Rhetoric Society Quarterly
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rrsq20

Participating on an “Equal Footing”:
The Rhetorical Significance of California State Normal School in the Late Nineteenth Century
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Published online: 31 Mar 2011.

To cite this article: Suzanne Bordelon (2011) Participating on an “Equal Footing”: The Rhetorical Significance of California State Normal School in the Late Nineteenth Century, Rhetoric Society Quarterly, 41:2, 168-190, DOI: 10.1080/02773945.2011.553767

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2011.553767

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Participating on an “Equal Footing”:
The Rhetorical Significance of California State Normal School in the Late Nineteenth Century

Suzanne Bordelon

This essay examines the rhetorical education that late-nineteenth-century women received at California State Normal School. The article complicates Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran’s claim that during the nineteenth century, rhetorical theory and practice shifted from an oratorical to a professional culture by considering how gender, class, and region affected this transformation. Building on the research of Beth Ann Rothermel, this analysis also reveals that although experimentation concerning women’s gender roles occurred in the northeast, it was more sustained in the West. California women generally faced fewer gender constraints than did women in northeastern state normal schools and were provided with more opportunity to learn typically masculine discourse practices.

In their introduction to Oratorical Culture in Nineteenth-Century America: Transformations in the Theory and Practice of Rhetoric, Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran contend that the mid-nineteenth century moved toward professionalism and specialized knowledge. More specifically, they argue that during the nineteenth century, rhetorical theory and practice in the United States “transformed,” in the Burkean sense of the term, from an oratorical to a professional culture. At the beginning of the century students in American colleges learned neoclassical rhetoric, which was “a rhetoric of general citizenship closely tied to the public discourse practiced in [the] pulpit, bar, and senate of the larger society” (6). The authors explain that several important teachers of rhetoric at Yale and Harvard were “simultaneously practitioners in one or more of those rhetorical forms” (6).

By mid-century, they assert, oratorical culture began to wane, largely because of the growth of individualism and the increasing specialization of knowledge.
With these shifts, knowledge came under the control of professionals and specialists, rather than the community, and the rhetoric that developed turned toward the individual as the basis of moral authority. In the late nineteenth century, according to Clark and Halloran, this transformation is evident in universities’ use of written examinations in each subject under the authority of disciplinary specialists, rather than public oral examinations that were common at the beginning of the century. According to the authors, “The emphasis had shifted decisively from common to specialized knowledge, from liberal arts to the disciplines and professions” (19).

Although persuasive on many fronts, this argument may underestimate how gender, class, and region affected this shift. California State Normal School is a significant subject of study because it illustrates these potential limitations, particularly apparent when we investigate the rhetorical education or training in reading, writing, and speaking that students—predominantly women—received at California Normal in San Jose during the late nineteenth century.1 The first state normal school on the West Coast and the oldest institution of public higher education in California, the school represents an important emerging site in rhetoric and composition historiography—normal schools, the teacher-training institutions of the era (Gilbert 44).

While rhetoric and composition scholars have begun to recover the significance of normal schools to the field’s history, they have focused primarily on eastern, midwestern, and, to some extent, southern schools.2 Drawing on a variety of archival sources, my investigation builds on this scholarship by analyzing California State Normal School’s contribution to the field, particularly to women’s rhetorical training.3 In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women dominated

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1Here, I draw on David Gold’s definition of rhetorical education. In Rhetoric at the Margins: Revising the History of Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1873–1947, Gold defines rhetorical education as “reading, writing, and speaking instruction . . .” (x). Some might contend that using the term rhetoric is anachronistic for the period since it didn’t mean the same as it does today. While this may be true, by examining the specific reading, writing, and speaking practices of normal students, I try to guard against anachronism by revealing what such practices might have meant to these students within their nineteenth-century context.

2See Gold, “‘Where Brains Had a Chance’” and Rhetoric at the Margins, chapter 3, “Challenging Orthodoxies at a Rural Normal College”; Gray; Harmon; Fitzgerald, “The Platteville Papers Revisited” and “A Rediscovered Tradition”; Lindblom, Banks, and Quay; Lindblom and Dunn; Rothermel, “‘Our Life’s Work’” and “A Sphere of Noble Action.” Gold currently is coauthoring a book with Catherine Hobbs that explores rhetorical education at eight Southern public women’s colleges.

In the field of education, Ogren’s history of American normal schools includes California State Normal School in San Jose among the schools it discusses.

3As Barbara E. L’Epplattenier has asserted, “we can and should begin incorporating more explicit discussion of our primary research methods into our historical research” (68). Archival materials discussed in this article are held by San Jose State University Special Collections and Archives, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library. Materials were gathered during two week-long and one three-day visit completed between 2008 and 2010. During the time I was completing research, San Jose Special Collections’ staff was processing the normal school materials. As the material becomes available, it is being listed on the Online Archive of California. Consequently, the name used to identify the material may be slightly different once it is processed.
the student body at California State Normal School, as they did at many other normal schools. In fact, women typically made up more than 80 to 90 percent of the school’s population during this period.4

Since its inception, California State Normal School emphasized a rhetorical education, particularly training in speaking. This stress on speaking is evident in the early curriculum, which highlighted the study of language arts; in its examinations and recitations, which were conducted both orally and in writing; and in its commencement exercises, which showcased student orations and essays. It is also apparent in the records of the school’s literary societies and debating clubs, which provided significant elocutionary training, particularly for young women. Thus, not only did their training prepare them for the teaching profession, but it also encouraged women to develop their civic identities and to become effective public speakers. As Cheryl Glenn asserts, “Ideally, rhetorical education shapes all citizens for public participation…” (viii). In significant ways, California Normal was preparing its students for such participation. The progressive nature of this training is evident when considering that during this period women were denied the right to vote and were socially oppressed.

By investigating California State Normal School, this research enlarges our understanding of women’s rhetorical education and of rhetorical instruction in general at western state normal schools during this period. One way this study achieves this broader perspective is by investigating California Normal through the lenses of social class and particularly gender. As noted, this analysis complicates Clark and Halloran’s assertion that during the nineteenth century, rhetorical theory and practice shifted from an oratorical to a professional culture by considering how gender, class, and region affected this transformation. This research demonstrates that California Normal, similar to other normal schools of the period, represented a hybrid blend of both oratorical and professional culture that allowed the school to meet the educational needs of its students. Extending Beth Ann Rothermel’s research on Westfield State Normal School, the second public and first coeducational normal school in the nation, this analysis also reveals that although experimentation concerning women’s gender roles occurred in the northeast, it was more sustained in the West. In their coeducational societies and debating clubs, women and men at California Normal participated on a comparatively equal basis. I demonstrate that late-nineteenth-century California women generally faced fewer gender constraints than did women in northeastern state normal schools and were provided with more opportunity to learn typically masculine discourse practices and ultimately enhance their public persuasive abilities.

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4Women typically made up more than 90 percent of the student body since the school’s early formation in the 1850s and extending through 1867 (Allen and Royce 32). In the 1870s, the percentage of women enrolled dipped below 90 percent in the 1870s and 1880s, but again climbed above 90 percent in the 1890s and early 1900s (Ogren 66).
Normal School Context: Fostering a Professional and a Liberal Arts Education

California Normal and other state normal schools across the nation developed out of the common school revival during the decades before the Civil War. Educators such as Horace Mann believed that teacher-training institutions were necessary if the new public primary schools were to succeed. Although normal school founders drew on examples from the Prussian teacher seminary and the French école normale, they “designed American institutions dedicated to creating a corps of teachers who could cultivate moral, obedient, and efficient young citizens” (Thornburg and Ogren 260). In the United States, the first state-supported normal school was opened in 1839 in Lexington, Massachusetts. By 1870, thirty-nine state normal schools were located in the East, Midwest, and California (Thornburg and Ogren 260; Ogren 1).

Although teacher education was the central objective of American state normal schools, they also focused on academic subjects. As Christine A. Ogren notes in her history of American state normal schools, “Basic liberal-arts subjects were a necessary part of the curriculum…especially because, much to the principals’ consternation, the majority of their students arrived with limited exposure to anything beyond what was offered in the common schools” (45). As will become evident, California Normal’s first principal was among those principals frustrated with the academic level of the school’s students. Yet, for students from limited backgrounds, normal school courses and extracurricular activities in significant ways “provided entree to a wider world” (Ogren 45). This emphasis is evident in the reminiscences of Martin V. Ashbrook, California Normal class of 1864: “[A]t that time there were on the Pacific Coast few schools opening their portals to overgrown country louts. It was a sight to see a bearded youth carry school books. I had to go there or stay out of school” (Allen and Royce 23, emphasis in original). The passage reveals the non-traditional nature of some early students and the fact that California Normal offered educational access to students who otherwise had little opportunity to receive an advanced education. From 1856 to 1890, only twenty-four high schools were established in California, and it was not until 1868 that the University of California was founded and 1891 that Stanford University was established (Brown 4, 14). However, as Ogren asserts, historians, like the early principals, have “largely overlooked the role that early normal schools played in expanding access to education in the mid-nineteenth century” (45). As Kathryn Fitzgerald has stressed, state normal schools “democratized and expanded educational and vocational opportunity far beyond any existing institution, in terms of both class and gender” (“A Rediscovered” 228). This emphasis on increased educational access, particularly for female students, is evident when investigating California State Normal School.

Originally established as Minns’s Evening Normal School in 1857 in San Francisco, the school officially became California State Normal School in 1862
with a $3,000 legislative appropriation (Swett 263). At this time, only eight of the existing thirty-four states had established state normal schools: Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Michigan, New Jersey, Illinois, and Minnesota (Allen and Royce 7). In San Francisco, the school had a rough start with five principals and eight different locations in its first ten years of official existence (Gilbert 59). During the school’s first year, Principal Ahira Holmes makes frequent mention of the unsuitable conditions of the school, which was temporarily housed in an old music hall. As mentioned, Holmes also complains about the students’ lack of preparation, noting that many “are so deficient in point of mental discipline and habits of application…” (1 February 1862). As scholars have pointed out, normal schools provided higher education to women and men “from backgrounds that were unusual in higher education at the time” (Ogren 66). California State Normal School students typically did not come from the elite classes but were drawn from white, middle- and working-class families living primarily on the rural frontier—a population overlooked in our traditional histories of rhetorical education. Students were drawn to the school because in its early years they could attend for free, so long as they declared their intentions to teach in California public schools after graduating. Similar to other public normal schools, students were required to pay only for their room and board (Greathead 15).

In his first annual report, Holmes contends “the gold fever and restlessness of California society hindered the institution’s success” (Gilbert 30). After pressure from the State Superintendent of Education and the normal school’s president, as well as courting by the city of San Jose, the school was relocated to San Jose in 1870. The institution (now San Jose State University) would grow and thrive despite being razed by a fire in 1880 and severely damaged by the San Francisco earthquake in 1906.

Complicating Clark and Halloran’s Argument

As noted, since its inception, California State Normal School emphasized a rhetorical education, particularly training in speaking (Gillis 1). For instance, in the 1862 Normal School Course of Study, Unit I specifically mentions “Elocutionary Exercises,” and just two years later the normal school hired Professor Ebenezer Knowlton as a “specialist” to teach “light gymnastics and elocution” (qtd. in Gillis 1). In their 1873 report, “The Object and Wants of the Normal School,” Principal Charles H. Allen and Trustee Benjamin Cory encourage a devotion to language, declaring, “Language is the teacher’s instrument; if he would be successful, he must become the master of it” (qtd. in Allen and Royce 52). This stress on language is evident in the early examinations and in recitations, which were conducted both orally and in writing, and in the commencement exercises, which showcased student orations and essays. It is also apparent in the records of the
school’s coeducational societies and in its debating competitions, which provided significant elocutionary training.

This focus on persuasive public discourse based in shared values complicates Clark and Halloran’s claims that the mid-nineteenth century moved toward professionalism and specialized knowledge. As Clark and Halloran have acknowledged, their depiction of “oratorical culture” is “distinctly limited in the gender and class of its participants… almost all women and many men still remained at its margins” (5). One reason for the limited perspective of oratorical culture in American colleges is that the authors’ narrative of transformation is based primarily on an examination of the rhetoric taught at elite Eastern, all-male colleges, including Yale, Harvard, and Princeton (previously known as the College of New Jersey), at the beginning of the nineteenth century. These were among the primary institutions of higher education available at that time, so it is logical that these institutions are investigated. I would like, though, to investigate how gender, class, and region affected this shift and how it played out at California State Normal School.

In some ways, Clark and Halloran’s narrative applies to California Normal. For instance, the development of teacher training represents the expansion of professional culture and the specialization of knowledge. In addition, with the growth of individualism, many teachers were “motivated by the ideal of striving for individual advancement that would become central to middle-class culture in the nineteenth century” (Clark and Halloran 7). However, California State Normal School, like many normal schools, was not only preparing its students for professional occupations. Late-nineteenth-century California was largely a frontier, and although some students were teachers returning to school to advance their education, others had little more than an elementary-school background. A significant goal of California Normal was to educate these students and, in so doing, to introduce these teachers to middle- and upper-class culture and morality. One way of inculcating these values was through a liberal arts education.

Like some of the early teachers of rhetoric at Yale and Harvard, several early founders of normal schools were also directly familiar with “the public discourse practiced in [the] pulpit, bar, and senate of the larger society” (Clark and Halloran 6). A focus on moral training, at least initially, was integral to normal schools in the nineteenth century. As Richard J. Altenbaugh and Kathleen Underwood point out, the early founders of normal schools in the 1830s were ministers and politicians—not educators (140). As ministers and politicians, several early founders of normal schools were practitioners of one or more of these rhetorical forms. In addition, some of California Normal’s early principals in the 1860s and 1870s were also practitioners of rhetorical discourse. For instance, the school’s second principal, George W. Minns, had been a Harvard-trained lawyer and the fifth, Dr. William T. Lucky, was a Methodist minister. In fact, while attending law school, Minns worked in the office of noted Boston lawyer and orator Rufus Choate for two years, earning his L.L.B. degree from Harvard in 1840.
Gilbert 6; 52). The rhetorical training of these early normal school founders and principals suggests that the transformation from an oratorical to a professional culture may have come more slowly to California Normal (and other normal schools) than it did to northeastern all-male universities and that a blending of oratorical and professional culture was central to the normal school’s mission, given its students’ social class and backgrounds. In other words, because students had a more limited education, they received both a broad, liberal arts education and specialized training in teaching. The evidence also indicates that marginalized groups previously denied access to an oratorical education and their teachers still valued this type of training.

Oratorical Culture and California Normal

The normal school’s focus on rhetoric and oratorical culture is particularly evident when examining its Course of Study, examinations, recitations, and graduation essays and orations from the 1870s through 1890. Although there were several changes to the Course of Study, with the major changes discussed below, the stress on language arts remained rather consistent. The period from 1870 to 1900, according to Ogren, represents the “heyday” for American normal schools, when after facing tough beginnings, these institutions grew and flourished (4). This was true for California State Normal School, which, after a difficult start, grew from an enrollment of 164 students in 1870–71 to 785 (including the preparatory and training departments) in 1888–89 (Allen and Royce 102). This period of growth, which Benjamin Franklin Gilbert refers to as the school’s “Golden Years,” coincided with the principalship of Charles H. Allen, who served from 1873–1889 (61).

The school’s focus on rhetoric, particularly debate and public participation, is evident in the 1889 reminiscences of Charles Edwin Markham, who graduated in 1872 and later became a famous poet. Markham’s recollections focused on a weekly institute in which students discussed classroom teaching issues that was led by Principal Lucky, an ordained Methodist minister. These sessions were not limited to students but were attended by visitors as well as reporters: “Dr. Lucky presided, and all students joined in the debates. Many were the sallies of wit, many were the blows from Wisdom’s logic fist, many were the ludicrous blunders, in that day of budding orators” (Allen and Royce 46). Markham’s comments reveal that debate and participation were central to the teaching of the school’s principal, and, in a broader sense, they suggest that debate was still highly valued within the culture of late-nineteenth-century California.

The Course of Study during the 1872–73 academic year was a two-year program focusing on those subjects required to be taught in the common schools as well as classes on how to teach those subjects. Students also took several courses emphasizing rhetorical training. Since many students at California Normal had a limited education, faculty members placed a heavy emphasis on correctness, both in speaking and in writing. Scholars have noted that with the growth of middle-class
consciousness and emphasis on social mobility in the nineteenth century, the ability to write and speak correct English “took on new importance as a sign of membership in the upper strata” (Wright and Halloran 231). A focus on correct spelling is particularly evident in the faculty meeting minutes in the late nineteenth century. Yet students were exposed to a range of classes focusing on language. Students in their first year, the Junior Class, took courses called Reading and Vocal Culture, Written and Mental Word Analysis, Grammar, and Rhetoric. In the Senior Class, students took classes labeled Reading and Vocal Culture, Rhetoric, Grammar and Analysis, English Literature, Composition, and Declamation (1872 Catalogue 12).

In the 1875–76 academic year, the two-year course was extended to three—Junior, Middle, and Senior years—because Principal Allen felt that the two-year program did not allow enough time to cover the broad array of subjects students studied. With this change, students now could select from two courses of study, an elementary and a more advanced course that included additional practice in teaching and more sophisticated courses such as Rhetoric, Criticism & English Literature, Geometry & Trigonometry, and Chemistry. In the elementary course, students could graduate with an elementary diploma at the end of the second year, a revision aimed at meeting the burgeoning demand for elementary school teachers (1875 Catalogue 31).

The 1879 Catalogue states that the advanced three-year program included “the studies of the elementary course, and other subjects necessary to fit one to teach in the higher grades of schools, and to give a wide and more generous culture” (36). Graduates of the three-year program could receive a life diploma, provided that they had the required teaching experience (36). Based on the classes that students took, we can see that rhetorical education figured significantly in teacher training, with several courses specifically focusing on reading, writing, and speaking. Besides fostering students’ language skills, the school emphasized raising prospective teachers’ social class standings by introducing them to the cultural capital of white, middle- and upper-class society. During the late nineteenth century, social class divisions became even more pronounced, including “a new distinction between elite (or high) and mass (or low) culture”; thus, social class started to define not only people’s standard of living but also their “lifestyle and tastes” (Ogren 102).

In 1882, the Course of Instruction, as it was then called, featured English Grammar in the Junior Year; English Grammar, Word Analysis, and Composition in the Middle Year; and Rhetoric and Criticism & English Literature in the Senior Year (Catalogue 27). By 1890, the Catalogue included a section called the Course of Study in Detail that featured a fuller narrative description of the curriculum. Under English, the 1890 Catalogue declares that the aim “is to give practical

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5In 1896, the course of study for all California normal schools was extended to four years (Van Liew 131).
training in the correct and effective use of our mother tongue, paying special
attention to such elements and principles of speaking, reading, and composition,
as shall best develop power in gathering thought and in giving expression to
thought” (31). This passage reveals the integrated nature of reading, writing,
speaking at California Normal and the school’s belief in the empowering nature
of such practices.6

In their analysis of speech education in nineteenth-century American colleges,
Marie Hochmuth and Richard Murphy note that from 1850 to 1875 rhetorical
and elocutionary training became closely aligned with English departments, mov-
ing from an emphasis on persuasive discourse toward a stress on belles letters, with
a focus on word usage and style (168). In addition, elocution fell from being a
required subject to an elective in many colleges. From 1875 to 1900, the focus
in English departments had largely transitioned from rhetoric to composition,
from the teaching of persuasive public discourse to an emphasis on writing in vari-
ous “modes”: narration, description, exposition, and argumentation (172).

By 1890, several of these trends came to California Normal. For instance, under
the category of Rhetoric, the Course of Study indicated the adoption of Brainerd
Kellogg’s A Text-Book on Rhetoric. In his book, Kellogg explains that the term
rhetoric “comes originally from a Greek verb which mean to flow or to speak. Were
we to name the study now, it is possible that we should take some word which
means to write” (14; emphasis in original). In addition, although the text includes
a discussion of oral prose that features Conversation; Debates; Orations; Speeches;
Lectures and Addresses; Pleas and Sermons; this section is only twelve pages of the
276-page book (Keith 28). (A section on Style takes up 111 pages.) The use of
Kellogg’s text at California Normal suggests that toward the end of the century,
Rhetoric had transitioned from a more civic focus to an emphasis on style and
written composition. This change indicates that Clark and Halloran’s thesis
contending a shift from an oratorical to a professional culture was starting to
be felt at California Normal. However, from 1870 to 1890, the Course of Study
reveals the school’s broader understanding of rhetoric, and its integrated stress
on speaking, reading, and writing.

As we have seen, the school’s curriculum in the late nineteenth century high-
lighted the language arts. The civic, oratorical nature of the school is particularly
evident in the communal, oral nature of the early examinations, of recitations, and
of student graduation essays and orations. At California State Normal School, oral
and written performances were central to significant rites of passage. For instance,
the early examinations included both written and oral components that were

6As noted, correctness, particularly in spelling, was a key emphasis; however, a more sophisticated
understanding is revealed in the 17 November 1891 recommendations from a Committee on Spelling: “That
throughout the work of the school the effort be constantly made to impress upon students that careful obser-
vation of what they read and study is the surest way to become good spellers” (Faculty 227). Here, the
committee recognizes the complex nature of the language acquisition process.
conducted before an examining committee that included, among others, the Principal and state Superintendent of Public Instruction. Here is a description of the first semi-annual examination on 21 December 1862:

The Superintendent of Public Instruction A.J. Moulder Esq., several of the Public School Teachers of the City, and some of the friends of the pupils were present. The examination was exclusively oral and the exercises were interspersed with Calisthenics and Vocal Music. None of the pupils were deemed qualified to graduate at the close of the session. (Holmes 11)

Although the passage reveals the limited educational background of the early students, it also demonstrates the public, oral nature of these early events. Knowledge (examinations) had not yet come under the control of disciplinary specialists but was still considered of communal interest and significance.

Not only did the early examinations include an oral component, but students also regularly recited their lessons before their teachers. In his 1876 Report of Principal, Charles H. Allen complains about the impact rising class size is having on teachers’ workloads, particularly related to recitations: “With such classes, no teacher can do really good work. With an opportunity to recite only once in two or three days, even the most earnest pupil will become slack in preparing lessons. The only antidote to this is written recitations. This has been unceasingly applied, but entails such labor upon the teacher as few can endure” (Catalogue 35). In 1884 recitations were re-organized, “by which each regular pupil was given a study hour at the school, instead of spending the day in unbroken recitations, as previously” (Allen and Royce 81). These recitations reveal the oratorical culture of the normal school and the way that speaking, reading, and writing were integral to the school’s curriculum.

The other major oral performance was commencement, where seniors prepared graduation essays and presented or read their papers as a significant part of the ceremony. At several normal schools, including California State Normal School, male students’ presentations were typically called “orations” and female students “essays.” In her study of Illinois State Normal School from 1857–1899, Sandra D. Harmon found a similar distinction in the graduation essays or “themes” that were presented throughout the nineteenth century at Illinois (94). According to Harmon, “While both men and women appeared on the platform to make oral presentations, there was... a clear distinction between masculine and feminine styles. Men orated. Women read” (94). As Harmon explains, the distinction reflected the notion that “the world of public speaking and debate was still a male world” (91). Women’s rhetorical skills were typically limited to writing, although, as is evident, women were allowed to read their own compositions during

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7It’s difficult to know the degree to which the male students orated extemporaneously. Since both males and females were working from written papers, it’s safe to assume that both involved a degree of reading.
commencement. Although women’s experience at commencement might not have been the same as men’s, California Normal women did gain experience speaking before a large public audience and, as will become apparent, delivery and content were viewed as significant aspects of these presentations. These ceremonies were attended by faculty and family members, and they also were covered by the local newspapers. In addition, during this period complete student essays often were published in both the local and student newspapers, indicating the public importance of these activities.

The topics for these speeches were typically drawn from the students’ studies, and they sometimes included a persuasive, civic dimension. For instance, Sarah A. J. Locke’s essay “Is it Worth While?” reveals her training in debate and argumentation. The essay addresses a significant question being discussed after the burning of California Normal in February of 1880 (just three months before Locke’s essay): “Is it worth while to sustain a Normal School in California? . . . And to this was often appended the query, ‘Do not most of the lady graduates marry as soon as they have finished?’” (2). After the normal school burned to the ground, this and other issues related to the school’s effectiveness were debated in the state legislature, and Principal Allen also countered similar assertions in his annual reports. In her 1880 essay, Locke enters this public discussion, but she investigates the question from the other side, asking, “Is it worth while for the students to accept of the proffered advantages, and assume the responsibility of instructors of the coming generation?” (2). By turning the question around, Locke underscores the significant responsibility being asked of predominantly female teachers, a point largely ignored in the debates. Locke’s address demonstrates that California Normal women were learning what Catherine Hobbs refers to as “effective literacy,” or “a level of literacy that enables the user to act to effect change, in her own life and in society” (1). California Normal women’s deployment of effective literacy is evident in the fact that students sometimes used their commencement essays to enter public discussions, to investigate issues related to women, and to resist traditional gender assumptions.

These commencement presentations were viewed as important occasions by both teachers and students at California State Normal. According to Mary E. Hendrix (class of 1873), significant time and practice were devoted to their preparation: “Now began the drill on our commencement exercises. We were taken, one at a time, into the large, unfinished audience hall to practice. Miss Houghton was an able elocutionist. She seemed to have an ocean of voice at her command” (Allen and Royce 49). Here, it is apparent that the commencement presentations were taken seriously and that strong speaking skills were highly valued. In addition, even though women read their essays, the school newspaper commented on the speaker’s delivery skills and on the content of their presentations. For instance, one student reporter noted, “[t]he young lady’s enunciation was clear and distinct . . . and her mental forces marshaled in full array for an effective support of her theories” (“Commencement” 84). The comments reveal that delivery
was an important aspect of these presentations and that students had learned the skills and language to evaluate the effectiveness of their rhetorical training. The student’s remarks also demonstrate the importance of invention and critical thinking to the essay-writing process. In examining California State Normal School’s early curriculum, we can see that training in speaking, reading, and writing was central to the education teachers received and that an oratorical culture still appeared to pervade the normal school and West Coast society.

This emphasis on rhetorical training was not limited to California State Normal School. In its discussion of the “intellectual life and culture” of normal schools across the nation, the 1899 Report of the Committee on Normal Schools declares that there are important reasons why students at colleges and other institutions should be encouraged to develop literary societies. However, the Committee asserts that there are even more significant arguments why student teachers should be urged to foster such organizations. According to the Committee,

Teachers should be trained to write and speak. They should be at home on the page of the periodical and on the platform. They should not only have ideas and theories, but they should acquire the power to impress them upon others. In no way can public educational interest be advanced and public opinion better established than thru a proper use of the press and the platform. (National Educational Association 30)

The Committee’s stress on ensuring that teachers were not only capable instructors but also skilled public persuaders is evident in this passage. Teachers were to be professionally trained but also civically involved, using their persuasive abilities to shape public opinion and to advocate for education. The passage suggests that an oratorical culture was still integral to the teaching profession late into the nineteenth century.

Regional Difference in Gender Roles at California Normal and Westfield

In analyzing Clark and Halloran’s thesis, I have attempted to demonstrate that the transition from an oratorical to a professional culture in American colleges depended on several factors, including, for instance, the needs of the students, the goals of the school, and the regional location. These aspects—particularly region—are also important to consider when examining similar institutions, such as normal schools. I now turn to an analysis of gender roles at California Normal and Westfield State Normal in the late nineteenth century. By investigating student coeducational societies and debating clubs, we can see that although experimentation concerning women’s gender roles was apparent in the northeast, it was more persistent in the West. To explore these regional differences, I will start by examining two early coeducational societies at San Jose: the Philomathean Society (Lovers of Learning) and the Erosophian Literary Society (Lovers of
Wisdom). Originally, the Philomathean Society seems to have been an all-male society. However, on 15 August 1873, the minutes indicate that the question of whether “young ladies be invited to become members of our society,” was tentatively broached and held over for discussion until the next meeting (32). The following week the issue was “discussed at considerable length. On motion and second the question was put before the house in the following manner: Shall we receive the Ladies as members on equal footing with ourselves—Carried” (35). At the next meeting, a woman was elected vice president of the society. Although single-sex societies would continue to exist alongside coeducational ones, this motion seems to have signaled the start of coeducational societies at San Jose. The Philomathean and other coeducational societies are notable because they allowed women and men to participate on a relatively “equal footing.” In addition, the student societies provided a vehicle for training women to use their rhetorical skills not only as teachers but also as active citizens. This preparation is particularly significant because in California, women’s suffrage was not enacted until 1911.

San Jose’s openness concerning women’s participation in debate is evident in the minutes of the Philomathean and Erosophian societies. The ledger books from these early societies indicate that students were to present “orations, declamations, and essays” at each weekly meeting. In addition, a formalized, agonistic debate was central to the meetings. Each question featured only two sides—an affirmative and negative side—and the chair typically decided the question. The minutes of the Philomathean Society indicate that student teams were assigned debate questions at the previous meeting, allowing time for careful thought and preparation. The format resembled the extempore debate introduced in 1875 by the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard (Potter 244). San Jose’s debates often featured teams composed of both sexes, enabling female and male students to engage each other directly in disputation. In her history of state normal schools in the United States, Ogren found that “[i]n the South and East, where social mores were generally traditional, single-sex societies were more common” than in the Midwest and West (109). Although men’s and women’s groups often met jointly in the South and East, they typically did not compete against each other in debate (Ogren 109). However, gender segregation was not as pronounced in the West and Midwest, “where societies were most likely to be coeducational” (Ogren 110).

8 In 1896, the Philomathean Society and the “K.S.” or Knowledge Seekers became the Allenian Rhetorical Society, named after former Principal Allen (Greathead 71). The Allenian Society, though, was not coeducational, but open only to “any young lady in good standing in school” (Normal School Literary Society Ledgers 13). The purpose of the Allenian Society, according to its constitution and by-laws, was “to gain a knowledge of Parliamentary Usage, to acquire fluency for public speaking, to better prepare for duties of citizenship, to cultivate a love for decorum in public places, and to otherwise work for mutual benefit and instruction” (13). As Ogren explains, the various societies at San Jose “were especially protean, as close to two dozen mixed and single-sex societies formed and re-formed among San-Jose students” (110).
At Eastern state normal schools in the 1850s, though, Beth Ann Rothermel notes that coeducational societies typically assigned gendered rhetorical duties to men and women: “men would debate and give orations, while women would write for literary magazines and give recitations” (“A Sphere” 42). In her analysis of the rhetorical education of women at Westfield State Normal School in Massachusetts in the nineteenth century, Rothermel asserts that a similar division of rhetorical duties prevailed at Westfield in the mid 1850s through the 1870s. In contrast, Rothermel found experimentation with traditionally masculine discourse practices, such as debate, in the 1840s through the mid 1850s. However, from the 1850s through the 1870s, there was greater ambivalence over such practices, yet women did develop their rhetorical power through experimentation with other discourse forms in the school’s literary society periodical. In addition, women still composed and delivered original graduation essays. By 1882, though, Westfield’s Philologian Society granted women “‘all the rights and privileges which hitherto have been accorded to the gentlemen alone’” (qtd. in Rothermel, “A Sphere” 52–53). In the 1880s and 1890s, women expressed less unease about typically masculine discourse practices and once again participated in debate.

As noted, in the 1840s to the mid 1850s, Westfield’s coeducational societies provided female students with broader access to traditionally masculine rhetorical practices. For example, the constitution of Westfield’s coeducational Improvement Society offered its female students the opportunity to participate in debate. However, instead of delivering their debates extemporaneously, women were to write their arguments so that they then could be read aloud at the meetings. In addition, women were appointed as debate critics. Rothermel asserts that this early era was a “period of experimentation when it came to defining women’s roles both in Westfield’s classrooms and in its Improvement Society” and that this experimentation was perhaps spurred by broader societal uncertainties about women’s roles (“A Sphere” 43). This period of experimentation was short-lived, though. As noted, from the 1850 to 1870s, rhetorical duties in Westfield’s literary societies became more strictly defined according to gender, “with male members debating and giving orations, and female members reciting and writing for a literary magazine, The Normal Casket” (“A Sphere” 47).

Rothermel suggests that Westfield women may not have participated in debate with men because they did not view such practices as helpful in fostering “less confrontational pedagogies of engagement, such as discussion, which were increasingly seen as the key to successful instruction” (“A Sphere” 49). Moreover, developing discourse strategies like discussion and conversation was also more

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9This separation of duties was also the case in Illinois State Normal School’s coeducational societies throughout much of the late nineteenth century. In addition, this division was evident in 1879 and 1880, when internormal contests were featured between Illinois and Carbondale State Normal University. Although men and women competed as musicians and essayists, only men served as debaters and orators, and only women were featured as “declaimers” (Harmon 90–91).
easily reconciled with broader cultural assumptions about “proper feminine behavior” (“A Sphere” 48).10

While the West Coast went through a similar period of experimentation as the northeast, it occurred later, with gender roles sustaining a greater degree of flexibility in the West. As David Gold asserts, Western normal schools “tended to make fewer gender distinctions than Eastern normal schools or even Western state colleges, though treatment of women varied from school to school” (Rhetoric at the Margins 117). Although speculating extensively about the various reasons for the gender differences between the East and West is beyond the scope of this essay, one significant rationale may be related to differences in women’s lifestyles and civic participation in the nineteenth century. Though he notes scholarly disagreement concerning women’s agency in the West during this period, Casey Ryan Kelly asserts, “[t]he conditions of everyday life that structured gender norms were radically different in the West from those in the East” (207). In the East, industrialization and urbanization increased the number of men who could support their families without assistance from their wives or daughters; thus, the home no longer was the center of production and a gendered division of labor was strengthened. Consequently, upper-class women in the East were often limited to the domestic sphere and protected “from the supposedly brutal conditions of public life” (Kelly 207). In the West, the demands of a frontier lifestyle often required the labor of both men and women, “blurring the lines between public and private” and putting “some women into more versatile family and public roles for purposes of survival” (Kelly 207, 208). Gender variations may also be related to differences in attitudes about women’s civic participation, evident in the women’s suffrage movement. As Rebecca J. Mead explains, near the end of 1914 almost all of the western states and territories had approved of women’s suffrage: “These western successes stand in profound contrast to the East, where few women voted until after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment (1920) . . .” (1). The successful movement to enfranchise women in the West is yet another indicator of the ways women’s roles were less constrained in the West than in the East.

This challenging of women’s position in society is reflected in the fact that San Jose women formed their own military drill companies and even competed against male companies. A February 1892 alumni publication asserts, “Companies of young ladies—minus muskets of course—have been formed and these display as much skills and enthusiasm as the young men” (Kennedy 171). In April

10In significant ways, this early shift to discussion at Westfield could be viewed as anticipating later dissatisfaction with intercollegiate debate and a broader turn toward instruction in discussion in speech education. According to William M. Keith, concerns within the new speech field related to coaching methods, requirements that debaters argue both sides of the questions, and other criticisms, “turned on this very notion of debate as training in civic communication skills” (66). Keith asserts that leaders in the emerging field viewed discussion as better suited to the nation’s democratic ideals and the civic goals they hoped to embody through their speech instruction.
1892, an alumni association publication reported that “the long delayed competitive drill between Companies A [comprised of women] and B [comprised of men] took place in front of the Normal building, before a large and interested audience” (“Normal Index” 272). Representatives from the National Guards of California and the United States Militia served as judges. The women’s company won the competition.

This questioning of women’s, as well as men’s, position in society is also reflected in some of the debate topics. On 19 December 1873, for instance, the Philomathean’s debated the following topic: “That the mind of woman is not inferior to that of man” (59). On 4 December 1874, they debated whether “woman is more revengeful than man” (122), and on 28 August 1874, they discussed whether “men are more given to gossiping than women” (105). The debate in 1873 featured mixed teams, but the last two debates were made up of all-women teams. Thus, the late nineteenth century appears to represent a period of experimentation for Californian women, which was expressed in everything from military drill to debate.

At San Jose, women and men in coeducational societies were assigned gender-specific rhetorical duties to some extent, but not to the degree that they were at Westfield in the 1850s through the 1870s. For instance, a woman typically served as the “essayist” while a man was the “orator,” and women often completed the “select reading[s]” and provided the program’s musical entertainment. However, both men and women served as critics and were featured in recitations, readings, declamations, and debates. In addition, women often were society officers, typically serving as president and vice president. One outcome for many young women was that they gained significant practice in mixed- and single-company public debate as well as experience in a variety of speaking occasions. As officers, they also acquired important leadership skills, presiding over the meetings and organizing the weekly programs.

In the coeducational societies, the topics for the debates were wide ranging, including everything from educational policy to the benefits of cremation. For instance, students in the Philomathean Society in 1874 and 1875 debated the following topics: “That true eloquence is the gift of nature not of art” (4 February 1875 137) and “That cremation is preferable to the ordinary method of interment” (28 August 1874 104). Topics from the Erosophian Society in 1873 and 1874 included the following: “That all persons who intend to employ themselves as teachers in the Public Schools of Cal. be required to undergo a thorough course of Normal training” (19 December 1873 21) and “That there should be a property qualification for suffrage” (27 February 1874 39). Debating remained popular despite the fact that students had to prepare for these debates on top of their regular school workload.

Occasionally, the Philomathean and Erosophian societies met for “a union debate,” which featured a public intersociety debate. Such a meeting occurred on 13 February 1874. According to the Philomathean Society ledger book, “In
spite of the rain quite a number of delegates were present from the Emendian, Lecticonian, Rhizonian, Santa Clara Union, and Archanian [literary] societies, as well as a number of the citizens of San Jose...” (79). From this passage, we can see that the joint meeting of the societies drew the attention of the community as well as the interest of nearby literary societies. The public exercises opened with instrumental music, which was followed by a speech on the “Objects and workings of Granges,” an essay reading entitled “Why?” and a presentation by “Humorous White,” which included an oration, a story featuring “Me and my dog Touzer,” and a funny poem. Afterward, the audience listened to a reading of a Valentine’s Day poem and a “select reading” (79). A man delivered the speech, while a woman read the essay. The oration was also delivered by a man, and women read the poem and completed the select reading.

Although the rhetorical duties tended to be defined more traditionally according to gender, this was not true for the debate, which featured the question: “Resolved, that the present social and political conditions of the United States demand the action of the Grangers.” The minutes from the Erosophian Society note “the following ladies and gentlemen were appointed on the Aff. and Neg. of the question. Aff. Miss Crumry and Mr. Farnham. Neg. Mr. E.R. Brooks and Miss Intermille” (35). The construction of the teams—a woman and man competing against the same—suggests that women and men were, indeed, participating on an “equal footing.” At this joint meeting of the societies, women were able to practice their rhetorical skills before a broader, mixed-company, public audience. In so doing, they were able to fashion their civic identities.

Debate continued to be a popular activity through the 1920s, particularly internormal debates between San Jose and Chico State Normal School, held from 1901 to 1919 (Greathead 88). The debate teams often were made up of both men and women, once again suggesting the relatively equal basis of participation. The keen interest in debate in San Jose and Chico is evident in a 1908 article aimed at recruiting students for the school debate team, which asserts that debate is “given more emphasis in Colleges, Normal and High Schools than ever before. This is as it should be, for what art is of more practical value than the ability to express our ideas with perfect poise, accurately, and to the point” (“Debating,” Normal Pennant). The internormal competition with Chico featured public tryouts and even included a student debating manager “who worked up a competitive spirit, and kept the interest at top notch till the eve of the contest” (“Debating,” La Torre 106).

According to a 1910 Chico student newspaper, the competition is associated with noteworthy traditions: the normal school President was typically invited to accompany the visiting team and to serve as the acting chair, and the judges

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11In 1882, a Branch Normal School was opened in Los Angeles. It became an independent state normal school in 1887. In 1919, Los Angeles State Normal School became a southern branch of the University of California. In 1927, the school became the University of California at Los Angeles (Gilbert 80).
selected were “men who are well and favorably known in the educational or in the other public circles of the state” (Jones 23). In addition, the debate topic “shall be a subject worthy not only of the best minds of our student body, but of the best minds of our time” (Jones 23). In other words, the subject was to be of broader relevance to society. The debate topic that year was: “Resolved, that all public and unclaimed lands within the boundaries of a state shall be under state control” (Jones 25). The student newspaper article underscores the significance of these debates:

This event is a test of the power of a student to inform himself from every day sources upon a subject of public interest, a test of his power to think upon the material gathered from sources, to digest it, to make it over into his own thought fibre, to express that thought upon his material, in a literary form which shall be interesting, attractive, forceful, convincing. (Jones 23)

As is evident from this passage, the competition between San Jose and Chico was ardent. Although these debates were intense and could take an emotional toll on the participants, they enhanced women’s intellectual abilities while fostering their public identities.12

In their article on intercollegiate debate, L. Leroy Cowperthwaite and A. Craig Baird assert that during the early beginnings of intercollegiate debating in the 1890s, “the appearance of women upon the public platform continued to be viewed with disfavor” (269). According to Cowperthwaite and Baird it was not until after World War I that women started to participate in intercollegiate debate. The first women’s intercollegiate debate team in the Middle West reportedly occurred in 1921, and by 1923, men and women, especially in the Midwest, were debating together (270). Yet the internormal competitions between San Jose and Chico, as well as debating contests among other normal schools and women’s colleges, significantly predate these competitions.13 They reveal the gendered nature of our histories and the ways that traditional histories of speech education have overlooked the activities of normal schools and women’s colleges. However, as David Gold reminds us, “[w]e cannot make broad claims about the development of rhetorical education without examining the diverse range of student bodies and institutions that participated in such education . . .” (Rhetoric at the Margins 7). Normal schools are important because they allow us to gain a fuller understanding of the growth of the rhetorical arts during this period.

12In fact in 1917, one female student suffered “a nervous breakdown the week before the debate”; however, the alternate “took her carefully prepared arguments and mastered them” (“Debating,” La Torre 107). In 1924, the Central California Intercollegiate Debating Federation was organized and San Jose State Teachers College was a charter member. However, interest in debate eventually declined in the late twenties and debating was discontinued (Greathed 81).

13According to Kathryn M. Conway, in 1902 Vassar and Wellesley colleges held the first women’s intercollegiate debate (217).
Conclusion

In examining California Normal, I have sought to provide a more nuanced understanding of Clark and Halloran’s assertion that rhetorical theory and practice transformed from an oratorical to a professional culture in the mid-nineteenth century by demonstrating that this argument underestimates how class, gender, and regional differences affected this shift. Based largely on an analysis of elite Eastern colleges in the early 1800s, Clark and Halloran’s argument overlooks how other institutions, namely normal schools, were affected by this transformation. I have shown that California State Normal, like other normal schools of the period, represented what might be characterized as a hybrid blend of both professional and oratorical cultures. Students were introduced to the more specialized knowledge of teaching theory and practice while gaining a basic liberal arts education that emphasized significant aspects of oratorical culture, including a focus on persuasive public discourse based in shared values. Students often had little more than an elementary education because access to high schools and higher education was limited in the state during this period. In order to meet the educational needs of its students, California Normal provided a basic liberal arts education as well as teacher-preparation courses. Thus, aspects of oratorical culture were present at California Normal well beyond the mid-nineteenth century.

Furthermore, this analysis has revealed that not only were there differences between normal schools and Eastern male colleges, but also there were variations among normal schools. California Normal, like northeastern normal schools, went through a period of experimentation when women’s gender roles were not clearly defined. However, in California this period of experimentation was more persistent than in the northeast. The end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, according to Ogren, was “a time of consternation in the popular press, politics, and middle-class society in general regarding proper sex roles” (175). This questioning of women’s position in society paralleled broader national developments including the entrance of women into higher education, the growth of the suffrage movement, and the advent of unmarried women pursuing careers, all of which caused concern about “the survival of middle-class femininity” (Ogren 175). In significant and varied ways, women resisted traditional male dominance of the public arena. At California Normal, this redefining of women’s social status was associated with a certain amount of gender flexibility. I have tried not to argue that rhetorical training at California Normal was radically different from Westfields’, but to suggest that less restrictive gender assumptions at California Normal may have made it easier for women to challenge traditional conventions, such as male dominance of the public arena. In their school life, particularly in their literary societies, California Normal women and men were treated relatively the same. The coeducational societies were based on an assumption of gender equality, an assumption that similarly challenged control of the public sphere.
Thus, in these societies California women typically faced fewer gender con-
straints than did women in northeastern state normal schools and were provided
with more opportunity to learn typically masculine discourse practices. In their
coeducational societies and debating clubs, women directly disputed against
men in weekly society gatherings, in broader public meetings, and in internormal
debating competitions. Not only did their extracurricular activities enrich what
female students had learned in their academic courses but they also enhanced their
leadership abilities, broadened their intellectual life, and ultimately prepared
women for more vocal and public social roles.

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