V. A History of Student Issues and Attitudes (1940-2002)

The main issues that have concerned students at Caltech have all been mentioned in other parts of this report. The strong spirit of the self-governing Student Houses has bred a constant concern over outside regulation of House activities. Social life is a concern for college students on every campus, and social activities have consumed a large portion of House and ASCIT resources throughout history. The honor code is the foundation of Caltech student self-governance and has long held a prominent position in the student conscience. However, the greatest concern for all Caltech students has always been academics, and in the classroom, there have been two major issues of concern: the academic workload and the quality of teaching.

Five Issues

Alumni were asked the question, “Which issue was most important to you while you were a student at Caltech?” In the 1940’s, the top 5 responses were Academic Workload (37.0%), Quality of Teaching (18.5%), Regulation of House Activities (7.4%), Social Life (7.4%), and Honor Code (7.4%). In the 1990’s, the top 5 responses were Regulation of House Activities (19.0%), Academic Workload (16.5%), Social Life (13.9%), Honor Code (13.3%), and Quality of Teaching (10.8%). Remarkably, over six decades, the top five student issues have remained relatively constant. Their relative frequency has changed somewhat over the years, which is illustrated in Figure 6, but this set of five issues have dominated student thought across several generations. Considering all 587 responses to this question on the survey, Academic Workload (18.1%) is the top issue, followed by Honor Code (14.5%), Social Life (14.0%), Regulation of House Activities (13.4%), and Quality of Teaching (11.2%). During the earlier years, Student-Faculty Interaction (4.1%) would occasionally displace Regulation of House Activities as the fifth issue, and during the later years, Restrictions on Personal Behavior (4.5%) or Student Morale (5.5%) would sometimes creep into the fifth spot over Quality of Teaching. Overall, the five issues illustrated in Figure 6 have clearly been the top issues on students’ minds at Caltech.
There are some patterns in the popularity of issues at certain times that correspond to changes in the structure of student governance. Most obvious is an overall upward trend over time in concern with Regulation of House Activities, which corresponds to an increasingly House-centric student culture. This is coupled with a downward trend in concern with Academic Workload and Quality of Teaching. There are also very interesting patterns regarding the Honor Code when compared with other factors.

**Which issue was most important to you while you were a student at Caltech?**

![Figure 6: Student Issues from 1940 to 2002](image-url)
The issue of Social Life however, does not follow any discernible pattern, except for a large decline in the 1970’s – perhaps the arrival of women during this time alleviated student complaints regarding social life. Otherwise, social life is consistently the second or third most popular issue, which is likely the case on any other college campus. Social life is perhaps the one issue on this list where the student government has broad, flexible power to make a difference – issues regarding social events are the daily grind of both House and school-level government. Few generalizations can be made because social life is something that changes very quickly and does not necessarily translate across generations.

The honor code however, has been passed down from the earliest days of student government, and it has gone through several major reforms, which were discussed earlier in this report. This issue was the most popular issue during the 1970’s and into the 1980’s, which was one of these periods of reform. During that time, the perception of the honor system expanded to include all of student conduct and was the topic of much public discussion. It was also a popular issue in the 50’s, which was another period of growth in the honor system, when the general perception expanded from the originally limited scope of academics. In the 1960’s there is a sharp decline in the prominence of this student issue; this coincides with a dip in Figure 5, which shows a corresponding decline in compliance with the honor system during that time. A decline in honor code compliance also coincides with a decline in this student issue after 1990. There seems to be a correlation between honor code abidance and the prominence of honor code in students’ minds – the more students think about the honor code, the more likely they are to follow it.

Student attitudes regarding the regulation of House activities were also discussed earlier in this report. It is interesting to note that this became the number one most important issue during the 1990’s after the Residence Life office was established and administrative regulation reached its highest levels. Rising student concerns with administration from above also coincided with a decline in the amount of influence students perceived to have over policies.
When you graduated from Caltech, did students have more or less influence on policies affecting students than when you arrived on campus?

Figure 7: Student Influence from 1940 to 2002

Figure 7 shows alumni responses to the question, “When you graduated from Caltech, did students have more or less influence on policies affecting students than when you arrived on campus.” Before the 90’s, the overwhelming response was that the level of influence was the same. The only time a significant number of students believed they had more influence was during the activist period of the 60’s and 70’s, a time when students gained representation on faculty committees and the student government expanded dramatically. A group of Techers even protested the Vietnam War in 1970.
(Tech, 5/14/70). The 1980’s were split between the first half and second half of the decade. However, by 1990 and beyond, students largely believed they had less influence over policies. During this time, student life became increasingly more regulated across the country, and Caltech was no exception.

**Academic Issues**

Two of the top five issues both involve academic life at Caltech. With the lowest graduation rate, by far, among the nation’s elite colleges, it is no surprise that Academic Workload is one of the top student concerns at Caltech. However, the appearance of Quality of Teaching on this list is probably most shocking, considering Caltech’s prominent academic reputation. Both these complaints shed light on the heart of Caltech’s academic program.

The 2002-’03 Caltech catalog describes the undergraduate program in this way: “Course work is rigorous and students are encouraged to participate in research. The undergraduate program is thus designed to provide an intensive exposure to a wide spectrum of intellectual pursuits” (Caltech Catalog, ’02-’03). The center of the undergraduate program is the core curriculum, a demanding set of classes that all students must take their freshman and sophomore years. The core curriculum is frustrating for many students because it forces them to study areas of science or humanities that they never would have chosen on their own; this comprehensive philosophy of education has spawned a growing variety of graduation requirements, and this has stirred student emotions many times in the past.

Over the years, numerous editorials have appeared in the California Tech calling for changes in the academic program. Bernard Shore wrote an article entitled, “The Caltech Method” in 1949: “A lightening of the academic load would provide students with an opportunity to satisfy the intense intellectual curiosity that is so characteristic of them… the student is cut or stretched to a preconceived pattern that ignores individual differences, needs, abilities, and interests” (Tech, 3/10/49). A decade later, Larry McCombs wrote, “A student should not be forced to follow a prescribed schedule of courses… Tech is no longer a leader. If it wants to regain its position as a top institution, some daring, risky, and experimental action is going to have to be undertaken by the
faculty and administration” (Tech, 9/28/61). This argument is typical of the student feelings that reached the pages of the student newspaper. Almost all freshmen enter Caltech with an intense desire to learn anything and everything; finding their choices limited by the core curriculum often causes great frustration. Freshmen from the tops of their high school classes come to Caltech, but many become demoralized by the workload. In the freshman class of 1960, 70% thought they would graduate in the lower half of the class after four years (Tech, 11/3/60).

Some of these feelings found an outlet in ASCIT President Joe Rhodes’ Corporation Meeting on April 21, 1967. The first proposition passed on that day “asked for reduction of the number of required courses and elimination of the requirement for choosing an option.” Over time, the number of courses required to graduate has drifted downward, albeit very slowly. However, choosing an option is still a requirement at Caltech, although a few students have designed their own options through the Independent Studies Program. That meeting also established Academic Reforms Groups, which initiated several changes regarding curriculum and teaching quality. Those groups were only temporary, but the student representation on faculty committees that was gained following that 1967 meeting gave students a permanent voice on academic issues.

One of the most interesting debates over academic issues appeared in the California Tech over a month in the spring of 1968. Joe Rhodes, the ASCIT President, wrote a two-part editorial entitled, “The Caltech Myth.” In the first editorial, he wrote, “Freshman (sic) who come into Caltech, excited, enthusiastic and eager leave this place largely emptied. In many sad ways going to Caltech is tantamount to committing (sic) intellectual or scholarly suicide… Freshman (sic) learn that science, something once loved as a sparkling orb, light and exciting, becomes the daily routine drudgery of physics lab and math assignments (Tech, 04/25/68). The next week, several students wrote in to refute Rhodes’ arguments. Mark Jackson wrote, “There is a hell of a lot of unexciting troll work associated with even the most exciting projects. If a student isn’t willing to work at this sort of thing, it’s best he find out fast so he can cast about for another vocation” (Tech, 05/02/68). Douglas Richstone elaborated further, writing, “For the less mature students the adjustment from the easier atmosphere of high school to the professional atmosphere of Tech is difficult, being made in a situation where one is
constantly brought face to face with one’s own shortcomings, and where one is under intense academic pressure. Moreover, for the student who does not love science, there is a strong urge to give up during the undergraduate years. It is this sort of student who loses enthusiasm (sic) significantly…He would probably lose his enthusiasm at a State University… For the sort of student that Caltech is intended, for the emotionally strong young man who is sure he’s interested in science, Caltech offers unique advantages” (Tech, 05/02/68). Clearly, Rhodes’ views were not shared by everyone in the student body.

In Joe Rhodes’ second editorial, he claimed that “There are social benefits aplenty for going to Stanford or Berkeley” and that “much of the intellectual fervor and excitement that exists at these other schools is lacking here,” concluding that “perhaps no one should come to Caltech.” Rhodes also wrote, “Caltech has the responsibility for the growth of the entire student. This is an area where we fail miserably… In our present world, it becomes evident that Caltech has some responsibility to consider the social values it imparts to the student body” (Tech, 05/16/68). Professor Frederick B. Thompson fiercely challenged this second installment of “The Caltech Myth” in the next issue of the California Tech. In “An Open Letter to Joe Rhodes” he wrote, “Consider the question of social opportunities… I would observe that the serious students choose a social career quite similar to those of Techers… Do not think that ten roads from which to choose gives you more variety than two or three when you can take only one.” He goes on to argue that Caltech research regarding pollution problems is “deeply founded in social consciousness.” Dr. Thompson concludes his letter by writing, “Education is a social contract between two very human beings – a student a teacher… The greatness of Caltech lies in the fact that there are so many students and faculty who are anxious to sign that contract – a contract concerning ultimately the well-being of society – if through all the vastitudes (sic) of time and being human, they can find a way” (Tech, 05/23/68). Unfortunately, Joe Rhodes never wrote to the Tech to respond to the criticisms. As is typical of these public discussions, much rhetoric was exchanged, but no resolution was reached.
Joe Rhodes’ “Caltech Myth” was composed mainly of recycled thoughts, and many students later on would recycle those thoughts again, completely oblivious of the arguments that had occurred a few years earlier.

In 1972, Jim Hugg, the newly elected ASCIT Secretary, became the latest student to renew this debate, writing, “The traditional, paternalistic system of instruction employed in most courses is generally unresponsive to the intellectual excitement and eagerness to learn which the student brings to Caltech” (04/27/72). Although unresolved in 1972, these complaints about teaching quality found their first constructive solution two years later, when ASCIT began publishing the Teaching Quality Feedback Report. Soon after, ASCIT began giving out teaching awards to outstanding instructors. ASCIT has devoted many of its resources towards academic issues over time, mainly through the Educational Policies Committee, which was established in 1962 and renamed the Academics and Research Committee in the mid-90’s.

These efforts led to numerous reforms, including an expanded humanities curriculum and pass/fail for the freshman year. These changes have raised the graduation dramatically, from under 50% to over 85% in the present day. An interesting positive indicator came from a 2002 ASCIT Survey, which found that only 40% of Caltech freshmen expected to graduate in the lower half of their class (ASCIT, 2002).

**Student Morale**

Public discussion of student issues, especially those related to academics, often amount to complaints about the quality of the overall Caltech experience. The issue of student morale has also become an increasingly important student issue in recent times. This raises the question of whether or not Caltech students approve of the Caltech experience. To find an answer to this question, alumni were asked, “If it suited his academic interests and abilities, would you encourage your son to attend Caltech?” The same question was asked regarding a daughter, but the results are not significantly different from those shown in Figure 8. This question was asked because it was not desired to learn whether or not each individual’s own Caltech experience was satisfactory, but whether they would be willing to recommend it to someone they cared about.
The results hold relatively stable from 1940 all the way into the 1980’s, with around 80% of respondents marking “Encourage” or “Strongly Encourage.” In the 70’s, more than 10% of respondents mark “Discourage” or “Strongly Discourage,” indicative of a time of strong student activism where many questioned the value of Caltech’s program. The number of dissatisfied alumni drops back down to around 5% during the 80’s, a sign that perhaps the reforms of the 1970’s actually had a positive impact on student life.

If it suited his academic interests and abilities, would you encourage your son to attend Caltech?

![Figure 8: Student Satisfaction from 1940 to 2002](image)
During the 1990’s however, the percentage of respondents on the positive side drops significantly, with less than 70% of respondents marking “Encourage” or “Strongly Encourage.” This statistic then drops below 60% for the most recent respondents, continuing a rapid deterioration in alumni support for Caltech.

The reasons for this decline may be related to the honor code, since 13.3% of respondents in the 90’s chose it as the most important student issue. The rapid decline in honor code compliance shown in Figure 5 also occurs after 1990, and dissatisfaction with the honor system may be leading to dissatisfaction with Caltech. However, these two red flags may not necessarily have a causal relationship. Declining faith in the honor code and diminishing approval of Caltech are likely symptoms of an underlying problem.

19.0% of survey respondents in the 1990’s and 24.5% of respondents in 2000-02 chose “Regulation of House Activities” as their most important issue. This is the largest single student concern, and may be one of the main causes of the other problems. With respect to the honor system, administrative concerns compete with the honor code for students’ attention, and the less students think about the honor code, the less they seem to follow it. With respect to overall approval of the Caltech experience, a declining perception of student influence may play a large role. When asked, “While you were at Caltech, how important was it to you that students had influence over policies affecting students?” 50% of all respondents to the survey marked “Very Important.”