

Masako Hattori
Postdoctoral Fellow
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, University of Tokyo
mh3079@columbia.edu

Youth, Higher Education, and National Security in Interwar America

American society returned to “normalcy” after the end of World War I, so the conventional narrative goes. Having rejected the League of Nations, Congress cut down military budget significantly, if not to the prewar level. According to this narrative, the 1920s was a time of consumerism, nativism, and prohibition, followed by a decade of the Great Depression and New Deal reforms. Toward the late 1930s, the nation drew closer to war but real military presence did not resurface until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. In short, military aspects are virtually absent from the standard narrative of civilian life in the United States in the years between the two world wars.

This paper shows how American society in the interwar years, in fact, experienced a subtle yet significant ideological and institutional change in the relationship between higher education and national defense that would leave an enduring effect in the years to come. Specifically, I examine how the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC), an emergency preparedness effort for World War I, was maintained in the interwar years, offering elementary military training to male students in civilian higher-education institutions. The maintenance of ROTC after World War I indicated that higher education now assumed the role of training male youth militarily not only in war but also in peace. By examining wide-ranging sources including Congressional debates, court cases, and periodicals, I demonstrate how the institutionalization of ROTC in civilian colleges was driven by supporters with various national-defense and educational goals: universal military training (UMT) advocates who considered ROTC as a step toward the eventual realization of UMT, peacetime preparedness promoters who believed that ROTC was a solution to the conundrum of realizing military preparedness without resorting to means that appeared militaristic or un-American, and educators and reformers who expected that military training would “toughen” American youth. In many cases, these ROTC supporters relied on two or more of the above reasons to support ROTC, blurring the distinction between national security and education. Historians have examined the extensive role higher education played in the two world wars and the Cold War, but the case of ROTC shows that the idea that colleges should serve national defense was not absent in the interwar years. Rather, the idea, first developed during World War I, had survived the interwar years before occupying the political foreground in the 1940s.