

Introduction

From its earliest days as Throop College, Caltech has relied on its students to govern themselves. At a small school with an even smaller administration, allowing students a large degree of freedom was simply the most practical solution. Guided by an honor code since 1910 and living in unique dormitories since 1931, the undergraduates of Caltech through the years have shaped their own distinctive way of life.

This study was motivated by a feeling among the undergraduate student body during the 2001-02 school year that the tradition of student self-governance was under attack by the Caltech administration. In numerous letters to the *California Tech*, editorials in the GSC newsletter, and most prominently in a protest on December 12th, 2001, students voiced their discontent with Caltech administrative policies. Many of these complaints centered on areas of self-governance, and the general sentiment may be characterized by this comment from the protest, written by Elise Kleeman: “When I came to Tech, I used to hear good things about the administration – that they supported us and our desire to express ourselves and that they understood that this school was a unique environment deserving of a uniquely large amount of student self-government and of respect for our views & needs. Today, I see an unwillingness on the part of the administration to stand up to people who don't understand this - and it is destroying everything that makes this place worthwhile” (*Elion*, 2002).

The Caltech undergraduates of 2002 seemed to understand self-governance as a set of rights. They felt that self-governance gave them the right to create their own rules regarding student life and the right to fair representation in matters of shared concern. The perception of these rights, like many things at Caltech, was deeply rooted in a sense of tradition. Students believed that self-governance had been a vital part of Caltech throughout its history and thus felt that any modification to their conception of student governance was an unjust reform. However, few students had memories that went back further than four years and neither did many in the Caltech administration. This study aims to find out whether the concept of self-governance has changed throughout the years and whether the concerns that caused the student unrest in 2002 were new developments or longstanding issues.