



# Rosenbaum

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## UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

**O**n July 1, Thomas Rosenbaum will take office as the ninth president in Caltech's history after more than 30 years at the University of Chicago—first as a physicist and faculty member; next as director of its Materials Research Laboratory and, later, its interdisciplinary James Franck Institute; then as vice president for research and for Argonne National Laboratory; and, ultimately, as the university's provost. In anticipation of Rosenbaum's arrival, *E&S* asked him to sit down and answer a few questions on topics ranging from diversity to Caltech's future to his summer reading list. Here, then, is a brief but close-up look at our next president.

**E&S:** UChicago is a pioneer in diversity. What did you learn through the process of expanding diversity that may be applicable at Caltech?

**Rosenbaum:** Diversity is integral to the values and success of Caltech; it is not an add-on. Universities are in the essential business of attracting the most original, creative, and compelling scholars and creating an environment of unflinching inquiry and challenge. These aspects of academic eminence require faculty, students, and staff from a wide range of backgrounds and with diverse perspectives.

**What do you think distinguishes Caltech in higher education?**

Caltech's combination of absolute excellence, traversable disciplinary barriers, and soaring ambition is simply remarkable. It does not seem possible that a university with only 300 faculty members and 2,250 undergraduates and graduate students combined could be setting the intellectual agendas and running world-premier facilities in so many different scientific and engineering arenas, yet we are. JPL is a huge and essential multiplier, but in my view it fundamentally comes down to Caltech's culture of fearlessness.

**What do you think is the biggest challenge before higher education today?**

Segmentation, exacerbated by a background environment of disinvestment. Private research universities like Caltech provide a very special residential experience where education and research are intertwined, but they can only serve a small segment of the student population and are squeezed by declining federal investment in research. Publicly funded institutions traditionally have provided the means for a larger body of students to receive an education, with some exemplar research universities among the mix, but states are rapidly retreating from this element of the American dream. Liberal arts colleges are highly tuition dependent and not all will be able to stay in business. For years these different parts of the higher-education spectrum, of distinct character but linked purpose, have provided a range of opportunities for students. I fear that the spectrum is segmenting and leaving large gaps between the elements.

**When you consider where Caltech could be decades and decades into its future, what are your hopes?**

We need to continue to be a place of possibility, for the intellectual dreams of our faculty and students and alums, and for the aspirations of the world at large.

**Tell us something that people would be surprised to know about you.**

I spent every spare minute I had in high school playing basketball. The hoop on the president's house garage sealed my move to Pasadena!

**What talent would you love to have that you don't?**

I wish I could carry a tune. I love music, but everyone is happier if I just drum my fingers or tap my feet.

**What's on your summer reading list?**

To catch up with the eight or so issues of the *New Yorker* that I am (perpetually) behind!

**What words do you live by?**

There is a Jewish teaching that in one pocket you should put a slip of paper that says "For me the world was created," and in another pocket you should put a slip of paper that says "I am but dust and ashes." The secret of a successful life is to know when to reach into the proper pocket. *E&S*