

# 'An Ethos of Excellence'

The University of Chicago cares very much about intellectual challenge and achievement, and very little about making an impression

It's Tuesday night at 10:30, and we're touring the most popular hangout at the University of Chicago: the Regenstein Library. Everywhere you go throughout the five floors of "the Reg," you can see Chicago students doing what they most enjoy doing, upwards of 16 hours a day, every day—studying. *Everyone* at the University of Chicago, it seems, goes to the library every night. And that's why the Reg is more than a quiet place to learn: it's the social hub of the school as well. If economics junior Christina Tavares expects to see her boyfriend, she must go to the Reg—"second floor, first cubicle on the right"—not that she wouldn't be there most nights anyway. When folks do party, it's usually in the form of brief respites at nearby fraternities—and even these restrained festivities are truthfully called "study breaks."

But then, the University of Chicago has always been dedicated to intellectual rigor and scholarly success. Funded at its inception with a few of the Rockefeller millions, the school opened on Oct. 1, 1892, with eight former college presidents on its faculty. (Today nearly 100 Chicago alums are presidents or chancellors at other U.S. colleges and universities.) Thus far, 54 people affiliated with the school—as faculty, students and/or researchers—have won Nobel Prizes. Sometimes the profusion of laureates can be dizzying. When physics Prof. James Cronin won his Nobel in 1980, for example, he asked that his press conference be scheduled around a class that he was taking—from fellow physics Prof. Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar, who won *his* Nobel three years later.

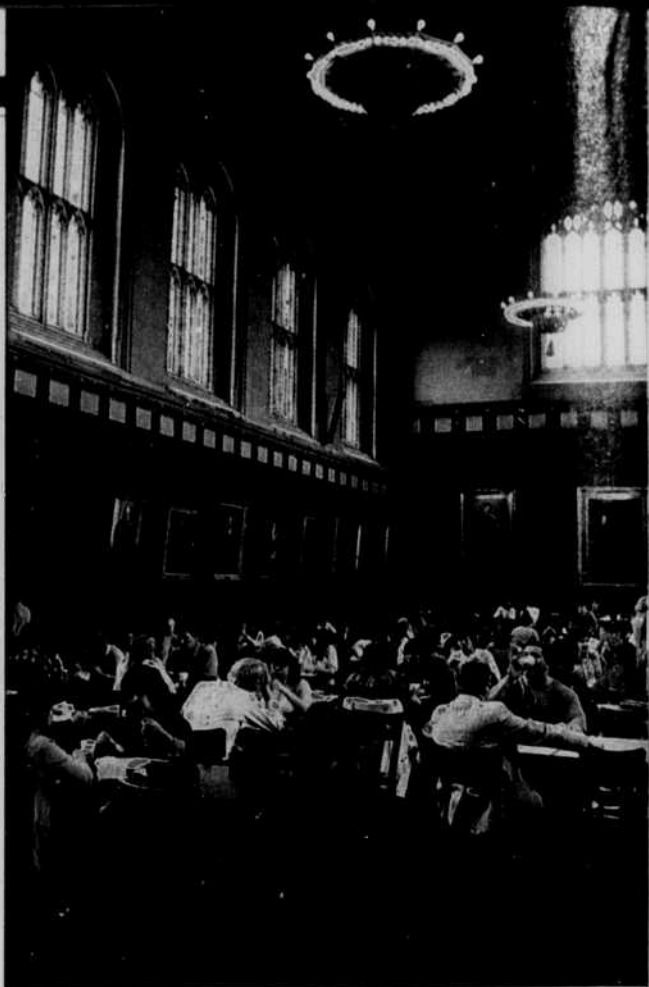
**Schools of thought:** As any history major can tell you, the nuclear age was ushered in at Chicago in 1942 with the first man-made nuclear chain reaction. Chicago also developed sociology and political science as scholarly disciplines. Moreover, the university has spread its influence so widely that "Chicago schools" of thought now flourish in several areas of study, including economics and law. "There is an ethos of excellence here," says University of Chicago president Hanna Gray. "Our major goal is to maintain that."

Chicago was one of the first schools in the country to be conceived as a true university, dedicated to research and a balance among graduate, professional and undergraduate studies. Today that balance still holds: despite a nationwide decline in the number of graduate students, enrollments in the university's three areas—undergraduate (3,100 students), graduate (2,700) and professional (2,700)—remain roughly equal.

Nothing matters more at Chicago than the life of the mind. Significantly, the most intense campus event is strictly academic; each spring, in order to land the courses and teachers they desire, hundreds of students camp out overnight on the Sunday before registration. Heidi Cuesta, a senior in economics, remembers getting in line 21 hours ahead of time—and finding two people ahead of her. Was the wait worth it? "Yes," she says, "I got the class I wanted."

This dedication to academic achievement can sometimes seem fanatic. Students grumble that they pack a semester's worth of work into each of their 10-week quarters. Not surprisingly, the combination of striving students and demanding professors often produces strain. Many students say they have trouble relaxing. "There's always this pervasive sense of guilt—that you should be doing something," says Angela An-

**'Intense about the right things':** Gothic atmosphere in Hutchinson Commons (top), camping out to get a choice class, fraternizing in the Regenstein Library.



STEVE LEONARD



JIM WRIGHT



STEVE LEONARD