

THE CALTECH STUDENT

— and what makes him like that

When the new freshmen arrive at Caltech each September, they are immediately bussed off to the mountains for three days of what is called New Student Camp. Quite unexpectedly, the purpose of Camp is not to haze and hector the frosh into four years of jolly college fun, but rather to ease their way into the harsh realities of Life at Tech. In recent years Camp has been remarkably successful in its chosen task.

To the gimlet eyes of the upperclassmen and professors in charge of running Camp, the frosh are usually a mixture of about equal parts of high self-opinion and idealistic naiveté. Thus, a great deal of Camp time is devoted to the twin tasks of beating down egos while building up ideals with a few hard facts. These noble aims are accomplished by a series of speeches and discussion groups in which three points are constantly reiterated:

1) Science is fun, but it is difficult. Many smart high school graduates don't know this, because most high schools haven't quite caught on to the fact that science has progressed beyond Newtonian physics (without calculus) and making iron sulphate in chemistry lab.

2) As a consequence, Caltech — with a sincere desire to produce at least one Nobel laureate per class — crams cubic acres of content into its courses in an attempt to turn bright, dedicated, but ignorant high school graduates into competent scientists in four years.

3) Therefore, since everybody who comes to Caltech is smart anyway, and since competition obviously breeds a love of knowledge, Caltech is operated on a

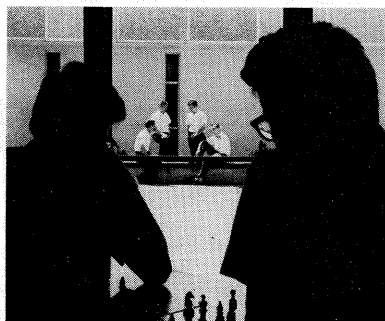
strictly competitive basis — in fact, it is probably the most competitive place in the country outside of the stricter Mafia training camps.

The last point of the three is most important, since it is the competition which makes life at Tech different from life at almost every other college in the country. At Friendly State U. (and even at most of the highly-rated liberal arts colleges) academics is a sort of passing diversion — a passport to a degree or a means to get a job. At Tech, academics and the competition it fosters is everything. Here you either beat out your buddy, or flunk.

Which is not to say that Tech students study excessively; in fact, rather the opposite is true. Despite all the hoary rumors, the amount of midnight oil burned at Caltech is so small as to be almost unnoticeable. After all, the College Boards do assure smart students at Tech, and (excuse the Hackneyed Phrase) you either understand how to do problems or you don't, and great amounts of pondering over a proof or formula usually don't help you understand it any more than five minutes of hard concentration does.

What is more important about the competition here is that a Techman is always trying to escape from it — in any of a vast number of ways.

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For example, all social life is predicated on an attempt to forget school. Techmen, when they date (about half of us go out once a week or more), scarcely ever do so with an eye to just friendship, or even romance. What *we* go out for is escape, liberation, or hope. Techmen, therefore, are inclined to date either artsy-craftsy types who can enthrall the addled mind with softly-sung Bach cantatas and discussion about the difficulties in translating the Mundaka Upanishad, or else party girls who can soothe the senses with fine laughter and voluptuousness. Very rarely do Techmen escort the Jane Does of the world, on the theory that unless a girl is strikingly talented in some field or another, she cannot possibly distract you from that ten-problem physics assignment due Monday.

This same philosophy carries over into all other aspects of non-classroom life. Other colleges pull pranks out of youthful high spirits, while we make research projects out of them, putting in endless hours of planning, with minds half-split between schemes and finals, just around the corner. Even our sports program is anti-rah-rah, with the players stealing a few hours from academic worry for a hurried practice.

Even in its day-to-day aspects, like the interminable bridge games and the perpetual "goofing off," Caltech student life is really one big escape from the awful realities of the classroom. In short, the prevailing undergraduate attitude is that Life at Tech is Hell. We sort of work at it.

But, as the catalog and the Deans have it, there is a happy day by and by for even the most discouraged of Techmen. After only four years in this place, you graduate, we are told. Actually what happens is that four-sevenths of any frosh class can count on graduating, while the others fall by the wayside for one reason or another.

For the ones who make it, there are degrees, jobs, and a certain exhausted satisfaction at having muddled their way through. And for the three-sevenths who don't make it — well, tough luck, guys; at least you got accepted into the Toughest School in the Country.

—Lance Taylor '62

