

# “Being a woman at Caltech has its own special

*Of all the prizes bestowed on exceptional Caltech students at commencement time, none quite has the flavor of the Hinrichs Award, which goes “to the senior who throughout the undergraduate years at the Institute has made the greatest contribution to the welfare of the student body and whose qualities of character, leadership, and responsibility have been outstanding.”*

*This year Sharon Long shared the award with classmate Russ McDuff; both of them fill the bill admirably.*

*During her three years at Caltech Sharon was a highly visible, vocal, and effective participant in student and academic affairs. As a sophomore—in her first year here—she served on both the freshman and upperclass admissions committees. In her junior and seniors years she was director of academic affairs and one of the strongest and most active members of the board of directors of the ASCIT. She also served as a student member of the faculty committees on academic policies and curriculum.*

*Winning the Hinrichs Award was a double honor for Sharon because she is also one of the first undergraduate women to receive a BS degree from Caltech, along with Stephanie Charles, Deborah Chung, and Flora Wu.*

*What’s it like—being a woman undergraduate at Caltech? If you ask Sharon Long, she’ll answer you something like this:*

The girls are probably more academically insecure than the guys when they come here, and they have a little more on the line as to whether they’ll succeed or fail. With me, it took the form of feeling I couldn’t go to anybody and talk about anything that was bothering me. As freshmen, male students learn pretty quickly to ask for help from other students. I was afraid to, because I didn’t want people saying “Dumb girl!”

I felt a strange ambivalence. At the same time that I thought I must be really special, I was convinced that I wasn’t nearly as good as the other students, and was special only because I was a girl. I didn’t want to use my being a female as an excuse for anything, and yet I sometimes did it without knowing it.

The man-woman relationship here makes for some difficulties. The way I handled it was to stay essentially paired off with one man almost all the time, and I got married at the end of my sophomore year. This made it possible to have casual friendships with men because it was understood that only friendship was implied. But being married during a period when you are still developing your life and your goals can get to be unworkable if the two people realize that they have taken different forks in the road—which is what happened to us.

Being a woman at Caltech has its special set of challenges—and it presents some challenges to the faculty too.

There aren’t many women professors to act as models for you, and there are male professors here who definitely let their prejudices show. I have a good friend who almost always dresses grubby. One day she went to class in a dress, and the professor was really extra nice to her. He leaped down to her chair to light her cigarette, and she was so embarrassed she never dressed up for class again.

When I was on faculty committees where I was the only female, I always felt a lot of ambiguity. I enjoy looking good. It makes me feel more comfortable. But I kept wondering if things wouldn’t get complicated if I went in there and really looked pretty. I felt I’d be in a double bind by calling attention to my being feminine—and thus categorized—plus my being a student and therefore already on one of the lower rungs of the ladder.

When I came here I had all the qualities of the average freshman—not socially very adept, having a lot of insecurities about my intellectual capabilities, afraid of other people. After you’re here awhile you have all your worst fears realized. You think, I’m really not as smart as people have told me I am. I’m fooling everybody. What if I really blow it?

But the first time you can look somebody in the eye and expose yourself to the potential humiliation of admitting you aren’t doing well, and they look at you and say, “Me too,” the sense of relief is awesome.

There is a lot of anti-intellectualism on campus of course. I think it has something to do with people seeing the gap between what they’re doing and what they would like to be doing, and feeling guilty because of it. Most students really expect a lot from themselves, inside. I’ve never been able to forgive myself for not working beyond my capacity.

I think most people come here with big goal orientations. But the work here is so hard that you can’t do it if all you have pushing you is goals. You have to be doing it because you basically like it. You have to enjoy the process.

A lot of professors have reinforced this idea in me by talking about their research. You can’t do research if all



# set of challenges.”

you want is an answer. You have to enjoy working in a lab and performing endless repetitive tests and reading endless journals to be a good researcher. I'm not sure I have all those qualities. But no goal, no matter how strong, is going to be able to get you through the work here otherwise.

One important factor that contributed to my intellectual growth at Caltech was tackling work that was difficult. You have to get it done, in spite of your frustration. You have to be able to have ideas even when you're confused, even when you're exhausted.

I think the work here is too hard, but I accepted it and eventually developed methods for ignoring enough of it so I could survive. You look for the essentials that are going to get you by. You have to learn to balance one class against another. You can't learn everything in depth. You're lucky if you learn one thing well here and there.

You can't talk about Caltech without talking about the honor system. Its effect on me was closely linked to the process of coming to accept myself.

Working under the honor system makes people become very intellectually honest with themselves. It gets them to know their limitations. That's important—not to live with fantasies about what you're capable of doing. Another thing that makes it work is that, even if you get a test back and you've done poorly, you realize that there is that firm little center core inside yourself that's starting to build up.

I came to grips with myself at Caltech because I had to, and maybe I wouldn't have had to if I had been someplace else. *I have no way of knowing.*



I went into the Independent Studies Program mostly because of the humanities courses I took here in my sophomore year. Annette Smith's course in French literature and Will Jones's course in philosophy opened up a new world for me. I had always been interested enough in humanities to read broadly, but until

I took the courses here, I didn't connect literature with life; I treated it abstractly—as a scientist, if you will.

In joining the ISP I was dedicating myself to looking at life and the world on more than one level. I know what it is to look at the world as a scientist, whose basic

philosophy is that effects can be traced to causes, and that reproducible order is meaningful. But life doesn't seem to me to be completely rational; poetry in particular, with its use of image and metaphor, seems to be an equally powerful approach to reality, and one whose beauty is complementary to the beauty of order that I have always loved in science.

Being in ISP made me feel more responsible for my education, in several ways. First of all, I quite literally chose what I thought was important to study—and that was what I studied.

As a result, my attitude toward the difficulties I encountered was healthier than before, because I realized I was there by my own choice. And there was a deeper sense in which I felt responsible, which is that,



floating as I did between scientific and metaphorical descriptions of reality, I began to feel responsible for what I thought, and for what I believed. There are a lot of equally valid ways of looking at the world; I am the one who chooses the way in which I myself perceive.

Last summer I got a chance to supplement my education when I was chosen as one of the two Caltech students to attend the Institute for Humanistic Studies at Aspen. It's mainly a program for executives to broaden their horizons on social and philosophical issues. They also invite people with different points of view, from other countries, from universities, government, business, and the media. I found I had more in common with people from the academic world in Germany, say, than I did with people from Denver or Los Angeles who were in business. I found that social classes transcend national barriers.

At present I would like to head for a university career, because that seems to be the best way to get paid for thinking and writing and teaching. I think I would prefer being a professor to just about anything; but in the next year I'll have to decide what field or combination of fields I want to pursue. I would specialize, although reluctantly, if that were the only way to become part of the academic world—a world which, I must add, sometimes seems to be only dreamed. But if many people have the same dream, then we can share it. I guess that's as much as I feel I can expect. ■