

# A Reflection on Student Leadership

Lily Coffin  
Opinion

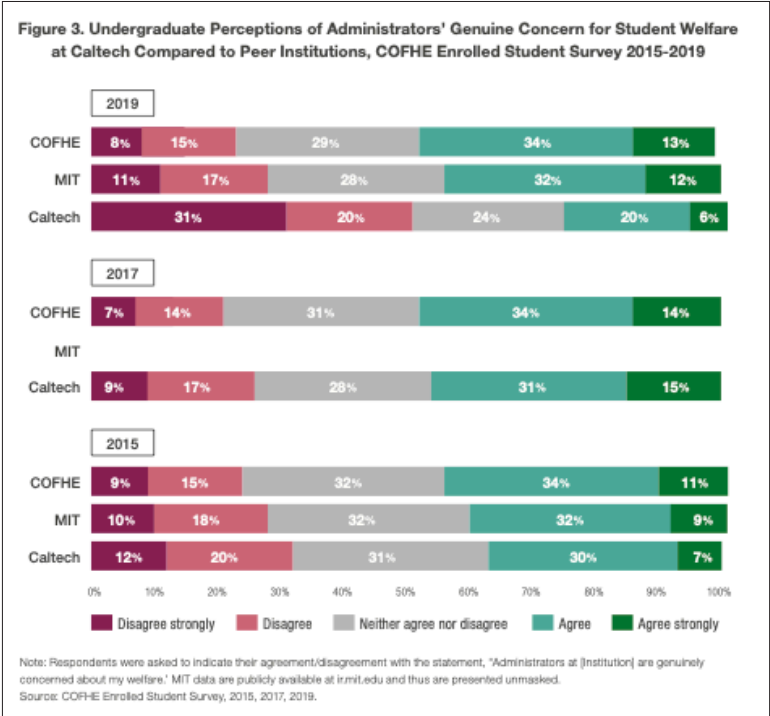
In the two years that I have been a Social Director for Ricketts Hovse, I have had more than a few opportunities to explore undergraduate student-administration relationships at Caltech and where they have broken down. I have watched my peers in student leadership be ignored and shut down by members of administration. As a frosh, I asked my seniors what could be done to be heard; to get our events back; to improve our relationship with admin; and I was told that they already tried, and it could not be done. I have always resented the defeat in my fellow student leaders' voices when I hear their frustration, but I have certainly shared it.

Ricketts boasts a tradition of discomfort during our annual Rotation activities. Because it's funny, and that is our culture. We throw a bunch of food at you. We make a lot of noise. And then we perform the most confusing, stupid, disgusting skits you can imagine. This is certainly not everyone's cup of tea, and it's not supposed to be. That's why there are eight houses with eight different cultures.

This year, when we proposed my favorite skit, "Nature is Beautiful," it was denied approval for no good reason by the Office of Student Experience (OSE). Let me tell you a bit about this skit. Members of Ricketts Hovse (Skurves) dress in random animal costumes we have collected over the years and prance around to The Circle of Life from The Lion King while somebody narrates about the beauty and cruelty of nature. This culminates in the reveal of a big bird's nest in the middle of the room where Skurves in bathing suits have been covered in maple syrup and feathers to look like birds. There is a momma bird and two baby birds. Mama bird chews something and then regurgitates it into baby birds' mouths, like God intended. The skit is objectively kind of gross. In an approval meeting that was held in our lounge, a member of OSE told me this is not allowed because "we have to follow community standards, not just Ricketts' standards." Somehow OSE has been allowed the power of cultural authority over the house system, and over and over again in my time here I have watched them chip away at the pieces they don't like.

This is just one example of many. We used to have a skit called "Bug Fight" where Skurves dressed as bugs would wrestle, and we would pretend to take bets. This was determined to be too violent and was not approved unless we replaced the wrestling with rock, paper, scissors. That's lame, so we canceled it.

The "Joyous Celebration" skit is a lot of fun—we would choose a prefrosh at random and write their name on a birthday cake and banner. Then we'd surprise them with a birthday party (it was not their birthday). Someone would bring out the cake and drop it on the floor, and then we would all yell at them. But at least the piñata was still good. The piñata was full of spaghetti. This is absolute nonsense, but we love this skit. The Skurves get up and eat all of the cake and spaghetti off of the floor, but despite the fact that



the food is not wasted, the skit was axed this year, evidently because it was in violation of a new food waste ban.

We used to have a frosh welcome event called Frosh Wash. My sophomore year was the last time we were allowed to host the event. The idea was to cleanse the new frosh before they entered the Hovse. We would line up the new initiates, and one by one, they approached the throne of the Ricketts Hovse President (a lifeguard chair secured to a ladder). Skurves would yell chaotically at them to spin around, to do a push-up, to kiss a bust of Hovse benefactor L.D. Ricketts' head, and to chant some meaningless strings of words. Water balloons were thrown and people were sprayed with the hose. Everything that we did at that year's Frosh Wash was approved beforehand. A Residential Life Coordinator (RLC) from OSE was even present at the event.

However, that year, a complaint was made to the Deans' Office by an individual frosh who was uncomfortable. I think this is fair, and in light of the complaint we were happy to rework the event with some input from administration. Instead, we were told we were never allowed to host anything resembling the event again. Despite generations of frosh kissing that bust on the day they were cursed with their Ricketts Hovse membership, we were told even that was not allowed

to carry over to the new welcome event we were planning. To this day we have not been able to recover this tradition, and for the life of me I cannot understand what we did that warranted such a comprehensive ban.

During Winter Term 2022, Ricketts held a lingerie party. Ricketts has always had a strong culture of body positivity. However, the RLCs decided that we needed to be punished for dancing in the courtyard in our underwear, so the Hovse was placed on social probation for the remainder of the term. The justification was that being in our undergarments in the courtyard was a violation of the Caltech Code of Conduct, because other people might feel pressured to remove their clothes as well, constituting an unwelcoming environment. This comes from a fundamental misunderstanding of Ricketts culture. We don't pressure people to participate in anything. We communicate openly about expectations of decorum and respect, and encourage people to participate in whatever capacity they feel most comfortable. If they are uncomfortable in general, they have the right to not participate at all. Photos of Skurves doing the exact same thing in the past have been published in the Tech! This was a long-standing tradition, there was no complaint made by a student, and for some reason we received the maximum punishment. Our Hovse leadership

tried to schedule a meeting with the administration to argue these charges, and we were met with a hard wall of dismissal. Naughty Skurves, don't you know that you are naughty?

The houses, in my opinion, are the antithesis of uniformity. We should be allowed to express ourselves. We should be able to make these Hovses feel like home. There is room for art within the current Housing policies. There is room for diversity within the Code of Conduct. But all too often during my time here, it has felt like our individuality has been violated. For example, consider the furniture that was involuntarily replaced for us last term. To be fair, it was a nice gesture. I am grateful that the Housing Office used some money to renovate our spaces. The carpet did need to be replaced. But we could have picked it out for ourselves. It did not need to be all the same. It did not need to be indistinguishable from the corporate purgatory of every conference room and office space on campus. The new furniture does not match. The space was distinct before, and now it is plain.

Why aren't we allowed to paint new murals in the dining halls and lounge spaces? Why were we strictly forbidden from having a kiddie pool in the Ricketts courtyard for a Lazy Sunday social? Why can't we throw food (and respectfully clean up after ourselves)? Why are Hovse storage spaces rou-

The California Tech

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF  
Michael Gutierrez

MANAGING EDITORS  
Maxwell Montemayor  
Lilia Arrizabalga  
Victoria Davis

LAYOUT  
Alanna Yelland

STAFF WRITERS  
Katelyn Sulett  
Ai-Dan Le  
Elizabeth Field  
Skye Ruedas  
Sascha Goldsmith  
Chi Cap

PUZZLE MASTERS  
Enric Adillon  
Madeline Hicks

COMICS  
Eloise Zeng

BUSINESS MANAGER  
Jonathan Booker

ADVISOR  
Richard Kipling

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](mailto: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](mailto:tech@caltech.edu).

tinely searched? Why can't we shoot a potato cannon during Rotation? Why does it seem like some houses are held to different standards by the administration? Why can't we decide when it is time to replace our furniture? What happened to the faculty role of Master of Student Housing (MOSH)? Was anything learned from the 2022 Caltech Co-Curricular Group Report?

Where is the accountability?

Ricketts is my home. You may not understand what it is we do here, but do you think OSE should get to decide what we can and cannot do within the walls of our own houses? Have you seen the ways they chip away at your own culture? You may think Ricketts is a dark stain on this otherwise prestigious institute (as do we all), but surely you must be grateful that we are over here instead of inside your walls. There is a place for everyone. Even now, Caltech is a place with a vibrant culture because students care a lot and are given the freedom to do great things. Houses are student run because Caltech students are competent enough to self-govern.

The frustration of student leaders across campus is centered around having things taken from us without explanation or discussion. I don't know how to fix this. It won't be my problem after I graduate. I think a good place to start is this conversation.