The California Tech

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Behind the Revised Grading Policies

Emily Yu
News

In an email to students on August 21, Kevin Gilmartin, Vice President for Student Affairs, announced revised grading policies approved by the Faculty Board, including "Strengthening Assessments," encouraging in-person assessments; "Improving Transparency," internally publishing course grade distributions and providing the median grade and course enrollment to transcripts; and "Preserving the Distinction of the A+," reserving undergraduate A+ grades for "no more than five percent of the class plus three additional students."

Professor Gilmartin wrote that the Institute has "a responsibility to ensure that grades distinguish different levels of student accomplishment" and that "the credibility of our grading system is an important part of preserving the value of a Caltech degree and our reputation." These two rationales came up repeatedly in the *Tech's* conversations with faculty members when learning more about the context and reasoning behind the changes.

Professor Markus Meister, Chair of the Academic Policies Committee, showed the *Tech* data from the committee's report that informed their policy proposals to the Faculty Board. From 2000 to 2015, the median GPA across Caltech students in an academic year had been rising steadily from below 3.4 to 3.6. Since 2015, Caltech's median GPA has increased more sharply, to medians above 3.9 from 2020 onwards and a median of 4.0 in the 2024-25 year.

The trend in Caltech's median GPA since 2015 can also be seen in the fraction of A+ grades given each academic year. From 2000 to 2015, the fraction of A+ hovered around 10% of grades; since 2015, that fraction has increased and tripled to over 30% in 2025. Applied across all course offerings, the policy limiting A+ grades to 5% of a course plus 3 additional students to account for small advanced classes would bring the overall proportion of A+ grades back to about 10%, said Professor Meister.

In 2024-25, the vast majority of grades across all courses were A+ and A. In every division, A+ and A grades accounted for over 70% of grades. GPS and CCE had the lowest average grades that year, although course enrollment was substantially lower in both than in the other divisions. Among the remaining four divisions, A+ was the most frequently awarded grade in two. The committee also looked at the average course grade compared to course enrollment size. While some small courses have low grade averages, many courses of all sizes have average grades above 4.0.

Elizabeth Hong, Professor of Neuroscience (BS '02, Page) and a member of the Faculty Board, told the *Tech*, "grade distributions in many courses have not fluctuated in the last 10 to 15 years, while other courses have changed substantially, and we know which courses are driving the effect."

Additionally, she acknowledged that faculty, like students, are aware of majors in which "students receive an A+ in a large number of classes." These classes are clustered together and known among students, who often take them together. She added that these reforms are intended to make grades more reflective of student performance and reduce what she described as "gaming" around grading patterns.

Professor Meister said the distribution by division was when he "heard some gasps among the board audience." He described "kind of a level of consternation among members of the Faculty Board, about

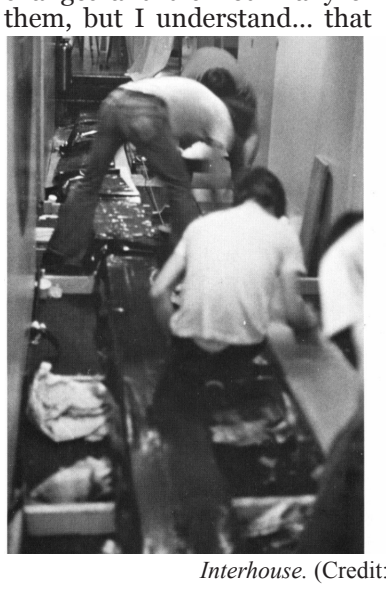
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Change Is Inevitable

Kevin Kan (BS 1993)
Op-Ed

As I read Richard Gruner's guest commentary, "Lost Caltech," in the October 6 *Tech*, I experienced a myriad of emotions and thoughts. Sadly, something has indeed been lost at Caltech over the years. As an undergrad here myself in the early '90s and as staff since 2004, I have been able to observe many of the gradual changes that have led to this disproportionate (relative to peer institutions and earlier graduating classes) alumni dissatisfaction with our school that he mentions. I have seen these changes and disliked many of them, but I understand… that change is inevitable. Liability was already getting to be a huge issue when I attended and has only gotten bigger since. The bureaucracies, such as Student Housing or Security, have gotten larger and more professional, which is to say, stricter and less forgiving of random potential damage that may occur as a result of some student's inspired act of genius. That's part of the result of keeping up with the times. But some things have very clearly been lost unnecessarily, in my opinion, by not taking full advantage of Caltech's small size and building a stronger sense of community in a way that is only really possible to do here.

I agree with Richard's com-





Interhouse. (Credit: THE BIG T, 1981)

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Response to Revised Course Policies

Aleksandar Marinkovic
Opinion

Editor's Note: This opinion piece incorporates feedback from students who requested anonymity due to concerns about potential repercussions.

The Issue with AI in Education

Misuse of AI has become a major concern institutions are addressing (Caltech, MIT). However, some courses have overcompensated with heavier workloads, frequent quizzes, and leaving instructors less time to provide feedback on assignments. Students who avoid the use of AI struggle the most. In just the first few weeks of the fall 2026 term, students are going days on a few hours of sleep, burning out, and missing lectures and coursework, harming their education.

Anonymous Student Feedback

Many courses now take far more time than what they have in the past and their unit allocation, and put an unnecessary psychological pressure on students. Students often have to take 3-4 of these severely underunited courses at once. Consider the following incomplete list of course feedback from a few anonymous students for some anonymous courses:

- Course 1 (9 units: 3-0-6): Weekly quizzes worth 40% of the grade, each requiring a full proof in 10 minutes, on top of weekly homework taking 10+ hours. With a few other courses built this way, students are reporting only 2-3 hours of sleep daily.
- Course 2 (12 units: 4-0-8): Each week there are 4-6 hours of lecture, an in-person quiz, 2-3 at-home quizzes, a homework, and practice problems, which can take up to 15-20 hours per week in total and each add an additional task to keep in mind in addition to similar workloads with other courses. The in-person midterm week also has homework.
- Course 3 (9 units: 3-0-6): 95% of the grade is on the midterm and final, making the process of learning through homework feel worthless while placing an undue power on examinations, which may not be reflective of student capabilities.

Important Matters

- Sleep loss due to the increased workload harms memory consolidation and health.
- Relief is hard to get. Campus wellness services, besides CASS, are not able to help grant extensions or exemptions, so students don't bother raising concerns about their health. The meetings and follow-ups also do take valuable time from students, further contributing to the avoidance of not bringing up health concerns.
- Students are often afraid to raise concerns about their courses since communicating with an instructor can be intimidating, fear their opinions will not be received well, or don't have time.
- The increased workload, in combination with inherent competition that the posted median on the transcript poses has increased stress and reduced collaboration between students.
- GPA still gates jobs and graduate school. Competitive applicants often have a GPA of 3.8-4.0+. Right now, some serious, intelligent students at Caltech say even 3.0 feels out of reach despite enormous effort, which can completely disqualify them from applying to many roles despite being highly qualified otherwise.
- Instructors are spending more time creating assessments and less time on feedback. Without a feedback loop between instructors and students or collaboration between students, we are paying nearly $100,000 for lectures and homework, which can simply be found online for free.
- The current pressure reduced students' desire to explore exciting, difficult, and/or unfamiliar courses as well as pursuing research opportunities during the academic year.
- Princeton ended its grade deflation policy after a faculty committee concluded it caused students too much stress.

What Can Help Reduce Stress

- Readjust workload to align with units listed.
- Build in flexibility that allows for extensions as needed and add drop sets and quizzes.
- Reduce the weight of in-person assessments (i.e., quizzes and exams) and increase the weight of homeworks so students are encouraged to learn and complete homework and learn from in-person assessments with lower pressure.
- Offer optional extra credit opportunities. This can also

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Grading

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how things had developed at Caltech" as the background for the committee's task to develop the revised policies.

The goal of the Academic Policies Committee in devising the changes was to return to differentiated grading, where students can be distinguished between competence and mastery, and to protect the reputation of the Caltech degree. In other words, Professor Meister said when a student applies for a job, for example, the goal is to preserve the notion that it most likely matters more that the degree is from Caltech than a particular grade on their transcript.

Nick Hutzler, Professor of Physics (BS '07, Ricketts) and a member of the Faculty Board, emphasized that the issue is grade compression rather than inflation, as the grade distribution carries information about how people perform. Even if the distribution was similarly narrow but centered around C rather than A, it would also be hard to assess how well someone did.

In addition to the policies detailed in Professor Gilmartin's email, the Academic Policies Committee also proposed removing the minimum passing grade of B required for a course to count toward degree requirements for many graduate programs; the Faculty Board did not approve that proposal.

The committee also proposed a "subtle nudge from REGIS," which the Board approved, described as, "At grading time, when the instructor hits the submit button, REGIS might display the grade distribution and 'As entered, the median grade in this course is: A.' Followed by the buttons 'Revise' and 'Submit'."

The REGIS nudge policy and changes announced in Professor Gilmartin's email were unanimously passed by the Faculty Board, according to Professor Meister, who noted "a remarkable consensus during the discussion." When a topic like this comes up on the board, there is time set aside for debating and usually "you get people going at each other" due to different backgrounds and viewpoints, so he "was actually prepared for fireworks, but they didn't happen."

Regarding the sharp upward trends of GPAs and A+ grades since 2015, Professor Meister stated that he is still asking faculty what they think changed that year, but currently there is no causal explanation, as people have differing opinions. Professor Hutzler said a noticeable change since he attended Caltech is "an emphasis on being a top performer on everything all the time," although he is also unsure about what specifically happened in 2015.

He added that "the sort of anxiety around having everything be perfect is getting out of hand. I feel really bad for young people today because that's an extraordinary amount of pressure. I don't know where it's coming from, but it seems to be there."

Professor Hong also observed an "enormous pressure to strive for perfectionism across the board" and students who are "overwrought," recalling emails she received complaining about shadow grades in her pass/fail class. She has also had students tell her they are interested in certain classes but unwilling to take them, due to concerns of obtaining a grade lower than A.

Both Professors Hong and Hutzler, as well as Professor Glen George (BS '82, Page), said that straight A grades were not the norm when they were students. Professor Hutzler stated, "when I was here, if you got a B+ in a hard class, you're like 'nice.' But now, you get an A- in a hard class, or even an A, it's like that's unacceptable."

Professor George described how the need for perfection has been reflected in the grade distributions in his classes. For example, EE10a has had many A+ grades in recent years whereas EE113 has had more A grades but not A+. He attributes the increase to people completing all the extra credit because they want to get as many points as possible. "Everyone says [EE10a] is very underunitted," he acknowledged. "Well, that's true for many students because they are doing all the extra credit."

His view on extra credit is to give interested students an opportunity to learn more topics not covered due to unit constraints, or to make up points if they did poorly on something. "Now, students are not doing the extra credit for either of those reasons, they're doing it to get the A+," Professor George noted. Due to his scaling, EE10a has an "enormous" number of A+ grades but EE113, which has the same set up and as many extra credit opportunities, does not because the class and the extra credit are hard. "People do some of it; they can't do all of it." EE10a, in comparison, is "relatively straightforward."

More broadly, Professor George suggested that there should be greater clarity about how course units relate to students' workloads and grades. His view is that the assigned units should reflect the amount of time per week an average student would need to earn a B. "Who is that mythical student who spends 9 hours per week on a 9 unit class, and what grade does that student get?" he asked.

Several EE upperclassmen told the *Tech* they disagreed with his explanation of the workload for EE10a, with some saying that the course was underunitted even without extra credit, while others felt the workload was reasonable for most of the term but became more time-consuming in the final weeks.

In EE113, which he started teaching 25 years ago, Professor George said that in the first few years he taught it, the grade distribution was bimodal with one group of people clustered around A and another group around B. "One year, that second hump wasn't there, and it never came back."

He recognized that it is possible he may be grading easier, as that is the only way he views that grade inflation could seep into his class, but he does not think he has been grading any differently. Another possibility is that students who received B grades stopped taking the class, but he is "not convinced that's true." Rather, "students stopped being willing to accept a B, and so they started doing whatever they had to do to get an A."

Due to this mindset, Professor George stated that he is worried about collaboration, as current undergraduates have also voiced, because limiting the number of A+ grades could make it a competition. "There have always been students at Caltech who competed for grades," he said. "They were called 'snakes' and that is why there was a snake on the blue book cover."

The snake reference has persisted through the finals week tradition of "snake kits," which the Caltech Magazine described in Winter 2011 as named after the snake printed on the back of blue books. "Another term that was used when I was a student for very competitive and not collaborative students was 'cut-throat' with the obvious implications," added Professor George.

The other faculty the *Tech* spoke with do not expect collaboration to change. Professor Meister pointed out that Caltech was a highly collaborative place, even when the proportion of A+ grades were lower, as classes are hard and students have to work together on problem sets.

Similarly, Professor Hutzler said there should virtually be no incentive to compete with other people because it should be hard to get an A without collaborating. When he was an undergraduate, the understanding was that "you were not going to get a good grade at all if you didn't collaborate" and an A+ should not be "the kind of thing you can sleaze your way into getting."

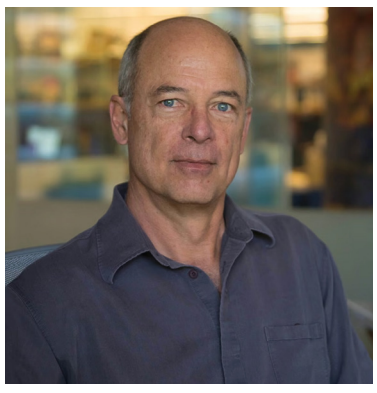
"If you insist on being a try-hard, your goal should be an A and 4.0. No school or employer is going to be like that's not good enough," said Professor Hong. "Personally, I would rather see students take a risk with their GPA and expand their intellectual horizons. I think it says something about your intellectual appetites and priorities. The four years you have in college are a precious opportunity — I always look at a perfect transcript with a slight side-eye."

She cautioned against feeling obligated to pursue an A+ simply because it is the highest grade available. "I think this idea that if there is a grade higher, then I have to try for that higher grade, that's just going to make you really miserable," she said. While she understood chasing an A+ if the majority of students receive one, she added that if only one or two students in a class do, "it's going to be very hard for anyone to consistently get an A+ in every single class. It just doesn't work that way."

Professor Hong acknowledged that the new policies may initially feel stressful to undergraduates, but said she thinks that "grade inflation is responsible for a huge part of the stress" students currently feel. "Students feel they have to unendingly chase extracurriculars and internships to demonstrate their strengths." She believes returning to grading practices from 10 or 15 years ago is "achievable" and within the faculty's purview.

She also characterized the current policies as relatively modest. More substantial changes, such as directly limiting the number of A grades awarded, as Harvard has done, would be "a much trickier conversation," she said, because the faculty have not reached a strong consensus on that approach. Caltech is "acting much more modestly" in part because the rigor of its academic program and the implementation of in-person exams may already push grading in the direction the faculty is seeking.

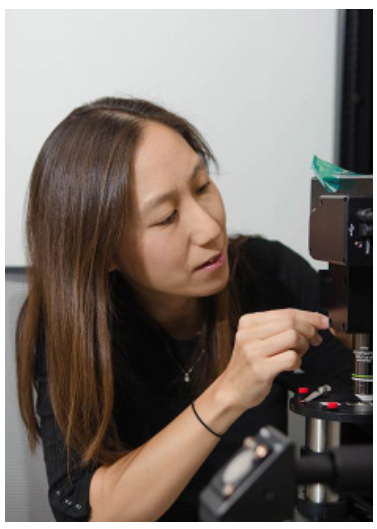
Students have also voiced confusion on the compatibility of an A+ cap with objective grading, as many classes award A+ for grades above 97. Professor Gilmartin's email stated that "the grade of A+ should indicate truly exceptional performance." Professor Hong explained that "an A+ is just a standout student, usually they just stick out and it's very black and white," and not just another grade on the grading scale.



Professor Meister. (Credit: Caltech)



Professor George at Avery fall 2026 formal. (Credit: Vivian Li)



Professor Hong. (Credit: Lance Hayashida/Caltech)



Professor Hutzler. (Credit: Caltech)

Using the example of organic chemistry, most students, especially pre-meds, take the course because they have to rather than because they are passionate. "Most of them will get an A and move on and never think about Grignard reactions again." In Professor Hong's view, the A+ is for the student who, for instance, is extremely interested in organic synthesis and does extra work. That student should be distinguished on their transcript because "they show exceptional promise to make future creative contributions on organic synthesis, and we want to recognize that."

Professor George stated that his classes have always been clear on what students need to do to obtain each letter grade, including A+, and he considered raising the threshold for an A+ to 110% in EE10a. However, it is not clear whether he will meet the policy target with that change, so he may need to rethink his course structure.

"The reason I was already planning on changing the grading criteria in EE10a (and have changed it in my other classes in the past) is that I did not feel all the people getting A+ had mastered the material," said Professor George, "but if 20 people in a class show complete mastery of the material and go above and beyond what is required, why shouldn't they all get an A+?"

Having professors rethink how they administer their classes, particularly in how they conduct assessments and the policy encouraging faculty to hold them in-person, is meant to work in tandem with the A+ policy. There is no formal enforcement mechanism for the new policies. For now, merely making professors more aware of grading patterns could influence how they design their grading schemes.

Professor Meister said the hope is that faculty will "self-regulate" around a shared interest in preserving meaningful grades. He suggested that even the narrow restriction at the top of the grading scale could prompt instructors reconsider their assessments. For example, a professor that gives nearly everyone an A+ would now have to distinguish among students and might therefore "think about more serious assessments."

Professor Hong similarly emphasized that the Institute is not trying to dictate how individual professors teach. The goal is to encourage faculty to move toward practices that reflect a broadly shared thinking rather than impose "really rigid rules," as grading depends heavily on an instructor's philosophy.

While the discussion of new policies has focused on undergraduates, Zachary Chase, who attended the Faculty Board meetings as Graduate Student Council Co-Chair, told the *Tech* that the resulting information from the changes could "benefit graduate students as well by revealing broader strengths and weaknesses in Caltech's pedagogy." Without clear indicators of student learning, concerns raised by graduate students about teaching quality have been difficult to assess.

He noted that much of the work for assigning grades falls to teaching assistants rather than professors. One possible step to make grades more informative would be for the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Outreach to provide more systematic training for TAs, particularly around applying grading criteria consistently. He stated that the effectiveness of the new policies should be evaluated by "whether assessment becomes a more accurate reflection of student learning and helps Caltech improve the quality of its teaching," rather than just by any resulting shift in grade distributions.

The end of Professor Gilmartin's email said the changes "represent the first stage of a broader effort to maintain meaningful differentiation in grading and to protect the reputation of a Caltech degree" and that the Faculty Board and division chairs will monitor grading outcomes throughout the year and consider whether further adjustments are needed. Professor Meister similarly said there is "nothing specific" currently planned beyond the new policies; the faculty will "see how this year goes" then discuss what to conclude from the experience.

Change

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mentary that Frosh Camp was/is an excellent way to immediately establish the foundation for it. Instead of the unique experience of Frosh Camp, its replacement—several days spent reassuring parents that their children will be okay here—seems more like the handholding that any expensive private college fearful of losing tuition revenue would engage in. Tuition revenue? Hah.

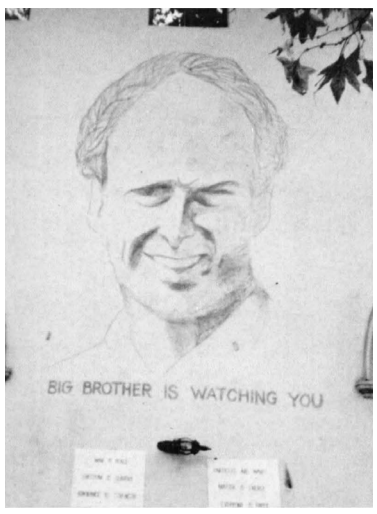
I was a frosh here for the last true Interhouse, with its fence around half of campus, and witnessed what a disaster that was, so I understand why it went away. Still, I do agree again with Richard that a big house-wide project early on can really create strong ties among House members. Endeavors that tap into the individual creativity of students in the pursuit of collective and inspirational goals like that should be encouraged rather than severely limited or dismissed outright. They go a long way towards creating a sense of camaraderie, and even kind of a family. As much as I (and many others) struggled at Tech, knowing that there was a tight-knit group supporting me made all the difference and was central to what made my experience here so special. It's not something that you can find just anywhere, but it's eminently doable here. Supporting things that promote House unity/community so that Houses become more than just dorms that you can find on any random campus, I think, is the biggest thing that can be done to address the level of dissatisfaction that Richard noted.

One thing that does NOT help build up House culture is having Alumni Weekend just a few weeks into the term to coincide with a nonexistent Homecoming week. (Postgraduate alumni might end up having to choose between Tech or their undergraduate institution, for gosh sakes.) Instead of already being familiar with the House and being curious to hear stories from the past, which used to happen when Alumni Weekend (for decades!) took place in the spring, frosh a couple weeks into the fall term are more likely to view sitting around with old strangers as detracting from their time to work on their problem sets. (Also, it felt really alienating that unless we paid to attend the weekend, alumni weren't invited to the "House Happy Hours." Like, does Caltech only care about alumni if they're gonna fork over some $$? Oh but I digress...)

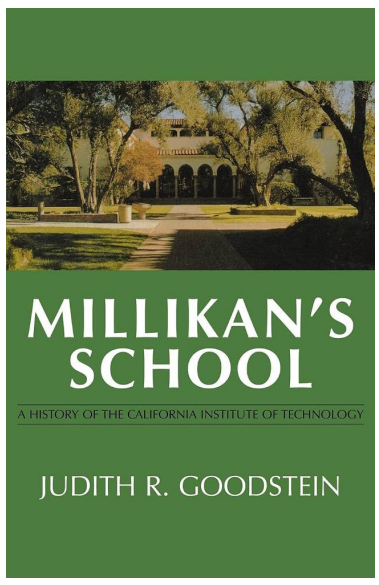
Ultimately, I feel that the problem of undergraduate dissatisfaction is greatly exacerbated when things are handled in a way that disregards how small and special Tech is and can be. Because if you take away the elements where Tech's unique environment can be an advantage socially and treat students like you would at any other university, then what you end up with is... a place just like any other university, except exponentially harder. So it wouldn't be surprising that many more would be unhappy at the end of it.

I realize that the undergraduates at Caltech have never been a high priority (there's the common joke that former Registrar and Institute Historian Judith Goodstein wrote a book about Caltech, but only mentioned undergrads twice) but to the extent that it is, some consideration given to encouraging the development of a closer undergrad community could go a long way.

Change is inevitable... but it doesn't have to be inevitably bad.



Gary Lorden (BS '62), professor emeritus of math and former vice president for student affairs, watching over us even in the '90s. (Credit: THE BIG T, 1993)



(Credit: W. W. Norton & Company)



November 1966 Interhouse. (Credit: Caltech Archives)

Response

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positively engage students with the material.
- Count the higher of the midterm and final.
- Provide guidance on how to use AI tools responsibly and effectively on assignments that allow the use of AI.
- Give students an anonymous way to raise concerns about courses for faculty to review. Ombuds are not yet strictly enforced, so this feedback avenue is not always possible if courses fail to have ombuds.
- Major change, but could work if thought out well. Grades can appear as a pass or fail and that's it. Courses keep the same grading schemes and the threshold for a pass or fail is set by the professor. A *Tech* article explaining the rational and answering rebuttals is in progress.

Conclusion

We are not asking for trivial courses. We are asking for a balance between rigor, workload, and units, so that students can learn, sleep, stay healthy, be happy, and still have some free time to pursue extracurricular activities that will help shape us into the creative members of society we aspire to be. Many already found Caltech very difficult before, but now it is starting to be impossible. The issue of AI for education needs to be addressed without jeopardizing student health or putting additional stress on students.

Caltech Needs a Testing Center

Manuel Santana
Opinion

Moving to Caltech for my PhD from a large, unprestigious state university was a big change. Campus can be traversed in a matter of minutes, no one is camping out for a good seat at the basketball game, and the total student population is smaller than that of my high school. Perhaps the most surprising thing to me when I arrived in Fall of 2022 was the fact that all tests were given as take-home exams. Even my qualifying exams were take-home! (Although I'm aware this is not the case for most options.) However, as the reader probably knows, the current recommendation is that examinations be given in person in light of the recent advances in AI. This change is here to stay, and I believe that Caltech could learn something from large state universities by establishing a testing center.

What is a testing center? It is a centralized location on campus where you can take all of your tests, quizzes, examinations, etc. In essence, the instructor of a course tells you to schedule an examination during a certain range of dates. You go online and book an appointment during a time that works for you, and then you go take it. Upon arrival at the testing center, you show them your student ID, are given instructions for the test, and then go into a quiet room to take the test while proctored by the testing center employees. Of course, the use of a testing center is up to the instructor's discretion, but I believe it provides some benefits.

Why would students want a testing center? For starters, it gives greater flexibility in your schedule. As a morning person, I perform much better in the morning, and the finals that are scheduled to last until 6:30 p.m. are quite unappealing to me. Additionally, as was done at my undergrad, a testing center could assemble several playlists of music which could be used during a test, thereby lowering test anxiety for many students. Another benefit is that a testing center would create more student jobs.

Why would instructors want a testing center? It would save the already overbooked professors the time it takes to proctor exams. To ensure that everyone has an available time to go to the testing center, the portion of class that would have been devoted to taking the assessment can be cancelled, freeing up more time for the professor. A testing center also provides a natural way to handle CASS accommodations without the student ever needing to talk to the professor, as accommodations can be handled by the testing center staff. Grading and returning feedback could be made substantially easier by having testing center employees scan paper tests and send them directly to the professors.

In-person assessments aren't going away, so Caltech should learn from other schools that have been doing in-person assessments for years and establish a testing center.

This Week in *Tech* History

November 18, 1988

Disturbing Incidents Mar 'Unpleasant' Interhouse

by Al Petterson

This year's Interhouse, as many Techers can attest, featured a number of disturbing incidents, many involving non-Tech personnel, despite the measures taken in recent years to forbid advertising off-campus and limiting access to alcohol. These events prompted Dean Chris Brennan to speak at this week's IHC meeting concerning the past, present, and future of Interhouse.

Dean Brennan began by describing how Interhouse has evolved over the past twenty years. Interhouse, he said, began as a carnival of sorts, intended for the Caltech community, wherein the houses would display their ingenuity in various ways. There was an element of costumes and performances, and the feel was very much one of entertainment and interaction. It was a festival for members of the Caltech community, alums, faculty and staff and their families.

In the last five or so years, he went on, Interhouse has changed dramatically, and, in his opinion, for the worse. Standing on the Olive Walk, he said, he found himself "surrounded by young people from the surrounding community" who have no knowledge of or stake in Caltech. The atmosphere has grown far more unpleasant. It was "not [something] I would have brought my family to," and, he said, he left that evening feeling very depressed.

The feeling that Interhouse was poor this year was not his alone, nor was the lack of fun the only thing wrong. For the second year in a row, the Pasadena Police were called to Interhouse because of fighting. When they arrived at Ruddock, they were forced to shut down the band to control the crowd, many of whom were Pasadena high school students with no connection to the Institute.

Dean Brennan emphasized that he was not blaming the student body for the change in atmosphere. The most disturbing aspect of recent Interhouses, he said, has been the number of local high school students who crash the party. Caltech is being increasingly victimized by the surrounding community, in that locals are taking advantage of the low security at large Caltech events.

Pasadena youth are on the lookout for Caltech parties, said Brennan, where they can, with little or no fear of law enforcement, cause trouble, disrupt the environment, and in general make Interhouse miserable for the student body and their guests. He pointed out the frightening fact that "they *know* when [and where] Interhouse is." During the Halloween party two weeks before, according to one member of the IHC, Techers were stopped off campus by carloads of high school students asking whether Interhouse was that weekend, since there was a party going on on the Caltech campus.

The IHC's attitude was one of general agreement; as one student who attended the meeting commented, "Interhouse sucked; I didn't know anybody there."

Dean Brennan contrasted Interhouse with the Halloween party in Dabney Hall Garden. The difference, he said, was the controlled entrances to the party. There were very few gates left open to the garden, and security guards at the entrances simply asked those who wished to enter what house they were from, a question very few gate-crashers would be able to answer convincingly. "It was a great filter," Brennan commented.

The bottom line, according to the Dean, is the absolute necessity of "a strictly controlled perimeter." The IHC agreed, and also agreed in principle with the intention of putting temporary fences on the Olive Walk, from Fleming to Page and from Ricketts to Ruddock, and closing off or controlling all other access to the student houses for the evening.

This fence, in addition to acting as a filter, would allow Caltech Security to prevent bottles or cans of alcoholic beverages from being brought to the event. (Bottles and cans were outlawed this year at Interhouse; anyone who helped to clean up after the party can attest to how poorly this was enforced.)

Brennan said, "I think we've been very fortunate that there haven't been worse problems. Next year will have to be different."

Inauguration of President Jayawardhana

Tingting Luo
News

On Thursday, October 29, Caltech celebrated the inauguration of Ray Jayawardhana as the Institute's tenth president. The inauguration ceremony was held at Beckman Mall, followed by an all-campus reception on Olive Walk.

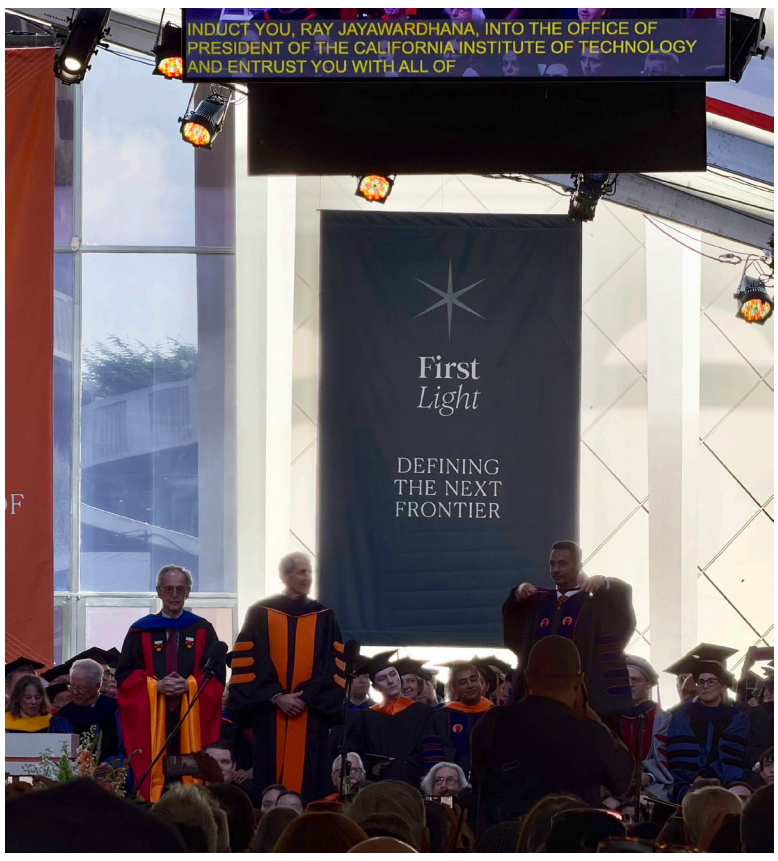
The inauguration ceremony began with a procession of faculty, student leaders, invited speakers, and President Jayawardhana. Representatives of the faculty, Jet Propulsion Laboratory, undergraduate and graduate student body, postdoctoral scholars, and alumni each offered their welcome to the president. The highlight of these introductions was a special message sent all the way from the International Space Station, in low earth orbit, by former Caltech postdoctoral scholar and current NASA astronaut Jessica Watkins.

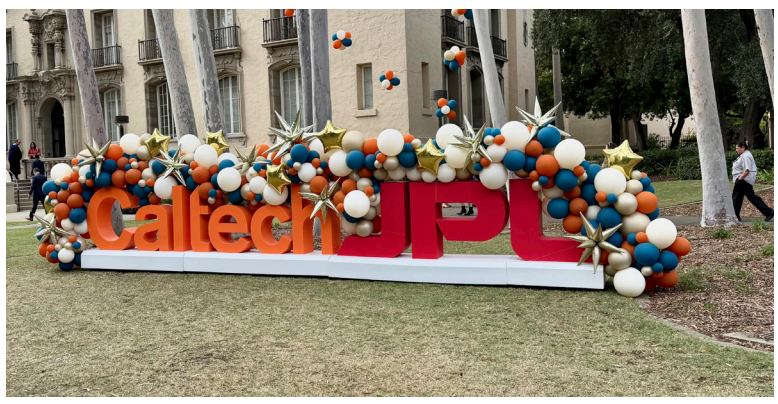
Afterward, invited speakers and professors emeriti Dr. Jacqueline Barton and Dr. Peter Dervan reflected on their own journeys and the "secret sauce" that makes Caltech special, citing the people who have the "courage" and "boldness" to try something never done before. They believe President Jayawardhana exemplifies relentless curiosity and courage, making him the perfect fit for Caltech.

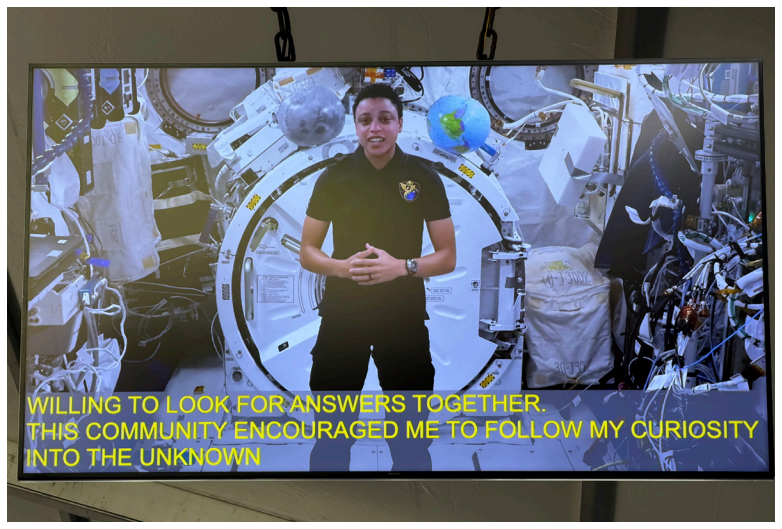
In the president's inaugural address, he described the "future that we aspire to create together." Ray began by expressing his deepest gratitude to his parents — his late father, who shared with him a "voracious curiosity" of the world, and his mother, who gave him and his sister the "freedom to dream and the confidence to venture into the unknown." To Ray, being Caltech's president is a "privilege beyond measure." He plans to lead the Institute to continue "invest[ing] in brilliant people who are undeterred by the seemingly impossible." Together, we will make discoveries "worthy of the long horizon of human exploration."

Welcome, President Jayawardhana, to the Caltech community, and we are so excited for the discoveries and possibilities that lie ahead.

All photos by Tingting Luo.









Campus Updates from Housing & Dining

Miguel Campos
News

Hello everyone from Housing and Dining Services! There were some awesome things that took place on campus the past few weeks, including the inauguration of Caltech's tenth president, Ray Jayawardhana, where Caltech Dining Services (CDS) was there to host the campus for a delicious lunch. With so much happening across campus right now, we want to share a quick recap of our recent events, along with important information from Housing below regarding the upcoming Thanksgiving housing period and the deadline to submit your break form.

President's Inauguration

CDS was hard at work preparing for the President's Inauguration, from crafting the custom decor to cooking for the campus community. We hope everyone got the opportunity to partake in the delicious menu offered and had a chance to look at all the wonderful department setups!

Halloween Maze & Midterm Pop-Up

We also had some hauntingly fun times in the Dining Halloween Maze! We hope you all had a great time making it through the creepy maze and then enjoying some frightfully delicious treats afterward. Earlier in the week, we also hosted a lemonade pop-up at Browne Dining Hall during midterms week as shown on our Instagram @caltechdining. Thank you to everyone who stopped by and joined us! With so many fun events happening back-to-back, we had a blast celebrating with the community and are already looking forward to the next events we have in store.

Thanksgiving Break Housing Form

All students must complete this form and identify the days they will be staying in Caltech Housing. This registration process is a requirement of the housing contract and is necessary in order to ensure that the Institute is aware of all students' plans. The deadline to submit your plans for Thanksgiving break is Thursday, November 19, 2026, at noon.

Please scan the QR code to fill out the form. If you stay on campus sporadically, please select the dates that you will be on campus. This information will be used in case of an emergency during the break. If you have any questions, please contact the Housing Office ughousing@caltech.edu or talk to your RA or RLC.

During the break, members of the Office of Student and Family Engagement and Caltech Security will be on campus to ensure student support. Emergency on-call Counseling Services will be available, and the Athletic Center will be open on Saturday, 11/28, and Sunday, 11/29. Dining Services and all other administrative support offices will be closed November 26-27, 2026. Browne Dining Hall will be open on Saturday, 11/28, and Sunday, 11/29 from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Connect With Us!

Thank you all for making this community so vibrant. It is our absolute pleasure serving you and we continue to wish everyone a fun, successful, and safe fall term!

Dining Questions:
Email: dine@caltech.edu
Webpage: dining.caltech.edu

Housing Questions:
Email: housing@caltech.edu
Webpage:
housing.caltech.edu

Scan to complete the Thanksgiving Break Housing Form by Thursday, Nov. 19 at noon.





Preparations and department setups for the Presidential Inauguration. (Credit: Miguel Campos)

Caltech Gathers for Election Night Watch Party

Camilla Fezzi
The Inside World

On Tuesday, November 3, members of the Caltech community gathered at Avery Courtyard and Dining Hall to watch the initial results come in for federal, state, and local elections. The Election Night Watch Party ran from 7 to 10 p.m., turning Avery into a hub of conversation and community.

The evening featured multiple spaces, both indoors and outdoors, each showing coverage from a different media source. Between updates, students, postdocs, faculty, and staff enjoyed food and drink, along with games, activities, and prizes.

Mixed into the coverage were speakers covering election topics. Greg Fletcher, one of the main administrators of Caltech Y, was present and excited to welcome so many students, as well as the Caltech Y student board president, Arabella Camunez, who spent a lot of time clarifying the rules of elections to me (an ignorant international student).

The watch party has grown since its 2024 edition, which was coordinated by the Office of Student Engagement, Student Affairs, and the Caltech Y. This year's non-partisan event, open to any member of the Caltech-affiliated community, was hosted by the Linde Center for Science, Society, and Policy (LCSSP), Student and Family Engagement (SFE), the Graduate Office, the Undergraduate Dean's Office, the Caltech Center for Inclusion and Diversity (CCID), the Science Policy Initiative (SPIN), and the Caltech Y. As the organizers put it, why tune in alone when you can enjoy the company and insights of others?

Thank you to all of the hosts for an evening of curiosity, conversation, and community, and we look forward to gathering again for the next election night.

All photos by Camilla Fezzi.











Professor Alvarez Breaks Down the 2026 Midterms

Camilla Fezzi
News

Three days after the 2026 midterm elections, on Nov. 6, the Caltech Y hosted "The Midterms in Retrospective: A Post Election Lunch Discussion" with Michael Alvarez, Flintridge Foundation Professor of Political and Computational Social Science. He opened by calling the elections "one of the most consequential elections of all of our lifetimes."

Alvarez said that, as of Nov. 6, there had been no significant issues in election administration. Voters ran into the usual problems, such as lines and ballot mix-ups, which he described as typical for an election system as complicated as the American one. "The big relief is that so far we didn't have any major meltdowns," he said. Nothing happened on the scale of the 2000 presidential election.

With counting still underway, Democrats had secured majorities in both the House and the Senate for the next Congress and had won a majority of governorships. Commentators have described the outcome as a "blue wave." Alvarez compared it to a river flood gauge, which measures how far the water sits above or below normal. In this election, he said, the water rose everywhere. "The flood isn't just a flood in Washington, D.C.," he said. "This is a flood that happened across the country."

Texas was the result that surprised him most. Before the election, a New York Times/Siena poll had Talarico ahead by about seven points. Alvarez said he and Danny Ebanks, who presented a forecasting model at Caltech's election night watch party, spent the weekend on the phone debating whether the poll could be right. Alvarez thought it could not. "I just could not believe that a Democratic senatorial candidate would win in a place like Texas by that kind of margin," he said. "But that's what happened." James Talarico defeated Attorney General Ken Paxton by roughly 12 percentage points, and Gina Hinojosa unseated Governor Greg Abbott.

Alvarez repeated what he told his PS 101 students in the first week of class: the president's party almost always loses seats in midterm elections, which generally serve as referenda on the party in power. With a Republican president and Republican majorities in both chambers, this election was a referendum on President Trump and his party's policies over the past two years. If projections held, he said, it would be one of the largest House losses for a president's party since World War II.

On Sept. 29, he had shown the class a simple regression model that predicts the president's party's House seat losses from two inputs: the misery index, which combines inflation and unemployment, and the president's approval rating. The model uses no polling data. It predicted a large Republican loss.

He named affordability as the main issue. The economy is not in a severe recession, he said, but prices are high, and that motivated a large part of the electorate. The second factor was candidate quality, which the simple model leaves out. Alvarez described candidate quality as measured by prior experience in office, a compelling personal story and the ability to raise enough money. He cited Talarico as a candidate who met all three.

One student asked whether voters were simply becoming anti-incumbent, given that Republicans had read their 2024 win as a mandate. "Great question. The answer is maybe," Alvarez said. Midterms are usually retrospective, he explained: voters judge what has happened over the past two years rather than vote for a specific plan. He said he did not think the result gave Democrats a mandate and that the party now had to decide what to do with its majorities.

Alvarez expects the next two years in Washington to produce mostly status quo policy. He thinks the real policy changes will come from the states, including on science policy. His advice to students with policy ideas was to contact their elected officials soon. The new Congress takes office in early January and will move quickly on the issues it campaigned on, and policymaking tends to slow once attention turns to the 2028 presidential race. "If you have ideas and things you'd like to see happen, now is the time," he said.



Professor Alvarez presenting. (Credit: Camilla Fezzi)

Editor's Note: Website Update

Our new website is now live and up to date, thanks to our industrious Editor Emeritus Michael Gutierrez! Here's a note from him:

The NEW IMPROVED tech.caltech.edu is here! Probably the best feature is ~~the dark mode button~~ the NEW IMPROVED article submission form (tech.caltech.edu/submit) which lets you type your article AND upload photos directly! Pasting in from Google Docs or other word processors also works. Hopefully this will make the editorial workflow much less painful for all involved. Please let us know any feedback or suggestions at tech@caltech.edu!

Inside the Mathematical Tripos and More: Studying Abroad at Cambridge

Enoch Guo
The Outside World

Editor's note: This article was submitted by the Fellowships and Study Abroad (FASA) Office and written by Enoch Guo '27, who studied at Pembroke College, University of Cambridge, in Fall 2025. At the end of the article, additional information about study abroad is provided by the FASA Office.

Overall, my time at Cambridge has been extremely rewarding, both from an academic and a social perspective. My favorite part of Cambridge was the plethora of activities and events, both curricular and extracurricular, to experience. I have always attended schools with smaller class sizes, so this was my first time in an environment with so many people. The freedom to join a variety of clubs and societies and such a diverse body of students have been quite refreshing.

That being said, the way academics work at Cambridge is vastly different than at Caltech, especially in the math department. First some general remarks. Cambridge math students essentially all take the same courses their first two years, so their mathematical background is entirely homogeneous and hence the prerequisites listed for courses tend to be much more explicit and strict than at Caltech. For example, there were some methods from differential equations I was not familiar with that came up in the Fluid Dynamics course. However, as their courses are very standard and never vary from year to year, this issue is easily remedied by catching up on publicly available course notes. In addition, instruction is heavily lecture based, compared to Caltech where attendance may be low, and attending lectures is essential for learning the material (fair warning, the Math Department is in West Cambridge, over a mile away from the central area where most of the colleges are).

I took only Part II(D) courses, and in terms of how advanced the content is, these lie somewhere between the equivalent introductory and graduate course offerings at Caltech (e.g. Cambridge's Algebraic Topology course covers roughly the end of Ma109A and the start of Ma151A). Each math course has 4 example sheets/supervisions per term; example sheets are essentially problem sets, given every other week, and supervisions are like mandatory office hours where you go over your solutions to the sheets in depth. (Note that usually the fourth example sheet/supervision takes place in the next term, so as a Caltech student one must plan ahead to get the fourth sheet done in time.) In addition to lectures, these supervisions are the primary source of your learning experience.

The sheets are not graded in the traditional sense; rather, supervisors will leave remarks and discuss with you in detail during the supervision. The supervisors themselves are very knowledgeable in their subjects, and can often clarify confusions from lectures, as well as drilling you on various aspects of the math that are important. The sheets themselves are slightly different than at Caltech; they are designed to follow the lecture notes very closely, and focus more on asking questions that may come up in exams rather than going deeper into the theory.

This method of learning is helpful in a number of ways. Firstly, it places less of an emphasis on bulletproofing one's sets in terms of rigor to obtain full points and instead on grasping the main ideas and concepts of what the question is asking. Even on exams, one can receive a majority of points by getting the main idea of a question without going into the nitty-gritty details of a proof. Secondly, the fact that you study like you are preparing for an exam forces one to memorize the definitions more thoroughly. Thirdly, discussing mathematics in person orally forces one to explain their understanding of the material much better. Finally, the students themselves are very bright mathematically, although there is no collaboration really and you only interact with your supervision partners (these are usually 2 on 1) for the most part.

Socially, Cambridge has also been extremely welcoming. The university and Pembroke (the college I attended) do a great job of integrating first year students into societies and the college environment itself, starting with the university and college "fresher's" fairs, where the different societies and clubs and sports teams all introduce themselves. There are literally hundreds of these, and it is quite a massive event. Personally, I joined my college's rowing team, a STEM society that invited various professors to give talks, and also made the University Men's fourth team for tennis (though I also played for Pembroke in inter-collegiate competitions). Everyone I interacted with was truly incredibly kind, and it was very easy to make new friends no matter the situation.

In addition, Pembroke also has exchange students take part in all the orientation events alongside the first years and also assigns everyone a college "family" consisting of fellow first years and also second year "parents." The societies you join and your college family often hold social events such as attending formal dinners or just hanging out, so you are never short of social activities, and end up meeting many other students even from other colleges through these events. Housing-wise, Pembroke assigns the Caltech students to Foundress Court, which is a newer residence kind of like Caltech's Bechtel, and the accommodation is quite nice. Most students either cook or eat meals at the servery which has subsidized meal prices for members of the college, although you can also eat with your friends at other colleges' dining halls.

Lastly, being in such a historic place at Cambridge was really refreshing. One could always admire the architecture while walking to class, and see famous landmarks like Newton's apple tree, or the mathematical bridge. Furthermore, Cambridge is less than an hour from London by train, which makes taking day trips to explore places like Bath, or even going to Edinburgh for a weekend very convenient. At least in Michaelmas term, the weather is also decent. Cambridge in general does not get much rain compared to the rest of the UK, and it does not get really cold until the last few weeks.

In conclusion, I would highly recommend studying abroad at Cambridge during the Michaelmas term.

Caltech partners with 4 colleges at Cambridge: Pembroke, St John's, Corpus Christi and St Catharine's. Each has a rich history and unique culture. The FASA Office is holding an info session on how to apply to Study Abroad on December 3rd @ 12pm in the Center for Student Services, room 345. If you are interested please visit our website, fasa.caltech.edu/studyabroad.

If you're still deciding if Study Abroad is something you would like to take on, don't worry! We will be out at Red Door answering your questions. Join us for Cookies and Questions! We will bring the cookies, you bring the questions!

Billy the Study Abroad Beaver went exploring Cambridge in September! Photos by FASA Office.



Billy with the St. Catharine's element wall.

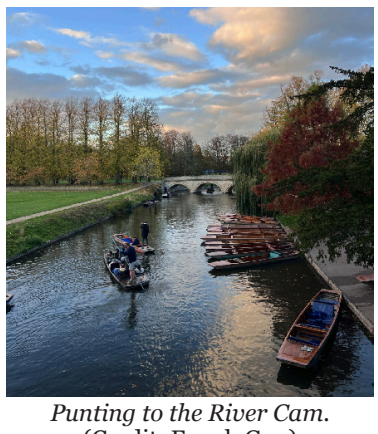


Billy in front of the famous bridge over the Cam River at St John's College.





The church at Pembroke.
(Credit: Enoch Guo)



Punting to the River Cam.
(Credit: Enoch Guo)

This Week in *Tech* History

November 14, 1986

California Scientists Angered

NSF Research Center Site Unfairly Chosen

by Dave Lomax

When the National Science Foundation awarded the State University of New York at Buffalo a $50 million National Earthquake Research Center rather than UC Berkeley, a great uproar was heard from California scientists.

Paul C. Jennings, chairman of Caltech's Engineering Department, discovered about 50 lines of text in the SUNY Buffalo proposal which were apparently copied from the California proposal which he had co-authored. Also allegedly plagiarized was material written by Caltech professor Wilfred Iwan.

California senators Pete Wilson and Alan Cranston have succeeded in having the NSF decision investigated by the Government Accounting Office and the NSF is also conducting an internal investigation of the matter. Neither of these investigations have as yet been completed.

"One of the allegations is that the evaluation committee for the recommendation of the center was not qualified for the job in the sense that they were not experts in the field of earthquake engineering which was the field of the center," said Jennings.

"Another one was that the proceedures on when the decision was made were inappropriate. Essentially, the decision had been written up before they visited California. In fact, they had made up their minds before they came."

Iwan, chairman of the California Seismic Safety Commission, wrote a leter to the NSF on behalf of the commission in which he stated: "I fear that this decision may, unfortunately, result in substantially higher losses of life and property in the next U.S. great earthquake than would have been the case. We can only hope that this earthquake will be slow in coming."

This concern can be attributed to the fact that it will take some time for Buffalo to assemble up-to-date, state of the art equipment and a staff of seismologic experts, both of which are already available in California.

However, according to professor Jennings, the real issue is the integrity of the peer review system, which is used in most granting of funds to institutions. "The primary qualification for funding research should be the quality of the research and not political considerations or geographic considerations or anything of that sort.

"The basic issue is to try to do things right without making the peer review process even more political. The people involved in the earthquake program think that political actions were already very strong in this thing, certainly from the New York side, but they don't want to further aggravate that problem in trying to correct it."

Since there are such a large number of earthquakes which occur in California, some Californians may think that seismic activity is particular to this part of the nation, but that is not true.

"The seismicity of the eastern U.S. is much less than that of the western United States, but that doesn't mean that earthquakes don't occur there. In historic times, there has been a series of three big earthquakes in 1811-1812 in the Missouri area and there was a large earthquake the size of the San Fernando earthquake or the Coalinga earthquake or the Long Beach earthquake or maybe a little bit bigger in Charleston, South Carolina in 1886.

"Because the east is older, and the buildings are older and they're not as well constucted as the buildings out here, for earthquakes of a given size, you can expect to occur even more trouble in the east than here. They're not as well prepared as us in a number of ways.

"The geology of the eastern U.S. is such that earthquake waves carry further so that some of the more distant effects carry over much larger distances than they do in the western U.S."

Compact Disk - "Campus Squirrels"

Annie Zhao
Humor

The Guest

Camilla Fezzi
Arts

First the smells went: November fog off the Adige,
bread at seven, grape must from the Valpolicella hills,
I go back and breathe in as hard as I can. Nothing.

Then the words. I count in English now.
I dream in both. My mother tongue sounds like an old address.

Here the nights smell of jasmine and eucalyptus,
of ethanol under lab lights that never go off,
and of hay in the barn, the one smell that's the same everywhere.

Each time I go home, something is gone.
A shop with its shutter down. A stranger behind the café counter.
Friends with jokes I wasn't there for.
Birthdays watched on a screen. News that arrives nine hours late.
I stand in the piazza with my suitcase, a guest in my own house.

What frightens me isn't the distance.
It's the day the streets I grew up on are just streets,
and the ache stops.

So I hold on to the work.
Cancer finds people in Verona and in Pasadena alike,
and somewhere someone is waiting for a treatment that doesn't exist yet.

In Pasadena, I'm Italian. In Verona, I'm American.
I've stopped looking for a home.
The work is waiting, and for now that's close enough.

(Originally written in Italian by the author.)

Untold Stories

Nima Ghaderi
Arts

How quiet shall words become,
Lying dormant and wounded beyond.

Lacking parsimony and their riddles be gone,
Waiting to become stone under the sun.

Lofty, pulling the tendril of the one,
As the soil receives the tears of above.

Here's a daisy to mark our beings,
Of hope and dreams with mighty wings.

It shall never be as was before,
But grandeur and truth newly formed.

Heavens speak for you to be,
Listen quietly and learn to see.

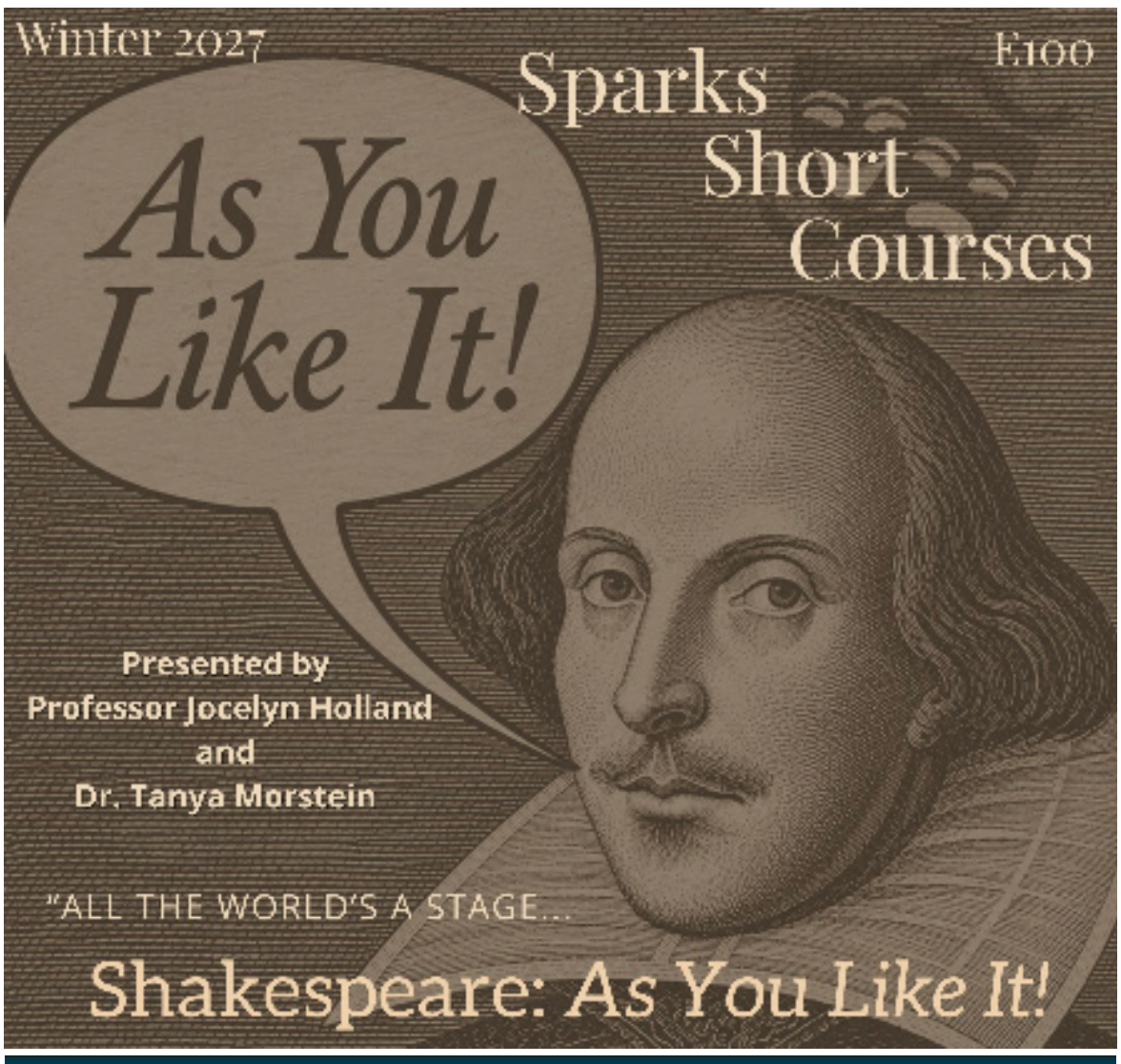
Of brooks becoming rivers,
And your heart beating free.

As time may fall,
You shall raise it.

A heavenly marker,
Carry it with grace.

Endings never end,
As you light the new.

You will be,
The story of the ages.





The California Tech
Journalistic Principles

The News-Opinion divide
All articles shall be clearly and explicitly labeled as either News or Opinion/Editorial.
News articles report on topics that have been thoroughly researched by Tech staff writers, and should be impartial to any one point of view. In a News article, the writer shall not insert their own personal feelings on the matter; the purpose is to let the facts speak for themselves. The Tech assumes full responsibility for all content published as News.
In contrast, Opinion articles (including Letters to the Editor) may be written and submitted by anyone on any topic; while the Tech will edit all published Opinions to ensure no wrong or misleading information, we do not otherwise interfere. Again, the role of the Tech here is to help the whole campus communicate their ideas and share their stories, not promote specific ones. Content published as Opinions do not necessarily represent the values of the Tech or our staff.
An exception to this is Editorials, which are written by Tech staff and represent official opinions of the Tech. Any information and sources in Editorials shall be held to the same standard as News reports, but there is no promise or expectation of impartial coverage.

Fair Reporting
All facts of major significance and relevance to an article shall be sought out and included.
If an assertion is made by a source about a specific person or organization, they shall be contacted and given a reasonable amount of time to respond before publication. In other words, no second-hand information or hearsay shall stand on its own.

Quotes and Attribution of Information
Facts and quotes that were not collected directly by Tech reporters shall be attributed. Articles shall clearly differentiate between what a reporter saw and heard first-hand vs. what a reporter obtained from other sources.
Sources' opinions are just that — opinions. Expert opinions are certainly given more weight, as are witness opinions. But whenever possible, the Tech shall report facts, or at least corroborate the opinions. A reporter's observations at a scene are considered facts for the purposes of a story.

Sources
All sources shall be treated with respect and integrity. When speaking with sources, we shall identify ourselves as Tech reporters and clarify why we would like to hold an interview. Sources for the Tech will never be surprised to see their name published.
In published content, we shall put our sources' quotes into context, and — as appropriate — clarify what question was being answered.
We always ask that a source speak with us on the record for the sake of journalistic integrity. We want our audience to receive information that is credible and useful to them. Named sources are more trustworthy than unnamed sources because, by definition, unnamed sources will not publicly stand by their statements.
That being said, we realize that some sources are unwilling to reveal their identities publicly when it could jeopardize their safety or livelihood. Even in those cases, it is essential that the Tech Editor-in-Chief knows the identity of the source in question. Otherwise, there can be no certainty about whether the source and their quotes were falsified.
This also applies for Letters to the Editor and Opinion submissions to the Tech. If the author requests that their piece is published anonymously, they must provide a reason, and we shall consider it in appropriate circumstances. No truly anonymous submissions shall be published. Conversely, no submissions shall be published with the author's name without their consent.
When we choose not to identify a source by their full name, the article shall explain to readers why.

Corrections Policy
We strive for promptness in correcting all errors in all published content. We shall tell readers, as clearly and quickly as possible, what was wrong and what is correct.
Corrections to articles will be immediately updated on the online version of the Tech at tech.caltech.edu. If appropriate, corrections will also be published in the following Tech print issue.

Honor Code Applies
In any remaining absence of clarity, the Honor Code is the guiding principle.

The California Tech

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The California Tech aims to publish biweekly except during vacation and examination periods by the Associated Students of the California Institute of Technology, Inc. The opinions expressed herein are strictly those of the authors and advertisers. Letters and submissions are welcome; email submissions to tech@caltech.edu, or submit them on our Discord server (https://discord.gg/Zaah8749s2). The editors reserve the right to edit and abridge all submissions for any reason. All written work remains property of its author. The advertising deadline is 12 PM on Friday; all advertising should be submitted electronically or as camera ready art, but *The Tech* can also do simple typesetting and arrangement. All advertising inquiries should be directed to the business manager at tech@caltech.edu.

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The California Tech
CalGuesser



Every issue we'll show you a different location on campus. Find the place and find the QR code hidden there to sign the log book and **win a fabulous prize! Gift cards sponsored by CalGuesser Benefactor Kevin Kan (BS '93), but only if you find it before he does!!!**

"On campus" is defined as the convex hull of the buildings shown on caltech.edu/map/campus.
The QR code will be hidden somewhere within or immediately around the pictured area.

Tech Editor's Corner

Musée des Beaux Arts
By W. H. Auden

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along

How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.



W. H. Auden. (Credit: Richard Avedon, Christie's)