

Essays on Caltech Student Government History

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The History of Rotation

[Essay sent to the California Tech on October 11, 2002]

As the frosh settle into their new Houses this week and the memory of rotation fades, I thought it might be interesting to share a little about the history of the Houses and freshman rotation.

The story begins on March 11, 1930. The front-page headline of The California Tech on that day read, "Dorms Will Rise at Once!" That week, the donation was made to build the fourth of the planned student Houses and a new era in Caltech undergraduate student life was born.

Before 1930, there was only room on campus for about one-fourth of the student body on campus. A majority of students pledged into a number of fraternities on campus that owned independent houses in Pasadena. When the plans were made to build the Houses, a committee of nine students was formed to investigate student living conditions and make detailed recommendations as to the conduct and organization of the new undergraduate houses. Members of the committee toured the U.S., Europe, and Canada to find out what organization would be best for the Houses. On March 5, 1931, they published their findings in the California Tech.

In the report, they said, "The reason for the building of the new undergraduate houses [is] the desire to supplement the present intellectual development of the students with a cultural and social development." Also, "Students shall be given the opportunity to wait on tables." Control of the houses was given to the students: "Conduct of house functions and the maintenance of order shall be placed entirely in the hands of the students." "A resident associate shall be placed in each house to serve as a counselor and friend of the students, but not as a proctor." The report also recommended "inter-house and intra-house competitions" and the creation of an "inter-house committee." The committee recommended that each fraternity "move into a single house as a group...not to perpetuate its own organization, but to serve as the nucleus about which to build and to foster a house unity and loyalty." All the Caltech fraternities agreed, and they moved into the new Houses in 1931.

The report also specified that "freshman shall be distributed among the four houses as equally as possible," which set the stage for rotation to begin three years later. Rotation ran with no major issues until 1951, when, according to the October 11 Tech, "Dabney flagrantly violated the spirit of rotation." Dabney offered blind dates for freshmen and lent them cars for those dates. They also announced their social schedule for first term and approached frosh in their rooms late at night and asked them for their House preferences. These actions led to the first written rotation rules in 1952, which survive relatively intact today.

At that time, freshmen spent two days in each of the four Houses during rotation. However, when three new Houses were planned in 1959, the IHC was compelled to revise the rotation system. The debate became rather heated among the student body and with the administration; no consensus was reached by the time the North Houses opened in 1960 so the MOSH assigned freshmen to Houses arbitrarily. This continued until the fall of 1963, when the IHC found an acceptable procedure for rotation: Each frosh would spend one day in each House and at the end could list four Houses he was willing to enter. This stayed relatively constant until 1991, when frosh were first allowed to rank their House preferences with a number 1-7, which is the system we have in place today.

As the freshmen go through initiations this week and learn all the quirky traditions of their House, try to imagine how their initiation rituals might have originated from a desire to provide "cultural and social development." When you complain about rotation rules, imagine that they came out of a desire to distribute frosh "as equally as possible." In fact, almost everything that the Houses do today can be seen as a confluence of traditional fraternity practices and the idealistic vision for the Caltech Houses that was laid out in 1931. In seventy-two years, the Houses have gone through many changes, but most students today would probably still agree with the January 11, 1952 Tech headline that proclaimed, "Student Houses Combine All Assets Desirable to Students."

History of the Honor System

[Essay sent to the California Tech on October 18, 2002]

In the coming weeks, the Board of Control Representatives in each House will entertain their freshmen with BoC talks. Soon, the frosh will also take their first midterms, and in doing so will be fully entrusted with Caltech's Honor Code.

For the frosh, and the upperclassmen as well, it might be useful to learn a little about where the Honor Code came from. Perhaps a little history will help us understand more about what the Honor Code means, which isn't as simple as it seems.

We know the Honor Code today by the phrase, "No one shall take unfair advantage of a member of the Caltech community." It sounds like an adage passed down from the ivory towers of Caltech's past. However, that phrase did not enter the Caltech vernacular until 1980 (*Note: I later found out this what not true. Although it entered the ASCIT Bylaws in 1980, the phrase existed in 1972 and various forms of "unfair advantage" concepts existed in the 60's*). Before that, Caltech simply had an honor system with no formal axiom. The 1970-'71 little t editors claimed, "Because one of the main benefits of the Honor System is a vast freedom from rules, attempts to state it explicitly are futile. Just respect the rights of others and expect them to respect yours."

So how long has Caltech had an honor system? According to early records, the honor system was established at Throop Polytechnic Institute in 1910. In 1913, the school was renamed the Throop College of Technology, and the Associated Student Body created a committee called the Board of Control.

The Board of Control was given "Complete jurisdiction over the conduct of all students according to the rules." In 1913, there were exactly 5 rules, and they were listed in the Associated Student Body Minutes:

1. No unnecessary disturbances in the buildings during recitation hours.
2. Any damage to property shall be compensated for by offender.
3. There shall be no smoking about the buildings or quadrangle.
4. Conduct unbecoming a gentleman or an engineer.
5. Examinations: The honor system is in vogue, with all it implies. Violations shall be dealt with accordingly by the Committee with the right of appeal for the offender to the student body.

It's interesting to note that maintaining the honor system is only one part of the duties entrusted to the Board of Control and that the honor system applied only to exams at that time. Over time, the Board of Control became synonymous with the honor system. It was not the BoC taking on more responsibility, but the honor system slowly adopting everything that was under the BoC's control.

From 1913 to World War II, the honor system expanded to all academics, including problem sets, lab reports, and essays. After the war, with perhaps some influence from the military, the treatment of Institute property and the theft of personal belongings became an important part of honor at Caltech. After women arrived in 1970, many aspects of personal behavior and interpersonal relationships became part of the honor system. Courtesy towards other students, pranks, and initiations all became part of the honor system in the 70's, setting the stage for the catch-all phrase of "unfair advantage" to enter the ASCIT Bylaws in 1980.

Today, the honor system applies to every aspect of behavior on the Caltech campus. Most simply, this means not cheating on exams and not stealing from others, but that is a far too narrow view. The honor system means we can pull pranks as long as we leave a note, we can have wild initiations as long as the participants feel comfortable, we can take food and drinks from the kitchen at our leisure as long as we don't bottle it and store it away, and we can trust our student leaders to work in the best interest of the student body, for it would be taking unfair advantage of my positions if I did not.

A Brief History of Caltech Pranks

[Essay sent to the California Tech on November 8, 2002]

Caltech's history has been marked by several great pranks, and for many current students, this was probably one of the things that attracted them to Caltech. We all know the big ones: The Great Rose Bowl Hoax of 1961, when the Rose Bowl crowd inexplicably spelled "Caltech" with a card stunt; the inscription of DEI/FEIF on the Voyager I and Voyager II spacecraft, now leaving the solar system; rewiring the Rose Bowl scoreboard to show "Caltech 38, MIT 9" in 1984; and on Hollywood's 100th anniversary, altering the Hollywood sign to read "CALTECH." It has been over a decade since there was a prank of national interest, but recently, Techers made the local papers by constructing a mock Vectors on the Beckman Lawn.

If any students are interested in perpetrating other similar pranks, there is \$200 set aside in the ASCIT Budget for that purpose. That fund, interestingly enough, has its roots in the "Prank Club" that was founded in 1987 for the Hollywood sign project. The big pranks that make headlines are the ones that are remembered, but they represent only a small fraction of the innumerable pranks that are happening on campus all the time.

With clockwork regularity, Techers pull pranks on each other. This happens on an interpersonal level, an inter-alley level, and an interhouse level, leaving no Techer unscathed in his/her years on campus. These smaller pranks come in many forms: stringing chairs across the Olive Walk, building metal dolphins in Millikan Pond, stacking someone in their room, and the occasional exchange of furniture.

This may paint a picture of a campus in total anarchy, where no student feels safe, but in fact, the atmosphere of pranking does quite the opposite. Pranks are a way for students to unwind; they provide a level of closeness and a way to escape the pressures of academics. Pranks are a fundamentally social activity – at the very least, two people are involved: the prankster and the victim. A good prank doesn't humiliate the victim, it is something both parties can laugh about. A prank done with style will gain the respect and admiration of your peers. Tipping over trash cans is artless and frowned upon, but delivering papier-mâché appendages is commended by students, if not by the administration.

Pranking is not about terrorizing other students, but is more about outsmarting them. An easy rule to remember when pulling a prank is the only rule you ever really have to know: It's called the Honor Code. When you cause physical damage, pay for the repairs. If people feel uncomfortable, don't cross that line. Most importantly, with every prank, remember to leave a note.

About ASCIT Dues

[Essay sent to the California Tech on November 15, 2002]

Without really thinking about it, every undergraduate who is reading this article paid their ASCIT dues this term. If you dropped your ASCIT membership and are reading this, I'll have to ask you to stop reading now, because you don't have a subscription to this newspaper.

Besides a subscription to this illustrious publication, paying your ASCIT dues earns you a number of different privileges. With free donuts, access to DVD's, discounted tickets to ASCIT Formal, usage of the Screening Room, a little t, and a Totem, ASCIT dues are much like House Dues: they pay for services that you can take advantage of. I know what you're thinking – there's no way you get \$60 worth out of those things and unless you eat a whole lot of donuts, you're probably right. But in my opinion, worrying about the value you get back is not the right way to think about ASCIT dues or House dues.

When you think of paying tuition, you should probably make the calculation of how much you're getting back. Can that dinner really cost \$11? Is a Caltech degree worth that much? Caltech is providing you a service and you're the customer; that's not the case with ASCIT. The Associated Students of Caltech, Inc. is a Corporation whose mission is to benefit the undergraduates of Caltech. You are a shareholder in this Corporation, and have thus pledged \$60 a year toward that mission, which is not to help each member eke out a benefit, but is to serve the needs of a community of 950. Paying your ASCIT dues is a fundamentally selfless action, and it should not be done with the selfish thought of profiting from the corporation.

This selfless spirit is likely why ASCIT, Inc. is categorized as a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation by the IRS. This is the same designation reserved for charities like the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, or the United Way. When you pay \$60 in ASCIT Dues, you are really contributing to a charity that, rather than trying to help needy children, works to help Caltech students. Did you know that if you don't feel like you get \$60 of benefit back from the dues you pay, you can write off the difference on your 1040, Schedule A?

But what about the talk of raising ASCIT dues? This topic has come up because dues haven't been raised in almost two decades. It's not something ASCIT is worried about this year because we've saved some money on accounting and also invested ASCIT's savings in an endowment. However, the fact remains that ASCIT dues have been constant since 1984, while Caltech tuition has more than doubled. Oddly enough, it is Caltech facing budget crises while ASCIT has done just fine with its smaller income. In fact, ASCIT supports more clubs now than it ever did before and is still printing a weekly newspaper, a yearly student handbook, and an annual yearbook. It may be difficult to imagine what ASCIT would do with more money, but a brief tour through ASCIT history reveals some interesting things.

Many years ago, ASCIT supported a large fraction of the athletic program at Caltech. In 1949 this accounted for more than half of the ASCIT budget. Back then, the students had a lot of say in which varsity sports teams Caltech had and what sorts of sports facilities were maintained. Nowadays, this is completely controlled and paid for by the Institute, but as an artifact of the past, ASCIT still subsidizes athletic awards and letterman jackets. At one time, ASCIT also had complete financial responsibility for the Coffeehouse, with the managers offered an on-campus room in the SAC, but that has since passed on to Dining Services. In the late 60's, ASCIT started an undergraduate research board that offered grants for summer research. The heir to the ASCIT Research Project is the present-day SURF program. In the recent past, ASCIT provided the majority of funding for all clubs, but today, that is not the case. The Student Affairs Department has taken a larger role in club funding over the years and now many clubs get a large portion of their money from Institute funds.

On the surface, this seems like a great thing – Caltech is dedicating more of its money towards student activities. However, if you stop and think about where that money came from, it likely has its roots in the higher tuition we're paying. In the same way we pay ASCIT Dues, we are pooling our money in the Student Affairs fund for clubs. Except that now, rather than students deciding which causes to fund, the decision lies in the hands of administrators. So by allowing tuition to grow at a faster rate than ASCIT or House dues, we may be trading away our decision-making power.

So if you ever question the value of ASCIT dues, take a moment and compare it to tuition. Caltech takes more than \$27,000 from you each year to create the kind of school environ what about the talk of raising ASCIT dues? This topic has come up because dues haven't been raised in almost two decades. It's not something ASCIT is worried about this year because we've saved some money on accounting and also invested ASCIT's savings in an endowment. However, the fact remains that ASCIT dues have been constant since 1984, while Caltech tuition has more than doubled. Oddly enough, it is Caltech facing budget crises while ASCIT has done just fine with its smaller income.

Responsibility in Student Government

[Essay sent to the California Tech on November 21, 2002]

At the “What I Love About Caltech” event last week, one student described the onus of the Honor Code, vividly describing the painful experience of policing yourself to fail an exam. Only at Caltech do students commonly find themselves having to enforce their own time-limits and close their textbooks, knowing that their actions are driving down their GPA’s.

As difficult as this may sometimes be, you’d be hard-pressed to find a student who would trade the Honor Code for proctored exams. In surveys where I asked students and alumni, “What is the best thing about the Caltech experience?” and “What aspects of the Caltech undergraduate experience set it apart from other universities?” the Honor Code was among the most prevalent responses. Caltech students don’t tend to shy away from challenges, and are certainly willing to take full responsibility for the Honor Code in exchange for open collaboration and take-home exams.

This willingness to take responsibility for themselves is a common theme throughout Caltech student history, and the privileges it affords us are the things we value the most. In 1913, the students formed the Board of Control to act as a disciplinary body on campus. In 1922, the students even created a Board of Traditions to enforce various campus-wide customs. In 1931, students took responsibility for student housing assignments and dinner etiquette, laying the foundation for the student House autonomy and traditions that persist today.

When ASCIT incorporated in 1935, its stated purpose was to conduct, manage, and control the business and affairs of the student body. With this charge, ASCIT often took responsibilities reserved for the school administration: In 1973, ASCIT started evaluating courses and instructors – the administration still doesn’t do this in a centralized manner today. When student telephone service was first established in the late 70’s ASCIT ran the switchboard and collected student phone bills. Rather than simply petition the administration to make changes, students of the past administrated themselves in the tradition of Caltech undergraduate self-governance.

Just as with the Honor Code, taking on extra administrative responsibilities often comes with a little bit of pain. Every House Secretary takes on responsibilities, without pay, that would generally be done by a campus housing office. Each House President is the recipient of innumerable complaints that normally would be directed toward administrators. The Board of Control deals with issues usually reserved for a Dean. The ASCIT Treasurer, without pay, does a job very similar to many full-time Caltech employees. The ASCIT web site provides many services that are unique among student-administered operations. The list of student administrative responsibilities is very long; this year's list lists 215 separate students as holding an office in House or school-level government – that's 23% of the student body!

Each one of those students takes on a duty that may otherwise be reserved for a Caltech employee. By doing their job responsibly, each student officer plays a part in making sure the administration doesn't tamper with rotation rules, restrict House traditions, or decide what gets printed in the yearbook. And in many cases, students do a better job than the Institute might. An online student directory, a restaurant guide, and an undergraduate research journal are a few recent examples of high-quality student creations.

I hear many complaints that Caltech should do x, Caltech should have y, why doesn't Caltech provide z? Instead of simply complaining, it might be more constructive to think of how students themselves might be able to help solve the problem. Self-governance is a two-way street, and if we don't want the administration meddling in our affairs, we should try to do as much as we can on our own.

At this time of year, many students are thinking about running for office somewhere in the student government. I hope that those of you looking to get involved are not just after room picks, but are willing to take on real responsibility for your position. When conflicts arise, I hope your first instinct will not be to go to an administrator, but to work it out among students. That may not be the way it works at other schools, but as I hope most of you know, Caltech is not other schools. We enjoy the unique privilege of self-governance, and the best way to protect that privilege is to do our jobs well and to serve other students responsibly.

A History of Student Publications

[Essay sent to the California Tech on December 6, 2002]

On December 5, 1913 the Executive Committee of the Associated Student Body of Throop Polytechnic University passed the first amendment to its newly rewritten Constitution that decreed, “the students shall publish a college magazine to be called ‘The Throop Tech.’” 89 years later, this student publication still exists, and is the only weekly newspaper distributed throughout the Caltech campus.

The fact that the Tech was established through an amendment is indicative of a long tradition of close relationships between student government and student publications. Created the same year as the Board of Control, the independent student voice of the Tech has been as essential to student self-governance at Caltech as any other part of the student government.

In 1917, the student body elected the third different editor of the California Tech, Frank Capra, who also served as the student body secretary that year. Following this invaluable experience, Mr. Capra went on to direct some classic American movies, including “It’s a Wonderful Life” and “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington.” Capra’s three Academy Awards are still a record among Tech alumni, but perhaps another Tech Editor will challenge that mark one day.

In 1919, the “Editor of the Annual” was listed as an elected student body position. At that time, the yearbook was known as “Orange and White,” but in 1921, after Throop Polytechnic changed its name to Caltech, the yearbook was renamed the “Big T.” Ten years later, a conflict involving the Big T precipitated a major event for the Associated Student Body.

In May of 1934, the Associated Student Body (ASB) was sued by Mitchell & Herb, the printers of the 1932 Big T. To get a lower price, the business manager of the 1932 Big T had signed a two-year contract with the publishers. However, when a new business manager took over in 1933, he found the contract to be unsatisfactory and printed with another company. Mitchell & Herb then sued the ASB for \$3,000 for breach of contract. Luckily, one student had a father who was a lawyer, and the suit was settled out of court for a much smaller amount. The lawyer suggested that the Associated

Students become a corporation in order to protect individual students from liability in the case of another lawsuit. When the ASB was not incorporated, the courts could have ordered all students to pay out of their own pockets. However, with corporation status, the judgment would be limited to the assets of the corporation. In May of 1934, the Associated Student Body (ASB) was sued by Mitchell & Herb, the printers of the 1932 Big T. To get a lower price, the business manager of the 1932 Big T had signed a two-year contract with the publishers. However, when a new business manager took over in 1933, he found the contract to be unsatisfactory and printed with another company. Mitchell & Herb then sued the ASB for \$3,000 for breach of contract. Luckily, one student had a father who was a lawyer, and the suit was settled out of court for a much smaller amount. The lawyer suggested that the Associated Students become a corporation in order to protect individual students from liability in the case of another lawsuit. When the ASB was not incorporated, the courts could have ordered all students to pay out of their own pockets. However, with corporation status, the judgment would be limited to the assets of the corporation. The ASB officers completed a thorough revision of the Constitution and submitted Articles of Incorporation to the State of California. On January 24, 1935, the Associated Student Body became the Associated Students of the California Institute of Technology, Incorporated.

With this newfound legal status, the Associated Students adopted another publication. A student handbook, which had been published yearly by the Caltech YMCA, came under the control of the Associated Students. As a companion to the yearbook, the student handbook was named the little t. Unlike the other publications offices, the editor and business manager of the little t became appointed positions, as they were not originally part of the student government.

In 1957, creating an outlet for students' creative writing, ASCIT took on a fourth publication: A literary magazine known as the Totem. In 1973, before there was any systematic method for evaluating undergraduate teaching at Caltech, ASCIT's Educational Policies Committee began publishing a Teaching Quality Feedback Report (TQFR). In 1981, this was renamed the Course Listings for Undergraduate Education (CLUE), and is still being published annually today, evaluating the quality of all course offerings at Caltech.

The CLUE actually doesn't exist anymore in paper form, and neither does the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Handbook (UROH), first published in the 80's. The CLUE and the UROH now exist only in online form as part of the newest ASCIT publication, donut.caltech.edu. The donut website is now the platform for online voting, club registration, and e-mail communications for the undergraduate student body. It is the latest example of how student publications and student government at Caltech have a long common history.

A History of the Past Year for the Caltech Undergraduates

[Essay sent to the California Tech on January 24, 2003]

So this Wednesday, you will elect a new hero to lead you into a bright future – one with a \$3 million endowment, a green lawn outside Beckman Institute, and a new best friend named Margo Marshak. My time as ASCIT President will soon come to an end, and I thought this might be an appropriate time to recount the past year, which has been quite eventful for the Caltech undergraduates.

This story begins on December 12, 2001 – the middle of finals week first term last year. At a time when it seemed as if Caltech had forgotten about its students, the typically apathetic undergraduates defied convention, gathering on the Olive Walk for a rally unlike anything in recent memory. More than two hundred students participated, sharing their views by speaking at the open microphone or by writing on banners that were filled three times over. This unexpected and unusual event gave birth to a year unlike anything Caltech has ever seen.

During second term, the Faculty Student Housing Committee organized a series of town hall meetings, visiting each of the student houses to discuss student traditions and housing environments. Continuing the spirit of the December protest, students spoke out strongly defending the traditions of the student houses.

During February, the ad hoc Library Task Force released its report in favor of a centralized library for Caltech campus. When many of its recommendations were ignored, students and faculty found another issue to complain about. As second term ended, little progress seemed to have been made. During finals week, David Baltimore invited student leaders to a meeting previewing a consultant's report on the student affairs administration at Caltech. The report itself, which called for a new full-time professional Vice-President for Student Affairs, was met with skepticism. However, the opening of the lines of communication provided a glimmer of hope for the future.

As third term began, the administration began feeling increased pressure from many different directions. Prefrosh Weekend loomed on the horizon, and many in the Caltech community expressed a fear that the student unrest would negatively impact Caltech's reputation. With hundreds of high school students waiting to descend on

campus, the administration finally caved to student demands. In a letter to students on April 5, President Baltimore restored freshman parking, reinstated the policies of giving students free catalogs and mailing home their grades, and made guarantees on health insurance and the student house system. A week after Prefrosh Weekend, at the 2002 Student-Faculty Conference, President Baltimore announced that \$3 million from the Moore Gift would be placed in an endowment for improving the quality of student life.

While these victories were very satisfying, new issues quickly rose up to take their places. At that Student-Faculty Conference, a growing concern about student morale was uncovered. A week later, the GSC exposed Caltech's plans to build a wall on Beckman lawn. The undergraduate student body remained dissatisfied with Residence Life policies regarding alcohol and fire. And still, the issue of health insurance lingered.

A few dedicated students served on committees over the summer addressing many of these issues, but the school year started with uncertainty still hanging in the air. In November, a long, hard battle ended in triumph. The big news even reached the Los Angeles Times – Caltech decided not to build Vectors on the Beckman Lawn. After winter break, ending another hard-fought conflict, it was announced that the student health plan would continue unchanged. It is perhaps fitting that these two events straddled the one-year anniversary of the student protest. If there is any lesson to be learned from the past year, it's that student voices can be heard.

I hope the student body realizes this fact. A little over a year ago, students spoke out and over the past year, the administration has begun to listen. The best thing students can do now is to keep telling Caltech what we want, and the student body desperately needs leaders that are willing to speak up. For those who are thinking about getting involved, I would like to offer some words from the protest that have helped me find my place in student government, "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."

Next year, a majority of the student body won't have seen the protest, but as long as students keep getting involved, its ideals will not be forgotten.

Women in Student Government

[Essay sent to the California Tech on February 14, 2003]

Did anyone else notice that there were a lot of women in this past week's election? I counted 27 male and 20 female candidates on the ballot. 27/20 is a ratio of 1.35, which is much better than the 2.02 ratio indicated by this year's fall term enrollment. Among the winners, it is even better, with the new ASCIT BoD sporting a 3/6 ratio (that's 3 men and 6 women!). Of course, this doesn't surprise me, I've been involved in student government for a long time at Caltech, and besides the cheerleading squad, there's no better place to meet women.

But seriously, is this just a fluke or is the ratio really better in the student government? Well, the current BoD has 5 men and 4 women, the BoD before that had 6 men and 3 women, and the BoD before that had 4 men and 5 women. My memory doesn't go back further than that, but we might be on to something. How do we know for sure? I think we learned it in Ma2a – Hypothesis Testing!

So I tested the Hypothesis: The male/female ratio in the student government is better than the ratio in the student body at large. I performed a paired t-test using the percentage of women in the undergraduate student body and the percentage of women in the student government each year. I defined the student government as the offices listed in the little t under "Student Government." Unfortunately, there's no data for the sex of students listed in the little t, but I made guesses based on first names. That introduces some error, but it should still be an unbiased estimator. The registrar had the historical percentages of women in the undergraduate student body.

Women first enrolled at Caltech in the fall of 1970, so the first women could run for office in the spring of 1971. Unfortunately, there are a few years when the little t didn't come out, but the ASCIT archive has 29 volumes from 1971 to 2002. For each little t, I wrote down all the student government officers and when I could, I guessed the sex of the student by considering the first name. The percentage of females in student government each year was defined as the number of females identified divided by the number of total officers for which a sex was identified. The test statistic will be the

percentage of identified females minus the percentage of females in the entire student body.

My first observation is that there isn't a clear trend through time; women have been getting involved at high rates since they first arrived on campus. In fact, the first female ASCIT President was Liz McCleod, who was elected in 1974. The first House President was Deanna Hunt of Blacker, elected in 1975. They were members of the 2nd and 3rd classes, respectively, ever to include women.

Now, back to the hypothesis test. Considering all the data, the mean of the test statistic was 4.40% with a standard deviation of 0.83%. With 30 degrees of freedom, this gave a t-statistic of 5.31. The null hypothesis was rejected with 99.99% confidence. This means that on average, the percentage of women in student government is 4.4% higher than the percentage of women in the student body, and the test concludes that yes, the male/female ratio is better in the student government.

But there were more interesting questions. Is female participation the same in House offices and school-level offices? For school-level offices, the mean was 7.15% while for House offices, the mean was only 2.41%. These are statistically different with 99.99% confidence. So although women participate in student government at a higher rate than expected, they tend to choose school-level offices over House offices.

Seeing that result, I wondered if particular Houses are dragging things down or if this was a problem across all the Houses. Investigating this question, I found that Blacker (6.09%), Dabney (4.15%), and Ruddock (5.82%) can reject the null with 95% confidence. Lloyd (3.18%) and Ricketts (3.63%) also exhibit higher rates of women, but Fleming (-0.24%) and Page (-2.91%) actually have had smaller numbers of women in office than the overall ratio would predict, although none of those results are statistically significant.

As a last test, I considered a few different committees in the student government. The ASCIT BoD, where we started, had 6.46% more females, which rejects the null with 99% confidence. The Board of Control had 2.61% more females, which is not statistically significant. One result stands out though, and that is the IHC, which had a statistic of -6.94%, which means that the IHC has had fewer females than the ratio would expect with 99% confidence. Out of all the categories I considered, the IHC was the only subset that

shows a statistically significant result in favor of males. Apparently, in Caltech student government, the glass ceiling is right below a House Presidency.

Too Many Clubs?

[Essay sent to the California Tech on April 4, 2003]

This weekend, the ASCIT Board of Directors spent Friday night listening to dozens of student clubs beg for funding. I've sat through that meeting twice, and as I look back on those long nights of debating over often trivial sums of money, it makes me wonder if maybe there are just too many clubs at Caltech.

A quick count through this year's *little t* reveals that there are 98 clubs on campus – more than one club for every ten undergraduates. Since ASCIT requires each club to have at least ten members, we're probably pretty close to reaching our limit. New clubs are still forming though, and two of the new ones might be considered among the most prominent on campus: The chess club and figure skating team are not even listed in the *little t* but have been topping the Caltech headlines for the past few weeks.

It seems like the most successful clubs are often the new clubs. I was part of one of these in my sophomore year, when the Caltech Cheer Squad won its division at the Cheerleaders of America West Coast Open. Another very ambitious club, Building Bridges, has compiled an impressive resume over the past two years. The CURJ and the Fishing Quarterly, the newest student publications, are both doing quite well.

This is not to say that established clubs aren't doing great things too. The Caltech Christian Fellowship holds more regular activities than almost any other group on campus. SPECTRE still maintains an extensive science fiction library. The Caltech C is quite active and organizes an impressive annual Chinese New Year celebration.

Still, almost a third of the clubs listed in this year's *little t* are less than five years old. A quick perusal of the 1996 *little t* reveals that more than 20 of the 88 clubs listed no longer exist. The Caltech Space Society, the Taiwanese Student Association, Israeli Folkdancers, Club Homeboy, and the Cryogenics Club are among the forgotten.

This sort of phenomenon probably exists at other colleges since any one student can only sustain a club for four years. However, the problem may be more acute at Caltech because we have such a small student body. The long-standing clubs like CCF

and the Caltech C boast memberships over 100. Most Caltech clubs can't even claim 25 active members so inevitably, many fall victim to graduating leadership.

It wasn't always like this. There were never more than about 30 clubs on campus before 1960, and students were generally concentrated into a few large student activities. In those times, Tau Beta Pi was very active on campus as were other engineering societies. The Glee Club was the most popular activity on campus into the 70's. The Caltech Christian Fellowship and the Newman Club also have long histories.

One of the most interesting clubs during the 40's and 50's was a group known as the Beavers. The 1946 *little t* tells us that "to be one of the fifty members of the Beavers is considered a campus honor of no small degree. Beavers are easily recognized by their white sleeveless sweaters with a brown and gold emblem on the front. The purpose of the Beavers is twofold. First to offer recognition for past service, and second to promote school spirit and interest in campus affairs in the future." It seems like the Beavers were basically a 50-person social team for the entire undergraduate student body. They helped organize ASCIT activities, rounded up students for athletic events, helped plan Frosh Camp each year, and even visited local high schools to promote Caltech. During the 50's, there was so much interest that some students started another group, the Instituters, that was not as exclusive.

Now, maybe it just wasn't cool to be a Beaver anymore, or perhaps the rise of Student Affairs and increased administrative support for students rendered them unnecessary, but by the 1970's, both these clubs had died out. Through the 70's and 80's, new clubs formed around special interest groups, representing the increasing diversity on campus. The Chinese Student Association, Hillel, and Jazz Band formed during this time along with now defunct clubs like the Undergraduate Women's Group, the Libertarian Forum, and the Model United Nations team. From 1970 to 2002, the number of clubs on campus doubled while the student body only grew about 25%.

Maybe this is a good thing. After all, between a half-dozen bands and orchestras, 18 varsity sports, almost 100 clubs, and over 250 different student government offices, there are more than enough activities for 942 students to choose from (those of you who complain that there's nothing to do clearly aren't looking hard enough).

However, the increasingly varied interests of the student body have created a much less unified campus. The past few decades have seen the end of almost all our campus-wide traditions. Interhouse, Mudeo, ASCIT Movies, and football games are long gone. ASCIT donuts and the ASCIT formal may not be far behind. Few activities on campus ever force people to cross House lines. Attendance at athletic events is certainly far down from the days of the Beavers, and school spirit is at an all time low.

Individually, we have a lot more opportunities, but are we really better off now? At a place where “Caltech community” is supposed to mean something and traditions are vitally important, perhaps a little more “Beaver Fever” might not be a bad thing.

The Caltech Myth

[Essay sent to the California Tech on April 10, 2003]

The Caltech student body, faculty and administration share many assumptions about Caltech. These beliefs are common to most of us ... Caltech is a good educational institution. Caltech produces a top quality scholar. The quality of the entering freshman is increasing. Though minor research modifications might be necessary, the basic research structure and orientation of Caltech will still attract future large-scale Federal support. Caltech is an intimate and personal college... The gradual erosion of the freshman's zeal marks his intellectual maturation... The healthy emotional and personal growth of the majority of Caltech students is possible in spite of the obvious social limitations of the Caltech experience. If any changes are required we have plenty of time to effect them.

It is my sincere conviction that all of these views are complete myths, lacking any foundation in fact. Though these beliefs may not all represent the verbal positions of the Caltech community, they certainly reflect the operational tenets reflected in the workings of the Institute. At this point, I would like to deal with just one of these myths and examine its validity.

Is Caltech a good educational institution? Freshmen who come into Caltech, excited, enthusiastic and eager leave this place largely emptied. In many sad ways going to Caltech is tantamount to committing intellectual or scholarly suicide. This freshman energy is not channeled into experiences designed to enhance it. Freshman learn that science, something once loved as a sparkling orb, light and exciting, becomes the daily routine drudgery of physics lab and math assignments. Even more distressing, many freshmen try to convince themselves that the drudgery is in fact, what they came for. After all, science is tough.

The Caltech student body, world known for its academic competence, experiences education as an external process. Little real responsibility for developing scholarly self direction falls on the student. The emphasis seems to be on the substance rather than the structure of information. If the Caltech education is supposed to prepare students so that they can do without Caltech it is not evident from our undergraduate program.

It may surprise you to know that the preceding four paragraphs were written almost 35 years ago by Joe Rhodes, the recently reelected ASCIT President, and published in the California Tech on April 25, 1968. The words are eerily resonant today, and this Wednesday, we will attempt to address many of these issues in a day of meetings and presentations. As we take a hard look at the curriculum this week, I would like to point out that these are not just current problems, but may be as old as Caltech itself.

Rhodes was certainly not the first to speak out. Bernard Shore wrote in the March 10, 1949 Tech: “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.”

These complaints have always been there, and over time, the faculty has responded to these complaints by diversifying the core curriculum, expanding humanities offerings, mandating pass-fail grading for freshmen, offering more different majors, and reducing the number of units required to graduate. Nowadays, our graduation rate is improving each year, and is dramatically better than a few decades ago. However, we are still far behind our peer universities in that respect, and the same criticisms of the Caltech academic program are still being voiced today.

The Student-Faculty Conference on Wednesday will identify and characterize some of our most pressing problems. The committees will also provide simple solutions for many of them. However, the most important work will come in the weeks and months after conference. We should not expect to solve decades-old problems in one day. Some reforms will require significant additional work and changes will likely need to be made at the highest levels.

The conference is the most ambitious event of its kind that Caltech has seen yet, and I have high hopes that Wednesday, April 16, 2003 may be the day we start making Rhodes’ “Caltech Myth” a reality.

All About Committees

[Essay sent to the California Tech on April 25, 2003]

Over the next week or so, the undergraduate student government will be interviewing and appointing representatives for various committees of campus-wide importance. Currently, this involves 66 students on 20 different committees; the body of committee representatives outnumbers ASCIT officers and is larger than any House government. There are many schools with honor systems, and there are even schools with comparable housing arrangements, but the privilege afforded to the student body in these committees is unparalleled.

Students read freshman applications and participate in admissions decisions. Students vote on reinstating students who become academically ineligible. Upperclass merit award applications are read by students and they vote on the recipients. When tuition was raised this past year, students sat on the committee that reviewed and approved the amount. When changes in health insurance were being discussed last year, students helped review consultant reports and helped write a set of recommendations sent to President Baltimore. When the P/F policy was changed this year, students participated in the discussions. Students preview and help choose the performances that are held in Beckman Auditorium each year. A student currently sits on the committee trying to decide what public art piece will replace Vectors.

There are other institutions where students participate in some of these activities, but at none of those universities do the students have the sovereign power to choose their own representatives. At most schools, the admissions office will pick and choose its own students, the Deans will nominate exceptional students for various positions, or administrators will conduct the interviews. At Caltech, student leaders do the interviews, and no administrator tells us who we can or can not have on a committee. The privileges of student representation at Caltech are truly unique, and are an integral part of the tradition of student self-governance at Caltech.

Compared with the traditions of the honor system and the student houses, committee representation is a rather new phenomenon. The roots of our current system can be traced back to April 19, 1967. On that day, the newly elected ASCIT President,

Joe Rhodes, called a Corporation meeting. 400 students gathered in Beckman Auditorium and passed several important resolutions. One of the resolutions asked for student representation on all faculty committees that were relevant to student life. The Faculty Board accepted the proposal soon after and the undergraduate student body was soon placing representatives on 15 separate committees.

It's not just the student aspect of committees that is unique. The fact that Caltech is run by so many committees is indicative of a rather unique administrative structure. Although we like to berate "the administration", there is no single entity we can blame for all our troubles.

The Caltech administration is relatively small in comparison to the \$2.5 billion in assets that they manage. Just as we have more homework than we can finish alone, the administration has more under their control than they can possibly pay close attention to. Their solution is the same as ours: collaborate. Committees of students and faculty give their opinions and contribute their time to play an integral part in the functioning of this Institute.

Students see this system and believe that we have some sort of unalienable right to be involved in every decision, but we would be hard-pressed to find this guarantee on paper, and this is certainly not the case at other schools. The truth is, things are handled this way more out of necessity than principle. The administration collaborates with us because we have something to offer. We are smart, responsible individuals, and we often care more about these issues than faculty or administrators do.

This past election season, more students ran for ASCIT offices than ever before. I urge those students who may not have won elected offices to sign up for committee positions outside SAC 33. These are the front lines of student-faculty-administration relations, and the student body needs responsible people to represent their views. Although it is one of the newest aspects of student government at Caltech, it is quickly growing to be one of the most important. Sign up now!

What's Wrong with Caltech?

[Essay sent to the California Tech on May 2, 2003]

This week, I finally ordered my cap & gown and made a decision on where I'm going next year. There are only a few more weeks until I graduate and write my last column in this newspaper. So, for today and the next three weeks, I will share my final thoughts about undergraduate life at Caltech. In particular, I will try to answer the question, "What is wrong with Caltech?"

There are a lot of things wrong with Caltech, but the reason I have been writing in this paper over the past year is that I strongly believe the solutions to almost all of these problems are in the hands of students. What's wrong with Caltech? It's the students. We are doing a great number of things wrong, and we have been doing them for decades.

There are probably very few undergraduates that agree with that statement. Many would blame "the administration" for the problems they perceive. However, anyone that has ever actually worked with administrators knows that "the administration" is a grossly over-generalized scapegoat – there is no behind-the-scenes conspiracy and there is no single administrator running the show.

So what are the common problems that students have with Caltech? At the top there are only a few. One of them is the academic workload, which students tried to address in earnest at the recent Student-Faculty Conference. I was surprised by the mixed response to a lot of questions about workload, and that helps illustrate an important point: there is no universal student opinion on any of these issues; "the students" can be as much of a generalization as "the administration". In any case, there are many quick fixes (revisions to the Catalog, adjustment of various requirements) and some long-term solutions (Dean of Undergraduate Studies) being implemented to tackle the workload issues, so I'm not going to discuss them at length.

The other oft-repeated concern of students is that the administration is taking away student freedoms – that our self-governance is being threatened. This belief is at the core of all the administration-student conflicts that have escalated dramatically over the past two years. It is also an issue that I don't think anyone really understands. The

loudest opinions of students are overly simplistic and flawed, and the actions of administrators have been clumsy and misguided.

The issue at hand is self-governance, and I believe strongly that the onus is on the students to solve these problems themselves. The mistakes of administrators are often blamed on a failure to solicit student input – put in other words, one could say that the fault lies with students for failing to make their own opinions heard. Perhaps this blame falls on the student government for not communicating student views to the administration. I was President of the student body for a year, and I will be the first to admit that I regret not speaking up enough on issues like the house system, the library, and the fire policy. However, I also rarely had people complain about those things to me during my term, so they never reached the top of my priority list above health insurance, Vectors, or donuts.

What makes SELF-governance work is taking it upon yourSELF to speak up when you have a concern. When there is something you care strongly about and find others who support your opinion, it is imperative that you get involved and do something about it. When you sit in your room and complain to your friends about what the administration is and isn't doing, you are openly dismissing the whole notion of self-governance. You're sitting idle complaining about how other people are governing your life rather than governing your life yourself.

I've told this to some people and they've said that they just don't have time to get involved with student life issues. That's where the miracle of representative democracy comes into play. While you may not have time to deal with student issues, there are people in ASCIT and House government that are ready and willing to work on your behalf. In fact, 215 different students held some student government office this past year.

Unfortunately, students don't always go to the student government when they have problems. Far too often, I've seen students try to circumvent their student leaders in an attempt to find "who's really in charge". It is the actions of these students that are really undermining student self-governance at Caltech.

Imagine how well the honor system would fare if professors consistently went straight to the Dean instead of talking with the BoC. That's exactly what happens when students go straight to the Provost to talk about the library situation without informing the

ASCIT BoD, when Houses report interhouse conflicts to the CRC rather than trying to resolve things amongst themselves, and when frosh complain directly to Kim West about hazing without first telling the upperclassmen in their House.

Students have repeatedly shown that they don't trust the student government to solve their problems. Every time they do it, they take power away from students and give it to administrators. We love to tell administrators that they should just trust students, but that's not likely to happen when we don't even trust each other.

Self-governance doesn't simply mean that the administration is supposed to leave us alone. It means that each person has a responsibility to govern his own conduct and that when conflicts occur, we must trust our own system to resolve the issue.

What's Wrong with ASCIT?

[Essay sent to the California Tech on May 9, 2003]

Last week, I argued that students are the source of Caltech's problems with student self-governance. This week, I will look at the centerpiece of our student government and ask, "What is wrong with ASCIT?"

My answer is simple: Donuts.

Of course, anyone who reads this newspaper knows this. Rarely does anyone complain publicly about club funding, the honor system, or student representation, but there were constant complaints about donuts during third term last year. In my entire time at Caltech, the only ASCIT legislation that was proposed by initiative has been a Bylaw amendment regarding donuts.

When put on a ballot, that initiative received only 40% of the vote, and this reveals a deep divide in the student body's opinion of ASCIT's proper role on campus. This divide has been growing over the years and has corresponded with a weakening central student government and a decline in student influence on campus.

There are basically two major opinions regarding ASCIT. First, there are students who believe their \$60 a year in ASCIT dues buy them various services; most prominently the donuts they pay for every Friday morning. On the other side are students who believe that ASCIT has no business buying donuts at all. They would like to see clubs charge their own membership fees, publications sell their own subscriptions, and ASCIT concentrate on representing student views rather than subsidizing special interest groups.

Most students fall somewhere in the middle of that spectrum (actually, most don't even think about these things at all), and opinions are often split across House lines. This ideological dispute has started to manifest itself over the past year in donut gravestones, ASCIT dropping parties, and water balloons at midnight donuts. Again, it is students against students undermining our ability to stand up to the administration.

It didn't used to be like this. Even just 5 years ago students were pretty unified in laughing at ASCIT for throwing bad parties and making fun of ASCIT officers for taking themselves too seriously. The two rival factions of today have appeared when Caltech student government has reached something of a turning point.

The ASCIT of the past was focused on student services. ASCIT once operated a coffeehouse in the SAC and managed the monthly phone bills for all students living on campus. When students needed summer research, the ASCIT Research Project was initiated. To help students pick the best courses, the ASCIT Educational Policies Committee began publishing Teaching Quality Feedback Reports.

Today, Dining Services operates the coffeehouse, Telecommunications manages our phones, the SFP office oversees the SURF program, and each department handles their own teaching evaluations. Even further in the past, ASCIT once managed much of varsity athletics, which is now in the hands of professional coaches and administrators.

This transition from ASCIT to Student Affairs has been going on for decades. After all, what better way for Student Affairs to identify valuable student services than to pick from students' own initiatives? Unfortunately, this model has broken down over the past two decades as Student Affairs has grown much faster than ASCIT.

Clubs can no longer rely on ASCIT to fund their activities without some Institute support. Administrators often create new programs to fit their own vision for Caltech. Students no longer look to ASCIT to provide them with new services, and when they do, instead of asking, "Why doesn't ASCIT help to implement an online registration system?" they ask, "Why doesn't ASCIT tell the administration to implement an online registration system?"

The reasons for this shift are simple. ASCIT dues have been constant since 1984 while Caltech tuition has doubled. Students are paying their money to Student Affairs rather than ASCIT, so that's where services have to come from. Money is power and we've been paying more and more of our power to the administration.

Raising ASCIT dues may seem like the obvious solution here, and doing that would certainly help the cause of Friday morning donuts. More money would put more flexibility in the ASCIT budget and allow students more influence to support the things they want to do. However, more money certainly isn't the only solution to this problem.

Rather than trying to reclaim ASCIT's role of primary student service provider, we could simply accede to Student Affairs. Instead of trying to compete with administrators we could work more closely with them to identify and respond to student needs. Currently, only the ASCIT President works with the administration on a regular

basis. All the other ASCIT officers have jobs related to internal issues – a relic of ASCIT’s past. If ASCIT wants to shift its focus, some major restructuring will need to be done, which should probably start with a stronger focus on student representatives to campus committees.

In either scheme, ASCIT donuts don’t make a whole lot of sense. The traditional Friday morning donuts were first delivered by MOSH’s in the 1980’s and ASCIT took over the responsibility in the 1990’s. They are a cost passed from the administration to the student government, a student tradition created by an administrator, and now they are a polarizing issue. I genuinely hope that someday soon the student body will get over donuts so ASCIT can regain a meaningful role in providing student services.

But what then? Should we raise dues or focus more on representation? How about both?

What's Wrong with the Honor System?

[Essay sent to the California Tech on May 16, 2003]

I wasted a column last week on the somewhat trivial subject of donuts, so this week I will tackle a more interesting question, “What is wrong with the honor system?”

The easy answer, and the one that I often hear is, “Nothing is wrong with the honor system – at least, nothing is more wrong than it was before.” I tend to disagree. I think there are some major problems with the honor system, and that if we don't address them soon, they will begin to threaten our way of life.

Like most of our student-governance issues, the current honor system problems have their roots in fateful choices made by students of the past. Once upon a time, the honor system was simply an informal code of conduct. In the words of the 1970-'71 *little t* editors, “Because one of the main benefits of the Honor System is a vast freedom from rules, attempts to state it explicitly are futile. Just respect the rights of others and expect them to respect yours.”

However, by the early 70's, a phrase had already begun circulating through the undergraduate population that would change the honor system forever. That phrase was “unfair advantage” and by 1980, our indefinable honor code had an explicit characterization, “No one shall take unfair advantage of any member of the Caltech community.”

Armed with a universal rule they could apply to a wide variety of situations, the Board of Control of the 1970's began to hear more cases of a non-academic nature. The honor system had always been meant to apply to all of student conduct, but before the concept of “unfair advantage”, the BoC had a difficult time dealing with any issues more complex than simple cheating or stealing.

However, the BoC was not prepared for the increased caseload. In 1970, a BoC Rep wrote to the *Tech*, “The Board finds itself faced with an increased number of such ‘violations’ and therefore with the dilemma of either ignoring them or having its efficiency threatened by having to call weekly case meetings.”

Over time, the BoC dealt with fewer and fewer of the interpersonal issues and those neglected responsibilities fell to the Deans office. Unfortunately, when issues go to

administrators, the spirit of self-governance is lost, and most students who find themselves in front of the Dean for stealing Daihatsus or pirating music feel more like they are being disciplined and less like they are part of an honor system.

We recently tried to put students back into the process by creating the CRC, but that innovation has been creating problems of its own. The CRC has created an atmosphere where students are encouraged to turn their friends in to escape punishment. The BoC encourages this as well, but the problem is worse with the CRC because while most students can rationalize turning in students to the BoC for their own good, ratting out your friends to the CRC usually comes from an “everyone for themselves” attitude.

Our honor system is being clouded by disciplinary motives and we are rapidly losing sight of the community atmosphere the honor system is supposed to foster. To get an idea of how that would work, we can look at how things were before “unfair advantage” and long before the CRC.

I’ve been looking a lot at 1970, so let’s take another incident from that year. On January 16, 1970, a group of Pageboys attempted to shower the *Tech* editor after he failed to print one of their letters. In the process, they broke his umbrella. This incident was not handled by the BoC, the Deans, or the MOSH; It came before the IHC. After interviewing many witnesses, the Presidents of the seven houses voted unanimously to pass a resolution regarding showering and to fine the aggressors \$7.50, the cost of the umbrella.

Nowadays, disciplinary issues of that nature never come before the IHC, and I’m sure many would question the House Presidents’ authority to impose a fine on individual students. However, I think this is exactly the sort of thing that should be happening more often.

In the 1892 catalog for Throop Polytechnic Institute 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.”

When we place too much power in the hands of the BoC, the CRC, or in Student Affairs, we are choosing police officers over watchful friends. No one group should have

a monopoly on student discipline. It is sometimes more effective to hear things from your friends than from an administrator.

It makes sense that all suspected academic cheating should go to the BoC, but do all other instances of unfair advantage need to be reported? If something can be resolved between friends, shouldn't they do so? If a problem can stay within an alley, a House, or between two Houses, is there any reason for other people to get involved?

We may have come up with an all-encompassing phrase to describe our honor code, but that doesn't mean we need a monolithic system to deal with violations. The strength of an honor system comes from each individual policing himself and having the authority to watch over his peers. We have forgotten this crucial aspect of our honor system and it is weakening our student community.

The BoC and the CRC are long overdue to take a careful look at their policies and procedures, but most importantly, every member of the Caltech community needs to look more carefully at themselves and those around them. Maintaining the honor system has never been easy, but the more people that are helping, the easier it will be.

What's Wrong with the House System?

[Essay sent to the California Tech on May 24, 2003]

Ditch Day made it hard to write an article this week, but here it is. Ditch Day is one of our oldest traditions, and this week I'm writing about our seven bastions of tradition. There are other schools with honor systems and other schools with demanding curricula, but there is no other school in the country with seven Houses quite like ours.

Preserving the student Houses should be one of our highest priorities as a student body, but we've come dangerously close to jeopardizing the House system in the past few years. Digging in our heels and crossing our fingers isn't going to work forever. This week I ask, "What is wrong with the House system?"

I've thought about this a lot during my years at Tech, and I've come to realize that all problems with the House system come from the beginning – rotation needs some serious work.

Most students think that there can't be much wrong with rotation because it has been doing fine for so long. However, the truth is that our present rotation system is a bastardization of the carefully crafted procedure of the past. Eric Tuttle put together a detailed study of the last time rotation was reinvented, and I encourage all students to read his work in Appendix C of the TURLI.

The biggest problem with rotation is that even if we wanted change, nobody knows enough about the process to change things. Every year, the IHC asks whether or not the picks procedure should be made public. I recently realized that some people understood this statement differently from me. I check yes not because I would like to see the names of each freshman and the order in which they are picked. Picks should still occur in a secret location and nobody should ever know whether they were a high pick or a low pick when they get into a House. All I would like to see is the rules for picks stated explicitly to the student body.

To borrow a slogan from the current ASCIT BoD, the first step to fixing anything is transparency. As long as rotation picks remain shrouded in secrecy, there will be major problems left unsolved. Even the BoC procedures are written out for everyone to

see in the *little t*. There is no good reason rotation should be more secretive than the BoC.

I know I am not the only person who sees problems with rotation. There are many students on campus that complain about rotation and administrators always cite anonymous students when they speak against our traditions. I would never trade our current system for random assignment, but there are definitely some students on campus that would. As the number of students living off-campus grows, so too do these complaints.

We usually dismiss these people as anomalies; we say that the House system doesn't work for everyone, but that it is invaluable for the majority of students. We don't want to make things worse for everyone else just to help a couple students feel better, but there might be ways to help these students without making things worse for everyone else.

I always thought it was ridiculous that a freshman can be forced to live in a House he doesn't like while there is an upperclassman who would love to have that room. It is usually these unhappy freshmen that are complaining to administrators about traditions and reporting upperclassmen for hazing violations. Getting these students out of their Houses would go a long way towards preserving our system.

We shouldn't force a student to live somewhere he hates. It's bad for the student, bad for the House, and bad for the entire House system. If we think the House system isn't for everyone, there's no reason everyone has to participate. While Houses can always tolerate a few freshmen they might not have wanted, the system breaks down when a freshman hates the House he's in.

Perhaps freshmen could be allowed to rank fewer than four Houses and face the possibility of not being picked. Maybe freshmen should be allowed to move off during first term. We could even allow some IHC-approved room swaps between freshmen after picks. Maybe we could simply return to the old system of listing four Houses without number ranks – this would de-emphasize the freshman role in the process and would avoid setting freshmen up for disappointment.

Unfortunately, students would need to know what the rankings mean in order to make any informed changes to the ranking system, and that would require the picks

procedure to be public. For that matter, freshmen can't really "rank honestly" when they don't know what the rankings mean.

I'm sure many students have ideas for how to improve rotation, but none of them will ever be implemented as long as the picks procedure is a secret. More and more students will just complain to the administration and the next time a big incident happens, the administration will feel justified in dismantling the House system. Administrators are listening, so the student body can't afford to just ignore the complaints of the minority. It is imperative that we try to fix as many of our own problems as we can. With rotation, the IHC isn't even giving us a chance.