I. Overview (1891-2002)

From the perspective of undergraduate students, the history of Caltech can be divided into four overlapping eras. The first begins with the founding of Throop College in 1891 and ends after the Incorporation of the Associated Students in 1935. During this time, most of the major student governance bodies were formed. The second era begins in 1931 with the construction of the Student Houses. These Houses became the main bastions of student self-governance at Caltech and each House defined its own character throughout this period, shaping a unique way of life. The creation of the ASCIT Executive Committee in 1958 and the opening of the North Houses in 1960 spark a third era in student history, a period of student activism. During this time, students became involved in many more issues concerning the campus and the world at large. In 1975, Caltech created the position of Vice-President for Student Affairs and started the fourth era, a period of student affairs administration. This modern era is characterized by friction between students and administrators and continues to this day.

The Beginning (1891-1936)

In November 1891, a small technical institution called Throop College was founded in Pasadena, California. It soon changed its name to Throop Polytechnic Institute and in the 1892 catalog for this school it was written, “The discipline of the institution will constantly keep in mind the development of self-governing citizens, self-respecting, law-abiding men and women. The helpfulness of the ever-watchful friend will take the place of the educational police officer.” Before the name Caltech even existed, Caltech students lived in an environment where they were expected to govern themselves.

According to the California Tech, Throop Polytechnic Institute adopted an honor code in 1910. There is no official record of the honor system’s inception, but it is clear it already exists in the oldest student government documents, which date back to 1912. Those records are minutes of the Associated Student Body (ASB), the main student government body at the time. In 1913, the ASB rewrote its Constitution. As part of the reform process, a committee was created that was charged with enforcing several student
rules. This committee was called the Board of Control. The honor system was part of its jurisdiction, and from then on, students suspected of cheating on exams would have to report to this board of their peers.

The very first amendment to the new constitution called for the creation of a student magazine called the *Throop Tech*. In the 1919 ASB Minutes, “Editor of the *Tech*” and “Editor of the Annual” were listed as elected offices; running the student publications quickly became one of the main functions of the Associated Student Body. In 1934, the annual was the catalyst of a major milestone for the ASB. In May of that year, the ASB was sued for breach of contract by Mitchell & Herb, the publishers of the 1932 yearbook. Luckily, one student had a father who was a lawyer, and after settling the case, he suggested that the Associated Students incorporate in order to protect individual students from liability in the case of another lawsuit. The ASB took this advice and on January 24, 1935, the Associated Student Body became the Associated Students of the California Institute of Technology, Incorporated (ASCIT).

**The Houses (1931-1960)**

In 1931, in an effort to house the majority of Caltech students on campus, the Institute built four student dormitories. Blacker, Dabney, Fleming, and Ricketts House were each colonized by existing student fraternities and operated as self-governing communities. In a report making recommendations for the Student Houses, a committee of students wrote, “Conduct of house functions and the maintenance of order shall be placed entirely in the hands of the students.”

In 1933, freshmen were allowed to tour each of the Houses and choose which ones they liked best in a process known as Rotation. Rotation became the foremost responsibility of the Interhouse Committee, a group of representatives from each House that oversaw the House system. In 1940, to assist in the administration of the Houses, the Institute created a faculty position called the Master of Student Houses. The MOSH soon became the primary disciplinarian for the undergraduates of Caltech.

This period also saw a broadening in the student conception of the honor code. As more students now lived together on campus, issues of property became large concerns. After World War II, the theft of personal belongings and improper treatment of
Institute property became understood as violations of the honor code. Rather than simply governing academics, the honor system began to govern many aspects of general student conduct.

The first 30 years of the Houses were a relatively calm period that saw the creation of many of Caltech’s odd traditions. Student self-governance mostly involved the maintenance of basic services. Throughout this period, the ASCIT primarily concerned itself with running the school athletic program and the student publications. This era came to an end with the opening of three new Student Houses in 1960, which coincided with the beginning of a very active period of student history.

**Student Activism (1958-1980)**

The event that marks the beginning of this era is a major restructuring of ASCIT recommended by the ASCIT Executive Committee. This was a newly created long-range planning group for the Associated Students that served to collect many activist students in the same room at the same time. The defining characteristic of this period is a large increase in the number of positions available in the student government. By 1980, there was one student government office available for every five students; double the opportunities of two decades earlier.

The construction of three new Student Houses in 1960 greatly expanded the number of House offices available to students and created three new student government entities on campus. With more people involved in House issues, the Interhouse Committee became far more active. Right after the new Houses opened, the IHC engaged the student body in a complex debate regarding Rotation.

ASCIT expanded its reach to academic issues in 1962 by creating an Educational Policies Committee (EPC). In 1968, ASCIT began a flurry of activity with a student-run research project that raised over $100,000 in grants to study air pollution. Also that year, students gained representation on several faculty committees, permitting them input into a variety of campus-wide issues. In 1972, ASCIT’s EPC started publishing a Teaching Quality Feedback Report, holding professors accountable for teaching for the first time.

In the 1970’s, Caltech saw its occasional student protest in a decade where that was a common sight on campuses across the country. The honor system further
expanded during this period, applying not only to academics and the treatment of property, but also to interpersonal relationships. The honor code became a simple, all-encompassing statement: “No one shall take unfair advantage of any member of the Caltech community.”

Students questioned almost every aspect of their student experience during this time, initiating a large number of reforms within the student government and with regard to the Institute at large. The ASCIT Bylaws were revised numerous times and editorials regarding student life appeared in almost every newspaper issue. The Institute greatly expanded its humanities curriculum and started making the first major efforts to raise the dismal graduation rate. One of the most drastic changes in student life happened in 1970, when Caltech went co-ed. At the end of this era, students and faculty met for a two-day conference in 1980 where they discussed a variety of student issues. Over the next decade, these Student-Faculty Conferences occurred every other year.

Administration (1975-2002)

In 1975, Ray Owen took on the title of Vice-President for Student Affairs, making the livelihood of students a top-level concern for the Institute. This most recent era in student life is characterized by a large growth in Institute resources devoted to providing services for the undergraduates, and most student concerns center around a reaction to this increased administration. The raising of the national minimum drinking age to 21 in 1984 created a permanent rift between students and college administrators across the nation. This is just one example of the legal and social movements of this period that challenged the Caltech conception of student self-governance in the late 80’s and early 90’s. Students of this era generally believed that the Institute was continually taking power out of student hands and this bred feelings of bitterness and resentment towards their school.

In 1986, a stabbing occurred during a party on campus that led the administration to consider a major restructuring of student affairs administration. In 1990, Caltech created the office of Residence Life to deal with some of the most controversial student issues, mostly pertaining to activities within the Houses. Over the next decade, the
Residence Life office became the target for many student gripes, creating an atmosphere where students felt largely antagonistic towards the administration.

Throughout this period, issues of administrative regulation dominated the student consciousness. An interesting consequence of this was that the honor system began to fade from the forefront of student minds. Less people thought deeply about the honor system, and the number of honor code violations slowly crept upward throughout this time.

In December 2001, many of these issues came to the forefront in a major student protest. Following the protest, town hall meetings were organized in each of the Student Houses and a student-faculty conference was organized after a 5-year hiatus. The next fall, Caltech hired its first full-time Vice-President for Student Affairs. A Tech article proclaimed that Margo Marshak would bring a new era for Student Affairs at Caltech and perhaps she will start a new era in student history as well.