

## **RU responses to Great Depression**

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**Summary:** During the Great Depression, the State Teachers College at Radford was forced to reduce faculty and staff salaries by about 20% in 1932-33, with an additional 5% reduction in January 1933. In 1938 some selected layoffs and salary reductions were made, but by 1938 enrollment was increasing, and salaries were raised to match and, eventually, exceed pre-1932 reductions. Radford also benefited from New Deal legislation, working with federal agencies on works projects on campus, including construction of new buildings, while many students received federal relief.

**Narrative:** The State Teachers College at Radford showed no real sign of economic distress for several years after the stock market crash in October 1929. Salaries remained stable (averaging \$3,000 for a professor for a nine-month contract), several new faculty and staff were hired, and construction was started on the John Preston McConnell Library building.

By April 1932, however, President McConnell made this comment in a report to the State Board of Education (SBE), "There has been a great depression in the whole State of Virginia. The depression as been particularly noticeable as reflected in the resources of the students from southside Virginia and the great coal and cattle regions of the southwest. " In this same report he noted the state legislature's adoption of "some rather drastic measures as to the reduction in appropriation for salaries and certain other provisions," adding that he felt that these measures were "justifiable under the depressed financial conditions that prevail in Virginia and throughout the United States as this time."

Three months later, Dr. McConnell reported to the SBE that Radford's 1931-32 session was beset with "more problems than any other session in the history of the college" and that the depression "has laid a heavy hand indeed on education from the kindergarten to the university." Enrollment and tuition revenues were down. As a result, faculty and staff salaries were reduced by roughly 20%, effective with the 1932-33 academic year. For instance, Mathematics Professor W.R. Bowers' monthly salary went from \$333.33 in 1931-32 to \$266.66 in 1932-33. Similar salary reductions were reported for all faculty and staff. Interestingly, McConnell's reports to the SBE in 1934 and 1935 still listed the "base salaries" of faculty and staff at 1932, pre-reduction levels, indicating that the reductions were considered temporary.

In August 1932, President McConnell met with Governor Pollard and discussed the possibility of New Deal works projects to employ New River Valley workers to construct a dormitory at Radford. Various improvements to buildings and infrastructure resulted from this influx of federal funds, as well as construction of a kitchen and dining hall. Dr. McConnell also reported in 1934 that students were receiving Federal Emergency Relief funding.

Radford sent a reversion of 10% of their annual budget back to the state coffers late in 1932, per legislative mandate. Salaries were not affected by this cut, but in December 1932 a second budget cut of 5% was ordered by the

Governor, and in January 1933 President McConnell applied this uniformly to all faculty and salaries. Many faculty also taught summer courses, which added additional income to their 9 month salaries, and these salaries were also cut.

President McConnell's last report to the SBE was in August 1937, prior to his resignation three months later due to poor health. In this he asked for salary increases for faculty and staff, and made several specific, merit-based recommendations for these increases. Beginning in 1938, the SBE reports would be filed by Radford's second president, D. W. Peters.

In his second report to the SBE in April 1938, President Peters noted the necessity to trim the budget due to declining enrollment and a corresponding reduction in income. He made several adjustments to the staff working at Radford's training schools, eliminating seven positions and laying off those employees, and reducing the salary of the training school director from \$2,100 to \$1,800. Peters also addressed salaries for teaching faculty and college staff, recognizing the difficulty this created because Radford was in the process of expanding curricula to be more competitive with other training or normal schools in the region, such as Appalachian State Teacher's College in Boone, NC. Peters placed two professors on temporary leave and laid off a third, and reduced the salaries of three teachers by \$300 each.

As enrollment increased, Peters gave salary increases to many, but not all, faculty for the 1938-39 academic year. Most increases were made to "overcome inequalities," and no faculty or staff salaries exceeded 1929 levels. Radford was also using Public Works Administration funding to construct a President's house, a science building, a new dorm, and a power plant and underground tunnels.

Faculty and staff salaries were increased for the 1939-40 academic year, and many of these increases exceeded 1929 levels. There were 15 professors on the faculty, with those holding the PhD earning \$3,200 per year and those with a Master's earning \$3,000. The eight Associate Professors earned between \$2,100 and \$2,700, while the nine Assistant Professors' salaries ranged between \$1,050 to \$1,800.

The economic landscape of Radford changed in 1940 when the ammunition plant was planned. In an emergency letter to the SBE in September 1940, President Peters reported that the influx of workers coming to Radford to build the ammunition plant had raised rents and driven up salaries, and that a number of College's workers were receiving better offers at the ammunition plant. Peters was able to make counter-offers, and in the case of the Mechanical Supervisor Bryan Allen, Peters raised his salary from \$1,980 per year to \$2,400, effectively counter-offering the ammunition plant's offer and keeping Bryan on the staff.

Source: Reports to the State Board of Education, 1929-1940, Radford University Archives, McConnell Library.