Fraternities develop new life styles

By Alex Makowski

gla. Note: the author is himself a personality member, a brother of Tau Delta Phi.

All but uninvolved by the rest of the campus, MIT’s fraternities have undergone major changes in their life style over the past two or three years.

Shaking off the stereotyped role of a conservative social group, many have experimented with new concepts of communal living. Even those houses reluctant to break completely with past forms have developed new ideas about what part the traditional “brotherhood” should play in their lives.

To investigate these new patterns, The Tech undertook an in-depth study of pledge training on the MIT campus. Much of the character of any fraternity depends on the way they orient their new members to life in the house. Sexograms of MIT’s

twenty-nine fraternities were reached, either directly or indirectly, for comment on their own programs for freshmen.

Past policies

Three and four years ago, an overwhelming majority of the houses emphasized the traditional collegiate pledge concept of separation. Freshmen had no vote in chapter meetings, were solely responsible for keeping the house clean, memorized information about both the national fraternity’s history and the local chapter’s, and were charged with the menial tasks of washing dishes and cleaning bathrooms. But times change. The quality of the dorms, and of the way people lived there, has steadily increased. Two or three houses did take a lead in developing alternative plans. And, most important, the demand from their freshmen the desire for a more liberal environment. Fraternities have responded with new life styles and new programs.

Thirteen of the seventeen houses surveyed allow their freshmen a full vote at chapter meetings, while on one the freshmen may participate in discussions at these meetings. A dozen fraternities divide the work of keeping the house clean among freshmen and upperclassmen. Among those of these twelve may weigh the division a little heavier toward the freshmen, while the others divided the work evenly. Innovators claimed that these changes were in keeping with the philosophy of their house. On the vote, they argue that it is only right to allow freshmen a full vote. They feel that freshmen must be involved in all houses. The most enlightening change has been the shift in attitude of the pledge class meetings. Traditionally, freshmen would meet once a week with an upperclass pledge trainer to learn about the national and their own chapter. They hoped to work their way such a way with freshmen meetings entirely, while others have experimented with a hybrid system. One house, for example, runs a six credit hour course on life in fraternities. Three fraternities and upperclassmen interested in participating. The course begins with a week of training, moves on to discuss the various problems of small group living, and ends with a simulation of meetings.

What brought these changes about? Discussion with members of the liberal and radical houses revealed two prime causes: 1) a shift in attitude among the upperclassmen members, and 2) all but open rebellion by freshmen against strict or rigid practices. Some houses developed their own innovations; others looked to neighboring fraternities for new ideas that might be grafted onto their own living patterns. Few houses changed their pledge policy almost overnight; a few more years of experimentation were allowed. In short, the common denominator has been a desire for new forms and definitions.

For another view of changes in fraternity treatment of freshmen, one interviewed Associate Dean for Students (and dean for freshmen) Dick Sorensen. The message he emphasized is that “we are away from the old role of an auto-matized teaching things.” Clarifying a point apparent from Tech’s own researches, he noted that the national organizations have had very little effect on local pledge policy this year, for those who would de from hazing, they would issue a statement condemning the practice. But only a few would seriously direct their efforts toward developing altered policies. Many houses – usually

about 80% during the school year – have sought our advice or comment on changes they are considering adopting. Both from this constant contact and from his experience as a former member of the twelve graduate tutors living in dorms, Sorensen has kept abreast of developments within the houses.

Fraternities and dorms

He now sees “no marked difference between the houses that the freshmen and fraternities. He cited the recent innovations in the life style and the whole system and the range of life style differences among freshmen choosing to live on campus.

Finally, Sorensen noted that the desire for freedom of freshmen that each fall drop out of fraternities to move into dorms is off campus. It is your low of seven. This shift roughly corresponds to the implementation of new pledge policies within the fraternities.

Most of the houses that perceive a pledge as a step toward preparing that is part and parcel of developing a strong relationship with the community. “We have a house where all the brothers take an active interest in each other, where all the brothers temper their actions with the knowledge that they are the protect the group, all the brothers unite to form a good and settled group academically and socially. A radical house, those with no structured pledge program whatsoever, often have the freedom of life styles. They have defined a fraternity as a “bunch of people living together” without attempt to force what they consider artificial relationships. No pattern is set for orienting freshmen.

And between these two poles, of course, lie a dozen gradations. Here are the houses who advocate “cooperative or collective living, rather than a seniority system,” but insist on some form of structure. They are the houses who have sought to run even with the shifting student attitudes, rather than experiment with bold new ideas, programs or maintain traditional concepts in the firm belief that they are a valid pattern for group living. MIT fraternities, then, are no longer a set of similar sounding Greek letters with the same life style. There is considerable variation in the alternative life styles. Several are now considering exchange programs – swapping upperclassmen for a week so they can consider more thoroughly the alternative life styles. Out of these and other programs will undoubtedly come new ideas and experiments.