

Caltech Grad Student Life

California Institute of Technology
Board of Trustees Meeting
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Good Afternoon, Trustees.

We would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. Caltech is a very special place for graduate students and we're here to talk to you about how we can help maintain the environment that brought us here.

Outline

- ✧ Defining grad students and their reality
- ✧ Concerns of graduate students
- ✧ The importance of communication
- ✧ Thoughts for the future
- ✧ Questions and answers



As an outline, we'd like to begin by examining what the role of a Caltech grad student is, the expectations of grad students upon entering Caltech and the reality we face during our careers here. We will then put forward some ideas, hoping that this will become an on-going dialogue between the trustees and the grad students. We have left a few moments of time at the end to answer your questions.

Graduate Students

- ✧ Largest constituent of Caltech
 - ✧ Students, but not undergraduates
 - ✧ Researchers, but not employees
- ✧ Vital contribution to Caltech
 - ✧ Foundation of innovative research
 - ✧ Educators
 - ✧ Future alumni



We are the largest single group at Caltech, though at times, the role of a grad student is quite ambiguous. Unlike undergraduate students, most of our education does not occur through lectures but through the work that we do. Grad students are researchers, but we are not employees. We have difficulties finding our niche on campus, because our concerns, as a whole, are different than those of any other group here.

We provide vital contributions to the community. Our work is the foundation of the innovative research that goes on here. We are educators, for each other and for the undergrads. We are diverse in age, national origin, ethnicity, religion and socioeconomic background. Many of us move on to become scientists at major institutes and universities and help perpetuate the reputation of Caltech as a leading research and educational establishment.

Grad Student Expectations

- ✧ Participation in cutting-edge research
- ✧ World-class education
- ✧ Student-friendly atmosphere

“Caltech is a haven for research. It takes everything else that interferes in the outside world out of our way and lets us do what we do best... lately, the outside world has been creeping in far too often.”

-2nd year graduate student in Mechanical Engineering



Why do graduate students decide to come here? Prospective students are searching for cutting edge research opportunities and a world class education. Graduate students can work with faculty of exceptional quality at many universities and are actively recruited to other schools with offers of higher take-home stipends. What puts Caltech over the top is its reputation for a student-friendly environment. One graduate student has said, “Caltech is a haven for research....It takes everything else that interferes in the outside world out of our way and lets us do what we do best...” Unfortunately, this haven isn’t what all grad students find upon arrival. As the student goes on to say, “lately, the outside world has been creeping in far too often.”

Graduate students come to Caltech because it is a special place and we are here today because we are committed to preserving its uniqueness. Now, Chip will discuss some concrete concerns of the student body.

Communication !!!

✧ Students are kept in the dark regarding important decisions

- ✧ Lack of information leads to distrust
- ✧ Students do not feel they are an Institute priority
- ✧ Insufficient mechanisms to include student input

“We are more concerned about the way in which these decisions are being made and the lack of concern for the citizens of the Caltech community.”

-3rd year graduate student in Chemistry



The past year has been a difficult one for students. The recent round of budget cuts to correct Caltech's deficit has led to campus-wide belt tightening. As different administrative units search for ways to cut their costs, they have begun to charge students for services that traditionally have been free. While the individual fees are modest, we fear that they indicate a deterioration of the student friendly atmosphere.

As this quote points out, students were not as concerned about the cuts as they were about the manner in which they were implemented. Students were rarely, if ever, notified that changes were being considered, nor were they given an opportunity to provide input on how the cuts could be implemented to minimize their impact. In some cases, students were not even notified after decisions had been made. While there may have been sound motivations behind the administration's choices, these were rarely communicated to students. This led many students to distrust the motives of the administration and left them questioning whether graduate students were truly an Institute priority.

There is no one person or group to blame for this breakdown in communication. There are currently insufficient mechanisms in place to ensure that students are involved in the dialogue at an early stage. Different administrative units are left to set their own policies, often without realizing the effect they will have on students.

Health Care

- ✧ Current coverage is excellent for students
 - ✧ Health plan used to be strong selling point
 - ✧ Our coverage is under siege
- ✧ Dependent health insurance
 - ✧ Caltech plan completely unaffordable (> \$3000/year)
 - ✧ Stopgap measure instituted to help pay outside carrier

“...the upper administration is approaching this from a \$-not-people point of view.”

-6th year graduate student in Physics



Health care is critical in helping students to “flourish, not just survive.” For years, the student health plan has been seen as one of Caltech's strongest points. The health plan serves to boost morale by providing concrete proof of Caltech's commitment to its students.

That all changed last August, when student benefits were suddenly and unexpectedly cut. In a sign of things to come, no warning was given nor was student input solicited. Although the actual changes were modest, there were strong signs that further cuts were planned. Eventually, students were given a voice in the process; however, the health-care program is still under siege.

While the health-care plan for individual students has traditionally been very strong, health insurance for dependents has been virtually nonexistent. Dependents are allowed to join the Caltech health plan, but the high cost puts it well beyond most students' budgets. To date, the only workable solution has been a stopgap program in which the Dean's office reimburses individual students for part of the cost of dependent coverage.

Housing

❖ On-campus housing shortage

- ❖ Students are forced off campus by lottery
- ❖ There is a 1.5% vacancy rate in Pasadena
 - ❖ Rental costs have risen by > 40% over 8 years
 - ❖ Stipends have increased by only 23%
- ❖ Time spent moving decreases productivity

“I was torn between Caltech and Stanford. I only decided to go here because of the availability and affordability of housing.”

-5th year graduate student



Housing is another major concern for graduate students. For the last three years, demand has exceeded the supply of on campus housing, leading to a housing lottery. Losers are forced to move off campus into an increasingly hostile housing market. Vacancy rates in Pasadena are 1.5% or less, which has driven up rental prices beyond the budget of most graduate students. According to a study performed by the Graduate Dean's office, over the last 8 years, rental prices in Pasadena increased by more than 40%, whereas graduate stipends have increased by only 23%. To make matters even worse, very little affordable housing can be found within walking distance of Caltech. Therefore, students who move off-campus must bear the additional costs of owning a car.

In addition to straining students' financial resources, the lack of housing decreases their productivity. Finding affordable housing often requires weeks of intense searching, and the rigors of moving obviously decrease the time and energy that students can devote to their research.

It is often believed that increasing fellowships can offset some of student's financial burdens. Fellowships provide very little benefit to students. For the most part, students with fellowships earn only 5-10% more than they would on a regular stipend. Most of the money goes to offset the advisor's costs for supporting the students. Thus, advisers, not students, are the primary beneficiary of fellowships.

Diversity

✧ Women and minorities

- ✧ Positive awareness, but no direct impact yet
- ✧ Insufficient numbers to build a true community
 - ✧ Lack of mentors among faculty and staff
 - ✧ Current students advise prospective students not to come

✧ International students

- ✧ No statement of support for the community since 9/11



Recently, Caltech has made progress towards achieving its diversity goals through the creation of the President's Diversity Fund and the appointment of a Special Assistant to the President to address Minority Affairs. These efforts have increased campus awareness, although concrete results have not yet been realized. Support for underrepresented students is mixed, and the simple truth is that there are insufficient numbers to build a true community, particularly among minorities. Citing these factors, women and minorities often advise prospective students belonging to underrepresented groups not to come to Caltech.

International students also contribute significantly to Caltech's diversity, but they often feel that their needs are not adequately addressed. Many are disturbed that there has been no institutional statement of support for international students in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks.

Family Life

❖ Child care

- ❖ The Caltech Child Center is ~\$900 a month
- ❖ Average stipend is only ~\$1600

❖ Maternity leave

- ❖ No Institute policy or funding
- ❖ Currently in hands of advisor

“I was offered larger stipends by every other school. Two of them also offered to pay all or most of the health insurance costs for my family.”

-1st year graduate student in Chemistry



Another aspect of Caltech's diversity consists of an increasing number of graduate students who arrive with families or choose to have children during graduate school. While Caltech has attempted to implement family-friendly policies for faculty and staff, graduate students are often left out of the equation.

It can be difficult to support a family on only 20,000 dollars per year or less. This problem is compounded for international students, since immigration law often prohibits their spouses from working.

Also, Caltech currently has no policy regarding maternity leave for graduate students, and there is no Institute funding to support students on leave. Therefore, individual students and advisers are left to search for a workable and affordable solution on their own. Unfortunately, as one female graduate student pointed out, that situation creates a legitimate reason for advisers to prefer male graduate students to female ones.

Day-care represents another challenge. Although graduate students are eligible to enroll their children at the family care center, the cost is prohibitively high. No significant Caltech funding exists to help offset these costs.

Standards

- ✧ Extreme variation of student experiences
 - ✧ Mentoring relationship
 - ✧ Classroom teaching
- ✧ Processes opaque to students
 - ✧ Reliance on word-of-mouth communication



There is a lack of minimum standards that leads to extreme variation in student experiences. The quality of classroom education, the degree of involvement of one's advisor and the stipend a student receives are all functions of academic division and advisor choice. Some members of the community feel that this allows for flexibility. However, others find these differences frustrating and unfair. The current system makes many processes opaque to students, and they are forced to rely on word of mouth communication.

During graduate school, students expect to learn how to navigate in the world of scientific research from their faculty advisors. Ideally, graduate students would receive the majority of advising and mentoring from their faculty committee; however, in practice this places a large amount of responsibility with individual faculty members who are sometimes either not interested or simply too busy to provide the necessary interaction.

Effect on Morale

- ❖ Made to feel that we are a burden on resources
- ❖ Second thoughts about recommending Caltech
 - ❖ Most current students feel they made the right choice
 - ❖ Concerned about future of Caltech
 - ❖ Advising prospective students not to come

“I simply couldn't in good conscience recommend Caltech. 'It's a great place, and some people love it here, but for the most part people are unhappy. You should probably go to Harvard.'”

-Advice of graduate TA to prospective undergraduate



All of these issues have combined to have a significant negative effect on student morale. Students often hear that they are simply a burden on resources. It seems that there is little recognition of the important contributions that students make, both to the campus community and to Caltech's success.

While most students are basically happy with their choice to come to Caltech, they are concerned with the changes that have occurred recently, and they are doubtful about the direction in which the campus seems to be heading. This has caused many people who were initially enthusiastic about attending Caltech to have second thoughts about recommending it to prospective students. As this quote illustrates, some graduate teaching assistants have come to feel that Caltech does not properly address the educational needs of its undergraduates, and I have heard of similar advice being given to prospective graduate students.

Now I would like to turn things over to Mike, who will talk to you about ways to restore students' confidence in this great institution.

Solution = Communication

- ✧ Simple steps can be taken to create engagement
 - ✧ Inform students of issues BEFORE decisions are made
 - ✧ Request representatives for student-related committees
 - ✧ Invite students for regular meetings with Trustees



The single most important thing that Caltech can do to restore student confidence is to improve communication with students. Traditionally, students have had to take all of the initiative in creating communication. We would like Caltech's administration and faculty to take some initiative and start actively seeking our input on student-related issues. We really appreciate the Board of Trustees inviting us to talk today, and we hope that this is the beginning of an on-going dialogue.

Increasing communication on campus will require keeping students informed so that we can contribute to discussions before decisions are made. It also requires asking for student representatives to serve on relevant committees.

Solution = Communication

- ✧ Increased communication benefits the entire campus community
 - ✧ Students are motivated and have a history of finding creative solutions
 - ✧ We help to solve problems with minimal negative impact for the whole community



Graduate students can help to solve campus problems, and we want the opportunity to do just that. We are reasonable, and we do understand that sometimes, tough decisions have to be made. Our input has already improved many areas of campus life. We initiated lab reviews to provide valuable feedback to the faculty. The security office has solicited input from us that has improved safety on campus, and we have set guidelines for the housing lottery that address the housing shortage in the fairest possible way.

The bottom line is that we are excellent problem solvers and our contributions to Caltech can be extended beyond the lab.

Suggestions

- ✧ Allow students to focus on research
 - ✧ Build additional affordable student housing
 - ✧ Increase minimum stipend
 - ✧ Retain the current health plan
- ✧ Actively fund and support directed recruiting
- ✧ Create family-friendly policies
 - ✧ Maternity leave
 - ✧ Child care
 - ✧ Dependent insurance



We would like to ask the board for help to address the issues that we can't take care of by ourselves. We'd like to increase morale and productivity on campus by removing concerns about housing and finances. Our time is more valuable to Caltech spent on research than on worrying about where we are going to live next year. Caltech can alleviate the housing shortage by building or leasing additional student housing, and can reduce frustration by keeping students informed of the measures that are being taken.

Caltech can ensure an adequate standard of living by increasing the minimum stipend to protect those students whose departments are less than generous. And we would like Caltech to find a way to retain our current health insurance coverage.

The issue of diversity on campus can be addressed through active recruiting. We need to break down the negative stereotypes that prevent some exceptional women and minority students from even considering Caltech for grad school.

Finally, Caltech needs to give more consideration to families. A maternity leave policy needs to be established so that students no longer have to rely on the goodwill of their advisors. And affordable child care and health care for dependents must be made available.

A Fair Trade?

- ✧ Students make significant commitments
 - ✧ We work long hours for low pay (~\$20k / year)
 - ✧ Most students spend 6+ years here
 - ✧ It is impractical to leave without negatively impacting future career
- ✧ We expect significant commitments in return
 - ✧ Education
 - ✧ Health insurance, housing and support for families
 - ✧ Dialogue between students and administration



To conclude, we want to point out that graduate students have made a significant, long-term commitment to Caltech. We work long hours for low pay, and we're often here for six or more years. In return we expect Caltech to make a commitment to our education and to support us financially by providing housing, health insurance, and family support. We aren't looking to get rich, but we do expect to receive enough support that we can focus on our education.

The Trustees are the steering force for Caltech. We ask for your support to improve student morale and quality of life, both of which are necessary for the success of this institute.