commitment and the colleges

By RALPH KNOOHUIZEN
Hanszen College President
The college system at Rice is emerging into a regular tradition, an amazing record for an institution which has enjoyed an existence of only eight years.

Its primary claim to traditional status is that it has proved almost invaluable to the university, not only for purposes of discipline and organization but because it has provided a source of spirit to a community where the tendency is toward apathy for anything outside the intellectual grind.

I am the first to realize that I’m treading on rather dangerous ground in attempting to criticize a Tradition, but I’ve decided to risk social equilibrium in the interest of improving the existing system.

This seems particularly timely right now, since there is a general feeling in the air that the college system has virtually passed through its incipient or experimental stage and will soon take on permanent patterns of development.

To put it bluntly, the Achilles heel of our college system is a failure to gain any form of commitment to the college from its members.

As a result, everything is put on a strictly voluntary basis and any feeling of obligation to serve the college or take part in its activities must be self-generated. The only source of obligation is the token financial commitment that the $15 college dues represent.

Therefore, it’s no wonder that we are so often confronted with the problem of the college not having the support of all its members.

In searching for a solution to this problem, I attempted to ascertain how other universities with systems like our own handled the same situation.

A study of the different methods pointed to two possible answers: (1) raising the college dues and (2) setting up some method whereby the constituents of the university could select their own college. The first of the two ideas has merit, because if the dues were $50 instead of $15, college members would no doubt feel more obliged to participate in order to get their money’s worth.

However, this is an approach that would meet limited appeal in the rather sophisticated atmosphere found here at the University. (In other words, people here are just too smart for anyone to pull that on them.)

The second alternative appears to have real merit, and it is this one that probably should be thoroughly explored. One eastern university, for example, has a system identical to ours except that it has a freshman dorm in which everyone lives during his first year.

Then, at the start of the sophomore year, each individual chooses the college with which he wishes to affiliate, and this choice in effect creates a feeling of commitment. This commitment provides the college with a basis for asking a college member to help with its program and for expecting participation.

The degree of success that has been enjoyed thus far at Rice can be directly credited to the voluntary efforts various college members who, in recognition of the magnitude of things that a well-run college can do for them, have thus developed their own personal sense of obligation and commitment. This is commendable, but their efforts have always been partially negated by the inertia of the members whom this feeling hasn’t reached. Hopefully, we will be able to solve the problem of getting a commitment from these other people so that the full possibilities of the college system can be realized.