) Those who were fortunate enough to be at WCSTC during the depression still had much to enjoy.

The economic slump seemed to hit other institutions in different ways than experience at WCSTC. Some schools had to come up with scholarships and work programs to keep students enrolled. The article "The Negro College Faces Depression," presents a study on the effects of the Depression on institutions of higher education for blacks. While there is much difference, because of the class of people involved, there are still some similar trends between some of the schools in the study and WSTC. For 60 percent of the schools surveyed enrollment rates were down 1 to 40 percent. Unlike West Chester some schools saw a gain of students. 35 percent of schools surveyed showed a gain of 1 to 100 percent. The average net loss was 1.5 percent for all schools surveyed.(14)

The lengths the black students had to go to in order to stay in school were much harder than students in WCSTC faced. Jobs such as janitors, firemen, cooks, and repairmen, were given instead of money so that black students could stay in school. The lifestyle was much different than at WCSTC where girls were protected from becoming live in maids in the homes of those they boarded with. Some of the black colleges had to reduce board or increase scholarship loans in order to keep students in school. The black students also struggled to find places to live. During this time period it was also harder for black families to maintain employment than for whites. Students at WCSTC had it pretty good compared to many of the black students.(15)

Similar problems were also faced at big universities. The article "Campus Gayety Hit By Effect of Slump," shows the bigger colleges like Columbia, Dartmouth, University of Pittsburgh, and Vanderbilt also faced enrollment decline during the Depression, specifically 1932. Columbia faced a loss of 1,366 students in 1932 while the University of Illinois a loss of 1,262 students. Some schools like Dartmouth and Virginia only lost about 30 students. Berkley in California had a gain of 608 students. There was a total net loss for the 19 institutions surveyed at 4,517. The average loss for these 19 institutions is about 4 percent. The average loss at WSTC for 1932 was 11 percent. Like WCSTC some of these schools also placed limits on enrollment by setting up rigid academic standards in order to deal with their financial limits. Students at

bigger schools gave up the non-essential and often had to get part time jobs on campus to get by. They also tried to get scholarship aid and tried to provide lower cost housing.(16)

During the Depression WCSTC loss rate was higher than the average loss rate for other schools around the nation. This may be do to the fact that it was hard to find teaching jobs during the Depression, which would have kept students from enrolling. Other schools offering various programs of study may have fared better during the Depression. On the other hand student life did not appear to be too rough on WCSTC students as compared to other schools around the nation where students had to struggle to get by. Sturzebecker notes that the students at the State Teachers College were isolated from the Depression. Similar to other institutions the college engaged in programs to find their students places to live. In some ways the WCSTC was the inverse of other schools around the nation, it had more enrollment loss, yet the students did not have quite a hard time.

The Great Depression had a big effect at the WCSTC, especially in enrollment. The school had a loss of 11 percent in 1932 and 16 percent in 1933. These numbers are much higher than those averages mentioned earlier. Like other colleges around the nation WCSTC tried to help students to make payments and find places to live. What is most different is that student life doesn't seem to have been greatly affected at the college, whereas students at other schools struggled to get by. This shows that the Depression had negative impact at WCSTC, but the results of that impact were different when compared to other schools in the nation.



Student automobiles parked in the academic quad, with High Street in the background. Source: The Serpentine, 1936

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