

THE BEAVER

How freshmen become Caltech students

PERHAPS THE MOST interesting weeks for the freshman are those during which he is transformed into a Caltech student. The traumatic effects of being quickly introduced to Institute methods can hardly be over-estimated. The first few weeks are rendered even more crucial, because the freshman will also be making his initial adjustments to his new social environment.

Meet the People

By the time school begins, however, our freshman has had abundant opportunities to learn about the Institute and meet his future classmates. This summer, Throop Club had a beach party for members of the Class of '55 living in the southern California area. Frosh living outside the southern California area may have been invited to dinner with some of their fellow freshmen by one of the Alumni Association Chapters. The Caltech "Y" arranges for upperclassmen to contact prospective freshmen during the summer, to answer questions and proffer miscellaneous advice. The "Y" also sends representatives to meet freshmen arriving in Pasadena by train.

When the freshman arrives at the Student Houses, he finds that each house has a contingent of upperclassmen, headed by the house president, to greet him. The freshman is given rides to Pasadena's best (economically speaking) restaurants, and may even be furnished with dates during the week before the fall term officially begins.

During freshman rotation, each freshman eats his meals in each of the houses for two-day periods. During the rotation period, the freshman meets many upperclassmen and more freshmen. It is then that the freshman may begin to wonder about his reception. He considers the possibility that each house may be trying to gain his vote, which will largely determine to which house he will be permanently assigned, at the end of the rotation period.

The Code

In years past some houses would prematurely proselyte freshmen by having them contacted during the summer by upperclassmen. To prevent this, as well as other undue attempts by any one house to entice freshmen, a strict code was promulgated by the Interhouse Committee. This committee, composed of two representatives from each of the houses and Throop Club, has the power to determine the presence and scope of any violations of this code, and to prescribe suitable penalties against the offending house.

In the last few years it has been suggested that any personal difficulties which the rotation system might cause could be eliminated by having the Master of the Student Houses permanently assign the freshmen to the houses from the beginning. The disadvantages of such a change are obvious when one considers how important it is that undergraduates have as much opportunity as possible to choose carefully the men with whom they will spend some of the most important years of their lives. Any revision of the present system like the one just mentioned would most certainly be extremely unpopular with an almost unanimous majority of the undergraduates in the houses.

After rotation, the freshmen generally find the upperclassmen just as considerate as before—except, perhaps, for some informalities in the house initiations. Even if this were not true, it would certainly be foolish to condemn any system which promotes cordiality and friendship among the freshmen and other undergraduates.

Take Care of My Little Boy

The only time anyone notes the absence of racial or religious discrimination among the undergraduates is in making the frequent comparison of our Student House system with the fraternity system at other colleges. It seems, however, that most such comparisons entirely miss the point. The Student House system, which has the distinction of being the least criticized by the students of the many facets of the Caltech theory of education, is not to be credited with this freedom from prejudice any more than a fraternity must necessarily assume the attitudes which the name fraternity connotes. The significant point is that the idealized aims of the Student Houses, with respect to this particular question, are habitually and unconsciously practiced by the undergraduates themselves.

The essential difference between the two systems can be seen by looking at the results of the fraternity system: people are segregated into groups on the basis of similar personalities, backgrounds, and aspirations. The Student House system as practiced here promotes the intermingling of students with different personalities and backgrounds, although the nature of the Institute precludes the presence of students with radically diverging aspirations.

If this column has been enlightening in no other way, it does show that Tech students can pat themselves on the back, once in a while—but perhaps that's not news after all.

—Al Haber '53