

Jackson Shares Vision of Diversity, Leadership

MIT Graduate and RPI President to Speak at MLK Breakfast

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STAFF REPORTERS

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute welcomed its new president Dr. Shirley A. Jackson '68 to campus this fall. Jackson is an MIT alum and the first African-American woman to graduate from MIT.



She brings with her a vision of leadership and diversity to improve the lives of RPI students.

Her aspirations for the university not only apply to the current students and faculty but extends to the alumni and the Rensselaer community. She will bring this message to MIT on Thursday when she speaks at MIT's 26th Annual Celebration of the Life and Legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Jackson, in a recent interview, said her speech will "be about leadership, opportunity -- we create opportunity; where we are in terms of science, technology and its impact on society, and what the importance is of creating opportunity for diverse groups, it requires going about things in a different way and looking at people in a different way."

This commitment to diversity and strong leadership extends to her professional life as well. She has had to determine "what is my responsibility as a leader of an institution and derivatively, what then do I think leadership means in other contexts. Depending upon the context and how one exercises leadership. I believe it makes a difference."

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Historical view allows reflection

Jackson's education was framed by notable events in Dr. King's life. She was in high school when the March on Washington and King's "I have a dream" speech took place.

"In the spring of my senior year [at MIT] Martin Luther King was killed. So it was interesting, on the front end when I was still in high school, and on the back end when I was graduating. Things relating to Dr. King and the civil rights movement had a big impact," said Jackson.

Inspired by these national events, Jackson decided to stay at MIT to get her doctorate because she felt she could make a difference in the community. Jackson wanted "to make it more open and hospitable to minority students and women."

Her successes academically and professionally have led her to be recognized as both a talented scientist and leader, but also as the first African-American woman to do many things, including getting a degree (bachelors and PhD) from MIT and leading a national research university.

Jackson reflected, "I know that I am introduced as or written up as the first African-American to do this or that. I used to react to that -- I mean that is not the sum and total of what I am. I guess as I have gotten older I have gotten more philosophical and if it's motivating to some young person who might otherwise think he or she would not have the opportunity to do something extraordinary, then that's good."

At the same time there are doubts brought about by these associations. "It's the year 2000, and it's still the first African-American to do this or that, to the point that it is still worth talking about," said Jackson, "as opposed to 'she was chairman of the nuclear regulatory commission and she totally transformed the agency' or did research in this or that, it probably says something about where we are still at in our history in this country. And so on the one hand, it is a mark of progress, on the other, it shows us still how far we have to go."

Jackson relates this to the issues she faced as a student. "We are at a funny place in our history in this country -- things are more global than they have ever been -- but at the same time we are still discussing some of the same old issues."

Goal of leadership and diversity at RPI

Jackson has taken her interest in promoting diversity and leadership seriously in her new role as president of RPI. "I think it is important that young people make a transition from the kind of focus they have when they are high school students to becoming informed participative adults." said Jackson. "And that means that they need to learn about the world, to reach out, to understand people of different cultures and even different parts of this country."

An awareness and appreciation of diversity will also help build stronger leaders. "You can't be a leader, especially in today's world, if you don't have a global view." Engaged student can defy the apathy which is evident on campuses across the country, Jackson said.

One of the solutions Jackson has developed at RPI is involving students in the community of Troy. "I think that more and more higher education institutions are finding that, if they are serious about diversity or even if they want to make a difference in terms of the preparation of any of their students, they have to be engaged in K-12 education."

Jackson pointed out that although many university professors have relationships with companies or research laboratories in their summer months, high school teachers do not remain engaged in such a manner. "They sometimes go off in the summers and do things, but they don't relate to keeping an intellectual interest in their fields." This is one area in which she would like RPI to connect with the outside community.

Other changes imminent at RPI

In the six months since Jackson joined the RPI community, she has spent much time assessing "where it's challenges are and it's opportunities are; what it's good at and where we could strengthen."

Thus she has engaged the campus in a discussion she termed the “Rennesselear Plan” based on work done by the school’s founder, and the fact that “Rennesselear has always had a strong focus on undergraduate teaching and involving undergraduates in the research and scholarship of faculty.”

Jackson posed five questions to the RPI community probing the definition and importance of the intellectual core, the leadership role of RPI, and the commitments and sacrifices the school is willing to make.

After 20 sessions held around campus to discuss these issues, a plan was released by the committee leading the program. Jackson said that they are currently “revising the plan based on input from faculty, students, staff, alumni, and friends of the university.”

In addition to improving research endeavors on campus, Jackson is looking to “Improve the quality life on the campus, both in terms of the physical facilities as well as services.”

MIT was a challenge and opportunity

Jackson said, “I’ve had challenges, but I’ve had a lot of opportunity and I’ve always tried to take advantage of it and not be overwhelmed by a hard time or bitterness.”

There were only five African-American students in the MIT class of 1968; two of which were female. Jackson lived in McCormick Hall and spent most of her time during her freshman year concentrating on her studies.

Many of the students were unfriendly towards her. “I could tell you a lot of terrible stories,” said Jackson. “I was spit on, I was shot at, I was chased.”

Throughout her experience at MIT, she “always had a couple points of view,” said Jackson. “I knew how much it meant to my parents for me to be at MIT ... [and] I felt that in spite of all the unfriendliness at the time, it still was an opportunity.”

To distract her from the unfriendliness of a large part of the MIT community, Jackson spent time volunteering at the Boston City Hospital. "I felt that if I was given that opportunity and I still had my health, I should always try to do something for someone else," said Jackson. "[Volunteering] kept me away from thinking how hard it was for me -- because in the end, I was still at MIT, I had a scholarship, and I was doing well."

At the Boston City Hospital, Jackson worked with young children with various ailments including orthopedic injuries, leukemia and in one instance a child "who was born with really no face. When you work with these kids ... it teaches you something about suffering."

While she was a student, the United States was engaged in the civil rights movement and the vietnam war. "All of these things, one degree or another, affected MIT and schools in Boston," said Jackson.

"There were a lot of marches, sit-ins, taking over of administrators offices. I never did any of that," said Jackson.

"I've always been conservative in a way."

Although Jackson wasn't one to participate in some of the conventional forms of protest, she contributed a significant amount to change minority relations at MIT. She was one of the founders of the Black Student Union at MIT and this organization brought the demands of minority students to the MIT administration. These demands related to recruitment and retention of minority students.

As a result of these demands, the administration created the 'Task force on Educational Opportunity.'

"We used to meet every week for hours at a time hashing out the issues," said Jackson. "Some of these sessions were quite heated ... some of the African American students were quite upset by how they were being treated," said Jackson. "I always would just talk -- I never believed in just screaming and shouting. I would fight for what I thought was the right thing to do."

The result of these sessions are quite impressive. The following year 58 African-American students were accepted to

MIT and a prefreshman program for minority students was created. The program, named 'Project Interphase, is still around today and enrolls one-third of the incoming minority students for a seven week program during the summer.

Life after MIT proves fruitful

After receiving her doctorate in physics in 1973, Jackson left to work at Fermi Lab for two years. Between those two years she went to the European Center for Nuclear Research in Geneva Switzerland. "I really enjoyed being in Switzerland and thought about not coming back." However family ties and American nationalism brought her home.

Jackson then began a new track in her life. "Bell labs was hiring if they thought you were smart enough. So I went and gave a speech on Neutrino reactions, and they gave me a job"

At the same time, her interests did not lie only in the laboratory. "I was always interested in science, technology and public policy, so I had a number of appointments in the state of New Jersey" These positions included the Commissioner of the New Jersey Commission on Science and Technology, as well as appointments to the Governor's Economic Conference and Governor's Economic Master Plan Commission

Later she served on several corporate boards, including the Utility Public Service Enterprise Group, "which owned at that time five nuclear power plants." Jackson chaired nuclear oversight committee as a member of the board

"In some ways that played into my background of high-energy physics because essentially high-energy physics is an outgrowth of nuclear physics."

She also became involved with the Institute of Nuclear Power Operations after the Three Mile Island incident.

"Then one day in 1994 I got a from the White House" asking her to send them her resume. Jackson received a presidential appointment to be on the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, with the intent that she would assume the role of chairman. Her appointment was finally confirmed in April 1995.