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IIT Navy V-12

During the first half of the 1940s, at the request of the United States military services, IIT became an education center for both civilian and military personnel. This included offering a variety of short-term courses for civilian war workers so great in number that by August 1942, IIT had already become the “war training center of [the] Midwest.” Programs specifically for members of the military were so numerous that by June 1943, the U.S. Army and Navy were using 70 percent of IIT’s engineering facilities, and by the end of that year more than 40,000 people had taken defense-related training classes at the university.

Two primary factors contributed to IIT’s position at the leading edge of this effort. One was the academic programming that IIT could offer to supplement the military’s training, namely engineering courses. The second was Henry T. Heald, IIT’s dynamic young president.

Barely a week after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Heald wrote to Admiral Charles W. Nimitz, requesting that a Naval Reserve Officer Training unit be formed at IIT. Heald was no doubt inspired by patriotism and a desire to position the university to do whatever it could to help in the war effort, but his request was bolstered by the knowledge that this new war, unlike WW I, would not be won in the trenches. It would take engineers as well as soldiers to bring victory to the Allies. While Heald’s offer was initially declined, only a month later the Navy contacted him to learn how many men could be accommodated at IIT and how quickly the preparations could be arranged.

Heald responded that space could be made available for 300–600 men within 30–60 days, and cited programs in radio and communications, ordnance inspection, physics, chemistry, and shop, as those that IIT was prepared to offer enlisted men. Subsequently, radio and ordnance inspection classes became two of the most popular short-term courses taught at IIT to both soldiers and civilians.



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It was, however, a newly created Navy program known as V-12 that was destined to become a scholastic component of the military’s training options for future sailors, apparently with Heald helping to guide its formation. The V-12 program offered men the alternative of attending a civilian college or university (vs. the U.S. Naval Academy) with the rank of apprentice seaman; they would become eligible for an officer’s commission upon graduation.

Eventually, the Navy created V-12 units on 131 college campuses across the country. During the three years the program existed, 120,000 men entered the program, about half of whom completed the strenuous training, which included academic work, physical conditioning, and leadership components. The V-12 program was a short-lived but significant component of the U.S. Navy’s effort to prepare men for active, junior officer positions during WW II. The program is also significant in military history for its admission of African Americans on equal basis with whites. IIT was one of the earliest schools to host a V-12 unit, educated among the greatest number of Navy engineers, and included African Americans in its ranks.

It would be more than a year after Heald’s initial offer before the V-12 option came to fruition, but when it did, it would significantly impact IIT both during the war and subsequently.

IIT’s ability to house and educate a unit of 600 trainees could be accommodated because of an arrangement that Heald had successfully negotiated with H. C. Coffman, president of George Williams College, to use his campus

as well as IIT’s State Street campus for housing and classroom space. IIT also assigned faculty members to the teaching staff at George Williams College, among them George Danforth, who taught technical drawing; Mollie Cohen and Helen Stevens, who taught English; and Haim Reingold, who taught mathematics.

V-E Day on May 8, 1945, and V-J Day, three months later on August 15, brought welcome news of the end of the conflict—and immediate jeopardy to the V-12 program. The Navy initially planned to liquidate the V-12 program without making accommodations for continued education of those men who had only recently joined the program, a decision based on both the government’s cost of educating the student trainees and the Navy’s sharply decreased need for junior officers in active duty positions. Heald appealed on behalf of the students that the decision be reconsidered.

The V-12 program officially ended at IIT with the June commencement in 1946. That didn’t end the Navy’s interest in having its student engineers trained at IIT, however, and today, 60 years later, IIT still has an active and highly visible Naval ROTC unit on campus.

The information in this article was researched and written by IIT University Archivist Catherine Bruck. Corrections to any of the factual information, which may be in error, would be appreciated. Please contact bruck@iit.edu.

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