II. A History of the Undergraduate Houses (1930-2002)

On his seventy-fourth birthday, the President of the Caltech Board of Trustees, Arthur H. Fleming, was surprised with the announcement that the last unit of the new student dormitories would be named in his honor. In 1930, twenty donors gave $10,000 each to fund the construction of Fleming House, and a new era in Caltech undergraduate student life was born (*Tech*, 3/11/30).

Before that time, there was only room for about 60 students on campus in a single dormitory. Caltech students were spread throughout a variety of off-campus housing, which included five fraternity houses: Sigma Alpha Pi (est. 1914) housed 31 students at 399 S. Mentor, Pi Alpha Tau (est. 1921) housed 13 at 330 S. Lake, Gamma Sigma (est. 1925) housed 18 at 415 S. El Molino, Kappa Gamma a.k.a. Gnome (est. 1897) housed 31 at 289 S. Madison, and Phi Alpha Ro a.k.a. Pharos (est. 1921) housed 25 at 593 E California (*Big T*, 1931). This still left about 350 of the enrolled undergraduates living in their own housing. The trustees decided that Caltech should seek to house as many of its students on campus as possible so a plan for a group of four undergraduate dorms was drafted. Construction began as soon as $200,000 per dorm was raised. On March 11, 1930, the *California Tech* proclaimed, "Dorms will Rise at Once!"

A Committee of Nine

A committee of nine students was formed to investigate student living conditions and make detailed recommendations for the conduct and organization of the new undergraduate dormitories. Members of the committee toured the U.S., Europe, and Canada to find out what organization would be best for the student residences. On March 5, 1931, they published their findings in the *California Tech*. Their recommendations formed the foundation for the undergraduate Houses at Caltech, and many of their ideals hold true today. Here are some highlights from their report:

Introduction
- "Familiarity with student opinion together with the viewpoint of the administration places the emphasis as to the reason for the building of the new undergraduate houses on the desire to supplement the present intellectual development of the students with a cultural and social development not possible where the student's social contacts are limited,

or where his living, lounging, or dining accommodations do not reflect this atmosphere."

Residents
- "Freshmen shall be distributed among the four houses as equally as possible."
- "Choice of rooms in each house shall be given according to seniority."

Dining Room Policies
- "Students shall be given the opportunity to wait on tables."
- "Square tables accommodating eight men and round tables for eight or ten men should be placed in the dining rooms."
- "A liberal policy shall be adopted with regard to both house and personal guests."
- "Men shall wear coats and ties at dinner."

House Library
- "Provision shall be made, if possible, for a small library of non-technical books in each house."

Associates
- "A resident associate shall be placed in each house to serve as a counselor and friend of the students, but not as a proctor. His purpose shall be to stimulate social and cultural life."
- "It is suggested that the residents of each house invite faculty members and their wives, and distinguished friends of the Institute to become Non-Resident Associates of their house."

House Organization
- "Conduct of house functions and the maintenance of order shall be placed entirely in the hands of the students."
- "Social affairs and the entertainment of visitors should be strongly encouraged."
- "Inter-house and intra-house competitions should be fostered."
- "It is suggested that a committee of four elective officers and two appointive officers be formed to manage the affairs of each house. The appointive officers will be a Social Chairman and an Athletic Chairman."
- "An inter-house committee would also be available."

Fraternities
- "Each fraternity shall be requested to move into a single house as a group, shall be asked not to perpetuate its own organization, but to serve as the nucleus about which to build and to foster a house unity and loyalty."

House Dues
- "Dues for financing activities shall be levied by the group and collected by the business office. It is suggested that $2.00 per term from each man would be a reasonable and sufficient amount."

The fraternities at Caltech all agreed to the recommendations with very little resistance and the next year, they each moved as groups into the four new Houses. The

Gnomes moved into Ricketts House, the Pharos moved into Blacker, the Gamma Sigmas moved into Dabney, and Pi Alpha Tau, the smallest fraternity, joined Sigma Alpha Pi in colonizing Fleming (*Big T*, 1933). Originally, the Houses were autonomous, with the Interhouse Committee as the only coordinating body. The RA's gradually took over more and more of the administrative duties and in 1940, the Institute first appointed a Master of Student Houses, Dr. Harvey Eagleson (*Tech,* 1/11/52).

Rotation

The question of how to assign freshmen to Houses was a problem from the beginning. At the beginning of the second year, men were assigned to Houses by a Committee of RA's. After three years, Rotation of freshmen, a system of allowing each freshman to visit each of the four Houses, was first initiated (*Tech,* 1/11/52). The actual process of Rotation was under constant revision and was not well documented. Early on, the system required freshmen to actually live in each House before making a choice, "Trekking counterclockwise from house to house for three days of food, propaganda, and entertainment" (*Tech*, 10/16/47). However, this was simplified in the 50's, when the rules specified that: "Newcomers will eat the noon and evening meals for two days in each of the four houses… Sixty percent of the choice is the frosh's, 40 percent houses. Frosh indicate first, second, third, and fourth choices. House puts out preference list" (*Tech*, 9/29/50).

Even after the completion of the Houses, there was only space for only about 60% of the undergraduate population on campus. A lounge for the off-campus students, known as Throop Hall, was created where the original dormitory stood. A non-residents association was formed that eventually took on the name Throop Club. They elected their own officers and were even allowed to participate in interhouse athletics and had representatives on the Interhouse Committee. Until the North Houses were built, Throop Club served effectively as a fifth House. Although Throop never participated in the Rotation process, incoming freshmen were not guaranteed a spot in the Houses so many lived off-campus. For many years, the Institute adopted a rule that freshmen who lived closest to Caltech were kicked off first. International students and those from the East Coast were virtually guaranteed spots while those from the LA area almost always were

not (*Huttenback*, 1968). Although many of those freshmen participated in Rotation and were picked into one of the four Houses, they were not necessarily given a room so most of them also joined Throop Club and lived their entire four years off campus.

The Houses and Rotation evolved gradually over the years. To ease the postwar transition, the IHC suspended Rotation for one year in 1947, but it was restored the next fall. Nothing major happened until 1951, when the actions of Dabney House necessitated the creation of the first written Rotation rules. The October 11, 1951 issue of the *Tech* reported, "Dabney, flagrantly violated the spirit of rotation, and is subsequently being fined by the interhouse committee…The Dabney pledges were first asked whether they might be interested in blind dates for the first weekend, a time when all Houses are supposed to restrain from organized social activities. The frosh were also given cars full of gas for these dates, giving them a completely false impression of what life in Dabney would be like after they got in...also announced its social schedule for the first term during rotation period...approached the individual men in their rooms, sometimes after they had gone to bed, and flatly asked them to state their preferences at that time."

The first Rotation rules were simple and are still the basis for the rules today: "No publication of social schedules and no organized social events during Rotation. In addition it shall be illegal to get blind dates informally for frosh or to loan them cars...There shall be no undue pressure or encouragement to force frosh to divulge their preference of house...These rules shall be enforced by the IHC and violations may be penalized by fining of houses or denial of house preference to individual freshman...enables the frosh to make a free, independent, and intelligent choice of house" (*Tech*, 5/23/52).

The New Houses

In 1955, the Student House Office, which was the division of Caltech administration that managed the student Houses, established an Interhouse Food Committee. One representative from each House met regularly to discuss the intricacies of the food program. According to the May 17, 1956 *California Tech*, the exchanges between the committee and the administrator of the dining program were described as frustrating: "In several exchanges she has let the members know that the food purchased

is of high quality and they have let her know that it is poorly prepared and served. She claims that this is a function of serving 410 at a given meal and there it stands, a stalemate."

Later that decade, a new construction project presented another opportunity and a new challenge for the Student Houses. In 1930, it was expected that "four units, which will be built later, will face on San Pasqual street, directly north of the new dormitories balancing both sides of campus" (*Tech,* 03/11/30). In 1959, the plan was to build three Houses, then referred to as "A", "B", and "C" Houses (*Tuttle,* 2001).

During the 1958-59 school year, the Faculty Committee on Student Houses, chaired by Robert A. Huttenback, the Master of Student Houses, asked the IHC to develop a plan for populating the new Student Houses. The IHC created the Committee on the New Student Houses (CNSH) to come up with a plan for Rotation and population (transfer of existing students). The committee set up two subcommittees, one to consider population, the other Rotation. There was little controversy about the plans for population, but the discussion concerning Rotation yielded many competing plans, which were publicized in the *California Tech*.

A wide variety of plans were considered, including an extra rush week before classes started, random assignment, and assignment by a committee of seniors before the arrival of the freshmen. During the second week of the 1959-60 school year, the plans were narrowed to four categories: "Long" Rotation (lasting six weeks), "Short" Rotation (1 day in each of the 7 Houses), "partial" Rotation (random assignment to either the North or South Houses followed by 2-3 days in each of those Houses), and no Rotation (assignment by the MOSH). Open meetings were then held to discuss the plans with the student body (*Tuttle,* 2001).

In the meetings, Short Rotation and No Rotation emerged as the clear favorites among the student body. The two competing opinions were summarized well in a *Tech* editorial:

Tom Jovin, the ASCIT President, argued against Rotation. He believed Rotation would hinder the development of the new Houses, since they'd be forced to adopt some sort of character right away. He mentioned that Rotation had once been suspended in 1947 and had not had a negative effect on House characteristics and spirit. He argued

that Rotation was just as arbitrary as assignment by the MOSH since decisions were made based on very little information. Tom believed that dropping Rotation would save a great deal of time and effort on everyone's part; he thought it would create an opportunity for other more productive activities, such as campus-wide mixers and social events, dinner exchanges, and term-long House exchanges. Jovin argued that Techmen were fairly compatible and the importance of choosing a House was overplayed. He concluded by arguing that experimentation is good (*Tuttle,* 2001).

Cleve Moler, the *Tech* editor, argued for Rotation. He stated first that students want and need freedom of choice in their friends and that Rotation allows that. He also thought that Rotation built House spirit and healthy interhouse competition. Cleve thought that the new Houses would actually make Rotation less tense. Since the new Houses would not have time to develop a "line," all the Houses would be forced to present their individual members to the freshmen, rather than trying to present "House characters." Another major point in favor of Rotation was that the addition of the new Houses would increase the likelihood that students would get their first choice and also reduce the likelihood that one House would dominate over the others (*Tuttle,* 2001).

On December 3, 1959, when the IHC adopted its committee's report, no consensus had been reached on the Rotation issue. It was decided that Rotation be suspended for one year, during which the MOSH would be in charge of assigning the freshmen to their Houses. The Rotation issue was thus left to be considered again the following year, which upset some members of the IHC. The report passed by a vote of 9-3 and there was no Rotation in the fall of 1960 (*Tuttle,* 2001).

The population plan was not controversial at all and in January of 1960, signups were posted for students who wished to move into the new Houses. After two weeks, 159 students signed up to live in the new Houses. 96 came from off-campus and 63 from the old Houses. Many of those who left the old Houses did so because of political aspirations. The MOSH, Dr. Huttenback, remarked on the sudden realization of "many would-be politicos that the new Houses presented a golden opportunity to achieve power and mold the destinies of a new creation" (*Huttenback*, 1968). At the time, Ricketts and Dabney were the most politically active Houses and a surplus of outgoing leader-types

caused a mass exodus. Page House became a colony of Ricketts and Ruddock a colony of Dabney. Lloyd House was populated primarily by off-campus students.
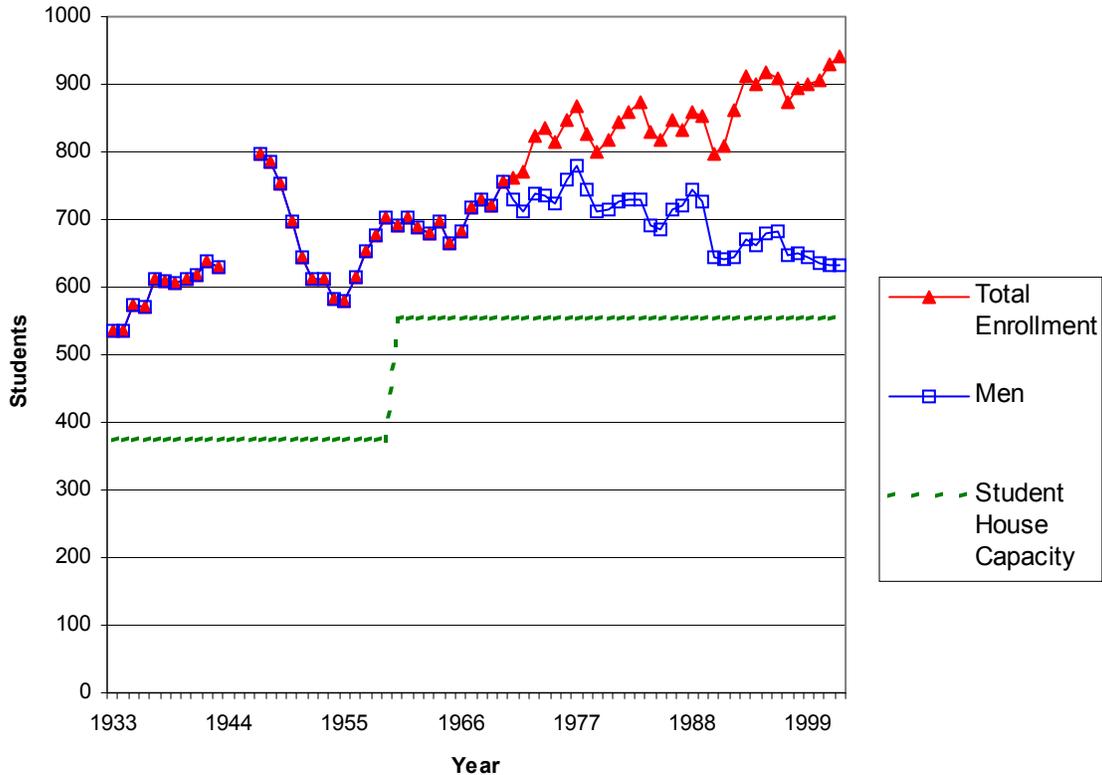
Caltech Undergraduate Enrollment

Figure 1: Undergraduate Enrollment from 1933-2002 (Caltech Registrar's Office)

At the beginning of the 1960-61 school year, debate over Rotation was renewed. During second term, the IHC decided to go with a plan proposed by the ASCIT ExComm. This called for six days of normal Rotation where the freshmen would eat in each of the other Houses. Then, the freshmen would eat for a few days in the House where they were living, but during that time any House could "rotate" them. The Faculty Committee on the Student Houses rejected this proposal and there was again no Rotation for the 1961-62 school year. (*Tuttle,* 2001)

There was less public discussion of Rotation during the 1961-62 school year, but when the IHC began organizing meetings and ballots on the subject, the Faculty

Committee announced that there would be no Rotation in 1962-63. During that school year, the MOSH went on sabbatical and the IHC made a new proposal for Rotation. The system called for each freshman to spend a single day in each House and at the end, list the four he was willing to enter. There was no motivation for a House to try to seduce a particular freshman, as it had only a one-in-four chance of getting him at best. The Faculty committee considered this proposal acceptable and in the fall of 1963, after a three-year hiatus, Rotation returned to campus (*Huttenback,* 1968).

Over the next decade, the North Houses each developed their own unique identities. Dabney and Ricketts House, having lost a large number of their members to the North Houses, underwent extensive transformation (*Huttenback*, 1968). Fleming and Blacker remain relatively unchanged even today from their earlier characters. The South Houses became more spacious after the construction of the North Houses, with occupancy dropping from 374 to 304. The North Houses were designed with a capacity of 250, providing space for around 550 students total (*Tuttle,* 2001). This represented almost 80% of the total enrollment at that time (see Figure 1), and there was ample room for almost every student who wanted to live on campus. Contrary to the situation before 1960, almost all freshmen were able to live in the House into which they were picked. Students thus felt a strong attachment to their House identity and this led to an increase in House spirit and a general decrease in school spirit (*Strauss,* 1997).

The Interhouse Committee

In 1966, the student body began to complain that the Interhouse Committee was run too loosely. With the all-important burden of Rotation falling under the IHC's responsibility, students felt the IHC needed some rules under which to operate. In February of 1966, the ASCIT Executive Committee took the initiative and proposed that the IHC become a part of ASCIT, with its formalization written into the ASCIT Bylaws (*Tech*, 02/03/66). The amendment did not pass however, so the IHC took it upon itself to create a formal definition. The IHC Definition was ratified in May of 1966. As explained by a *Tech* reporter, "Since the IHC is an organization composed of House governments as opposed to students (as ASCIT is), it was felt that a straight-forward statement of policies, procedures, and purpose was required rather than a constitution.

Thus the term 'definition'" (*Tech*, 05/19/66). The Definition specified that any action of the IHC must have the consent of four Houses, and that the presence of four House representatives would constitute an official IHC meeting. Amendments to the Definition required the approval of six Houses. With the ratification of the IHC Definition, the Interhouse Committee assured itself a permanent place in Caltech student government.

In 1970, the acceptance of the first female undergraduates altered the social landscape of Caltech forever. Women entered House governments very quickly; the first female House President was Deanna Hunt in 1975. The growing number of women on campus made Techers less dependent on other schools as sources for women, and inter-university relations became less important. In turn, the student body as a whole became less unified in its goals, and ASCIT began to share more and more student governance responsibilities with the IHC. Soon after students gained representation on faculty committees in 1968, the ASCIT Board enlisted the help of the IHC in identifying students to serve as representatives (*Tech*, 04/30/70). The IHC slowly became more prominent in undergraduate governance, and Caltech drifted toward a disparate mix of seven distinct social groups (*Strauss*, 1997).

Residence Life

In 1986, an incident occurred on campus that drastically changed the way Caltech administered the Student Houses. For decades, all of the undergraduate Houses would come together once a year to throw a huge party on campus. With seven separate parties going on at once, the Caltech campus became a social Mecca for one night a year. Rumor has it that this party, known as "Interhouse", once made Playboy's list of top ten college parties. Caltech students began advertising the party off-campus and it became a popular event for teenagers throughout the LA area. At the 1986 Interhouse party, the Master of Student Houses, Dr. Chris Brennen, was the first to arrive on the scene of the stabbing of a Caltech undergraduate by a visiting partygoer. The administration suspended Interhouse indefinitely after 1989 and began to rethink the position of the MOSH. On September 18, 1990, Kim West took her position as Caltech's first Director of Residence Life. The Residence Life office assimilated all the disciplinary duties of the MOSH, while the Master was reduced to simply an advocate for students.

Off-Campus Students

Although the Houses could hold almost the entire student body at capacity, about a third of all upperclassmen lived outside the Student Houses in the fall of 1971. This led some motivated students to create an Off-Campus Club, resurrecting the ideals of the Throop Club that had disappeared with the construction of the new Houses. The goals of this Off-Campus Student Association were "To give voice and focus to the grievances of off-campus students…To represent the interests of the O.C. people before the Interhouse Committee and Institute powers that be…[and] to provide, for those who are interested, a substitute for the Houses as a focus of social life, camaraderie, and prostitution" (*Tech*, 12/02/71). Although this club was formed with big ideas and a reasonable amount of organization, there is no mention of it after 1971, and it does not exist at the present time.

The number of women at Caltech grew continuously through the 70's and 80's, and the size of the undergraduate population grew as well. In fact, as one *Tech* writer observed, "the number of men admitted has remained fairly close to constant" (*Tech*, 05/17/73). The number of females however, has grown to almost 300 since 1970 (see Figure 1). That 1973 article speculated of "a faculty attitude which goes something like, 'don't take a place in the freshman class away from a man to admit a woman'" (*Tech*, 05/17/73). Through the 80's and into the 90's, the student population grew to far exceed the capacity of the Student Houses, and more and more undergraduates were forced to move off-campus after their freshman years. Contrary to the situation before 1960, when some students were assigned off-campus as soon as they arrived at Caltech, students in the present day are guaranteed an assignment in the seven Houses during their freshman year and often find themselves "kicked off" in their sophomore or junior years.

Although the Off-Campus Student Association failed, the number of off-campus students continued to grow. This population bred resentment toward the seven Houses and in the early 80's, there was a failed movement to abandon the House system (*Strauss,* 1997). In 1991, during Caltech's centennial celebrations, undergraduates picketed on the Olive Walk for more housing. A committee of administration, faculty, and students created a vision for a new House: a residence similar to those found at Oxford and Cambridge, where faculty members, graduates, and undergraduates could live together.

With a generous donation from R. Stanton Avery, Avery House opened its doors on September 10, 1996. With many of the students who helped create Avery already graduated, the new residence was met with great skepticism. The seven undergraduate Houses maintain a monopoly on incoming freshmen and view Avery as a place for outcasts. Although a system of self-governance was installed in Avery in the form of the Avery Council, the House still remains under the strict control of the Residence Life office and distinctly separate from the seven Houses (*Strauss*, 1997).

Student dissatisfaction with the House system cannot simply be attributed to congregations of off-campus students. In the 1960's when almost all students were housed on campus, a few editorials appeared in the *California Tech* criticizing the Student Houses. In a 1961 article entitled, "McCombs Blasts Student Houses," Larry McCombs wrote, "Water fights and purity tests are fine, but why should serouis (sic) scholastic pursuits be pushed to a shameful status by these recreations? The anti-snake attitude of Techmen jus[t] doesn't make sense" (*Tech*, 10/5/61). Ira Herskowitz echoed this sentiment 5 years later, writing, "The Student Houses are off limits for serious discussion and the exchange of ideas… anyone who tries to do so is a "troll", "snake", or "eagerbeaver" – something of an untouchable." He also laments that the "oppressive atmosphere is self-perpetuating. The freshman who arrive are eager to take thir (sic) place in the new world… [but] the[y] acquire the Caltech attitude toward most things – lack of involvement… Even after four years at Caltech, the seniors are very little different from the freshmen" (*Tech*, 10/6/66). These ideas likely existed among a quiet minority before the 1960's, and they have certainly persisted since that time.

TURLI

In December 2000, with a major capital campaign in the planning stages, President David Baltimore formed a Task Force on Undergraduate Resident Life Initiatives to review the overall conditions of the current Houses and system of undergraduate residence life at Caltech, assess the need for structural renovations and systemic changes in the Houses, and formulate recommendations based on the findings (*TURLI*, 2001). In December 2001, a committee of students, faculty, and student affairs

administrators released a report with 8 main recommendations, which are listed here as described in the Executive Summary of the report:

    I. Renovate and reconstruct the existing undergraduate Houses.
    II. Create a mixture of singles, doubles, and some suites in the south and north Houses.
    III. Act on immediate physical infrastructure needs.
    IV. Reconsider Rotation.
    V. Increase interaction across Houses and lower inter-House barriers.
    VI. Reexamine House traditions.
    VII. Ensure equity in institutional treatment across different residential populations.
    VIII. Explore instituting a faculty in residence program in the North or South Houses.

At the time the report was released, Lloyd House was in conflict with the Residence Life office regarding an alcohol issue and Ricketts House was dealing with new restrictions regarding their firepot. This climate caused students to fixate upon recommendations number IV and VI, and the reaction was very negative. On December 12, 2001, the undergraduates staged a protest on the Olive Walk against the Task Force report and many other administrative actions. Students spoke out and left comments on issues ranging from House traditions to health insurance, budget cuts, parking, and the honor code. Hundreds of students turned out that day in what was the strongest showing of student solidarity at Caltech that anyone could remember (*Elion*, 2002).

During second term of the 2001-02 school year, the Faculty Committee on Student Housing held a series of Town Hall meetings to discuss the Task Force report. The meetings occurred in all seven Houses and lasted for several hours each. The vast majority of students spoke out in favor of Rotation and resolutely defended House traditions. In the end, no major changes were made to Rotation or House traditions; the release of the report and the ensuing dialogue only reaffirmed students' faith in the House system that had existed at Caltech for over 70 years.