

STUDENT GOVERNMENT

— on the way out?

As the second term draws to a close, things seem to be going on as usual with Caltech students. But having just seen the structure of Caltech student government shaken by recent turns of events, some interested observers are beginning to think that ASCIT ought to be preparing for the possibility of a mortal blow, and that the nature of student life is currently undergoing some far-reaching changes.

For the first time that any undergraduate can recall, the campus newspaper, the *California Tech*, was threatened with demise, which would have resulted from its not having an editor. At the same time, only three of eleven other elective offices were even contested in the recent campus-wide elections. Important offices such as ASCIT Vice President, Secretary and Treasurer, and Secretary of the Board of Control were uncontested. A total of fifteen people ran for twelve offices!

With the aid of last-minute signups and a group of seniors who agreed to assume responsibility for the newspaper until an underclassman could be appointed, ASCIT squeezed through some rather unenergetic elections and so has another chance. But Caltech student government will not make a go of it without some changes in student orientation.

Critics of ASCIT who hit it for being ineffective and unnecessary miss the point. In general, Caltech can boast of one of the most unhampered student governments anywhere. Students are allowed to set up and run their own governments. The student houses have their own officers and their own judiciary groups. ASCIT is free to conduct business as it wishes, without the need for administrative approval. The newspaper is completely uncensored. Even so, this is not a drastic thing for the administration to allow, for Caltech students have conducted themselves with good judgment in the past. The result is that many offices available to those who are interested offer almost unbounded opportunities for instituting programs of great interest and worth. And these possibilities are about to be increased with construction of the Winnett Student Center, scheduled for completion in just a few months.

The Student Center comes near the end of a long development program, which — among other things — resulted in three new student houses for undergraduates. It would appear that a good place to look for changes in student attitudes which seem to go back a few years would be in changes brought about by these new houses.

In their first year of existence, the new houses were populated by a combination of people who transferred from the old houses, and those people for whom there had never been room in the houses before (the bulk of the members of Throop Club). Because of the unavoidable turmoil which was to accompany organization of the new houses, it was decided to bypass rotation — that method whereby freshmen and upperclassmen make an attempt to match interests and to exert control over freshman house assignments. Therefore freshmen were assigned to houses in an arbitrary fashion. Later that year (1960-1961) the Inter-house Committee (composed of seven house presidents) recommended rotation for the next year, but a faculty committee vetoed it, ostensibly to prolong its reinstatement until such a time as all those who had taken part in it before (including the Class of 1963) were gone.

The decision stemmed from complaints that rotation had been deteriorating in the last few years to the level of fraternity rushing, and that a fresh start would improve it. That meant that if rotation were ever to be revived, it could not be until October of 1963 at the earliest.

If rotation offered no more than a congenial way to assign freshmen to houses, it would be no great hardship to go a few years without it.

But with its omission we have found that rotation had a greater effect on student life than supposed. Where several years ago there was a flourishing student government, today it's hard to drum up even enough interest to get people to run for office. Rotation, if nothing more, *forced* student interest in inter-house activities; as a result, both inter- and intrahouse activities seemed worthwhile.

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Engineering and Science

Admittedly, student governments are not beneficial *per se*. On other campuses throughout the country individual and group concern for and interest in nuclear war, disarmament, civil rights, the UN, or politics have replaced interest in student government. Fine! That is really one of the goals of student government and is a good end result of the process. But at Caltech, interest in student government has been replaced by a cultural void. It seems that, unlike other campuses, we are heading backwards in our development.

There have been many complaints about practices of rotation — it takes too much time for everyone, it bothers freshmen at a time when they are heavily beset by problems of adjustment to Caltech, there is generally too much pressure exerted on everyone by everyone, and so on. Much of this is valid criticism, but it is viewed with perhaps more alarm than the situation justifies.

Something is needed to take the place of rotation; the vacuum which now exists is leading towards in-growth of the students because there is no strong group (with the exception of the YMCA — and it can't function efficiently on an apathetic campus) to spark interest in the vital unconventional or unscientific aspects of education.

And what shall take the place of rotation? Undoubtedly, plans of action could be submitted and tried. After several years of experimentation something might be found to make the students feel they were part of an alive campus. But would it be any better than rotation? And what about the years of trial — what happens to liberal education for the students who pass through in the period of flux?

The deterioration of ASCIT in two years has demonstrated that something must be done now. Naturally, there is no unique solution to any problem of this sort, but reinstatement of a system of rotation next year might be a good start towards breaking down the unreasonable and unnecessary barriers which now exist.

True, rotation works by forcing an interest in the campus. But the interest becomes genuine and somewhat self-sustaining soon after, when the benefits and fun of large-scale activities become evident.

Next year Caltech will be presented with a golden opportunity to change things — Winnett Student Center. It would seem that rotation would be a good thing to couple with these facilities to get the ball rolling.

— Bruce Abell '62



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