Inches at a time

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There can be no denying that the College System on the Rice campus has not begun to live up to the potential that any intelligent member of the community can foresee for it. On the other hand, potential does exist, progress has been made, and to think of abandoning the system at this very early stage of its development seems ludicrous to me.

I stress the word early because eight years in the life of an institution such as Rice or any phase of that institution's life is a very short time indeed.

Very understandably, some of those most closely associated with the functioning of the Colleges are disappointed, frustrated, and even bitter at this point in their term of office. Before considering some of their specific complaints, I would simply say that at this time of year their attitude of frustration is neither uncommon nor totally unwelcome. For with this feeling frequently comes some of the clearest thinking about the source of concern. I think the statements by two of the College presidents in last week's Thresher illustrate this clear thinking.

Allegations Are True

College spirit consumes very few of any given College's membership. True. All the Colleges are severely hampered by lack of funds. True. College plans and programs, made in good faith and after long and serious consideration, are sometimes met with lack of interest and an attitude of "let the children have their fun" on the part of the officials to whom they are presented. True. These allegations and many more like them are all true.

As has been suggested over and over again, the ideal answer to the situation is a complete reorganization in the structure of the University. But to use the needed change in structure and the fact that it hasn't occurred—nor is it likely to occur in the next few years—as an excuse or reason to abandon the College System is ridiculous.

Many of these allegations involve extension or improvement of physical plant. Entirely too much emphasis is placed on the physical limitations within the Colleges. Physical terms are apt for defining a dormitory, but somewhat inappropriate in the definition of a College. Sadly neglected by the Colleges is their potential in inter-personal communications, fulfillment of the individual's psychological and emotional needs. Here, the opportunities for College development are literally boundless, yet College leaders, myself included, have been singularly slow in pursuing these channels of growth.

From College Life Alone

Rice University provides this training not in the classroom but in the Colleges. Every College member, whether he is imbued with college spirit or not, gains from College life something that no dormitory could provide. Catch almost any Rice student in an unguarded moment, preferably off campus, more preferably at home, and I think you will find that he thinks the college has given him something valuable—something he would otherwise be without.

Before being accused of not knowing whereof I speak, let me add that I have been in the position of working in the seemingly hopeless cause of the College System on this campus. At this time last year I felt much the same way as Mr. King and Mr. Morrison apparently feel now.

Realistic Thinking

I was deflated, frustrated, and at times extremely bitter. And I felt terribly alone and unsung for all my efforts and sleepless nights. But I was also forced to think in realistic terms of what was feasible within the context of the University.

I have seen some of the things for which we agitated last year implemented this year. I have seen other plans abandoned or laid aside for some future resurrection. But I have seen progress, measured in inches, perhaps, rather than the miles we had hoped for, but progress all the same.

The College System is far from stagnating yet. As long as this is true, and as long as there are eager, fresh newcomers seeking the opportunity to serve in their Colleges, the system is worth preserving, even fighting for on this campus.

One can't expect to build the traditions and autonomy of the colleges of Oxford or Cambridge in eight years. One can expect to find the opportunity within the Rice Colleges to achieve the maturity to realize that what we have is worth preserving and improving, albeit only by inches.