Student leader
Rhodes analyzes Caltech

By Larry Klein

Editor's note: In early December Joe Carson, undergraduate president of the Student Council at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, met with a group of Princeton students to discuss student government leadership. Here, Joe reviewed their experiences.

CARSON: Joe, what brought you to New England?
JOE: Oh, I had to talk to some people as Harvard and at the Ford Foundation about certain projects.

CARSON: Joe, isn't this kind of unusual for an undergraduate president to travel around the country?
JOE: Actually, I do it a lot. For example, I've been traveling all over California talking to student government leaders concerning student projects on their campuses.

CARSON: I entered Caltech in '62 as a freshmen. I'd like to know a few things, for example, I know you've introduced Fall-Fall. Is that, in fact, you beat to it, and I'd like to know how you believe it worked out.

JOE: If you're talking about the freshmen program at Caltech, there's certainly an improvement over the structure of the past. But it certainly shouldn't have been looked upon as an ultimate solution. The problem facing the freshmen with Fall-Fall is that after a while a feeling seems to develop among freshmen that there was something new and different about Fall-Fall. For instance, you'll find freshmen going over their finals. They're Fall-Fall, but still have numbers on them. And one freshman will say, "It's a 31, you have a 33. Oh, I've got to do better!" It's really strange. So, although the Fall-Fall system has obvious benefits, there are still forces in the Institute (Caltech) which tend to bring us back into line. I find this very depressing.

CARSON: Allunility and reaction
Spots: Do you believe this is the fault of the system or simply the fact that most freshmen who enter Caltech like to compete. When they don't compete in grades, they find these other ways of which to compensate.

JOE: I don't know how much I can credit what they say, but for the last three years we've made surveys of freshmen both before they've gotten into the Institute and afterwards, and in most cases they say that when they came to Caltech they weren't so whipped up over competition. They had been so accustomed in their high school that they'd been kind of off by themselves. We went out and questioned freshmen asking what they liked to do, and many of the answers were about basketball, or doing it in a group. So, I'd say it's a little bit about, or even close to half.

CARSON: Well, I was at Caltech, I argued strongly for changes and was totally flaky that it was impossible. Actually, it was mainly my dealings with the administration, I think, that caused me to leave after two years. I found the administration to be stiff and, quite honestly, dishonest in their dealings with their students.

MARGA: I think one of the reasons Joe initiated his project at Caltech was to try to change this situation.

JOE: To talk about the project, it's difficult. For it was a complicated affair. But I think you're right, Maria, in what you said. We were dealing with an administration which was inaccessible to students, primarily, I think, because it is a research institution. Although education is certainly a concern of the administration, it is not always considered so by the faculty who are more interested in their research.

CARSON: You know, when I was a freshman we had a student government president like you who wanted to accomplish changes, but he only succeeded in very minor ways. Do you think Caltech is finally changing now?

JOE: No, I don't think Caltech is becoming a more flexible or sensitive institution, if that's what you mean. What I think happened is that the student body is becoming a lot more sophisticated in their approach to the Institute. I believe we discussed educational policy. One of the things we were dealing with was a proposal to get rid of the humanities.

CARSON: We saw differences in the faculty between the humanities and the sciences, and you discussed the need to move in both directions.

JOE: No, actually we weren't. Even though we could make those public, during that period, we felt we weren't making substantive changes. We could put together a great deal of old data and report back to the faculty, but real changes, like in faculty-student relationships, weren't being accomplished. We were making anything for the personal life of the day, and when it was a sad thing to see these bright, sensitive young people getting. It's out of that dissatisfaction that our project came.

Gonerson and a project
JOE: This was the beginning of the project. We had, as you see, a number of people.

CARSON: We, in fact, had a number of people.

JOE: That's right, just interested people.

CARSON: I wondered how you came about the president twice now? Was there some issue you've stood for or is it simply been that no one else was interested in the job?

JOE: No, there were other people who wanted the position. The men I ran on a platform of changes; I felt changes were necessary on all committees, a movement of people involved in a variety of smaller projects working for change. People used to tell me I was too young, where my mouth was, so I ran for office. During the election I said student government should be an active entity, rather than simply sit back and be a mirror of the administration and the students. I felt I received a mandate from the student body for a change. I certainly wanted the position. I ran on a platform of changes, and I now have a solid and fifty-five of the school's seven hundred students, some of them were twenty of the faculty. At this meeting the discussions were the most exciting that we'd ever proposed, and people could stand up and say 'The Caltech is the most wonderful, most beautiful place in all the world' and that would ring true. Then another person would up and say 'I'm not sure what he thought was wrong at the Institute.' Then, we voted on providing majors, on reducing requirements, on establishing an Academic Reform Committee. Everything passed by the majors proposal, and even close to half the students voted for this. I really felt this was amazing, since so many people at Caltech are sensitive to the idea of having a diploma and a major in the same course.

CARSON: And what happened then?
JOE: This is very interesting. Everyone was eager, except for a putting students on faculty committees, we changed quickly. We then had a series of meetings with the faculty, and this was very good for us. We had a differences in the different classes; we saw that the faculty was not a monolithic. Some faculty members were friendly to our request, others fully and students couldn't be treated.

CARSON: We finally, though, the faculty decided that we could move on these committees. I feel this part may have been a little unfair. I felt this was helpful. Now we have students on all committees, even on the admission committee.

JOE: You must have been rather pleased with this.

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