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Diversity is critical issue before Institute

Denise Brehm, News Office

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In the last couple of decades, MIT has had mixed results in its efforts to increase diversity in the graduate student body and faculty, according to data presented at the Feb. 18 faculty meeting by the president, provost and chancellor. The provost asked for ideas on how to make faculty diversity one of the Institute's "core competencies."

"It is a cold, hard fact that there was a time when MIT was a clear leader in attracting women and minorities to science and engineering," said President Charles M. Vest. "I do not feel today that we can claim that same leadership position."

Vest said he hopes to gain consensus from the MIT community to move forward and accelerate efforts in this area, which he sees as MIT's "responsibility as one of the world's great institutions."

"I believe the education of all students in a university setting is improved when they are living and learning in a community of diversity in all its dimensions--intellectual interests, geographic backgrounds, race, gender, economic differences, gays and lesbians, and differing world views," said Vest.

Since 1980, MIT has seen steady growth in the number of women undergraduates at MIT, which has now leveled off at about 42 percent. Although growth in the percentage of women graduate students has been steady, it remains much lower (29 percent). The proportion of women faculty is lower still, but has steadily increased as well; women now comprise about 18 percent of the faculty.

With regard to underrepresented minorities, Vest noted that while there has been significant growth at the undergraduate level (now nearly 20 percent of the undergraduate student body), there has been very little growth in the number of minority faculty (just over 4 percent), or of minority graduate students (4.5 percent).

In 1970, Vest said, the number of women faculty members was roughly equal to the number of underrepresented minority faculty. Achieving real diversity at MIT, he said, will require leadership and perseverance--particularly as progress in some dimensions is met with resistance on the part of some

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special-interest organizations. He characterized the meeting's discussion as the beginning of an institutional dialogue that needs to continue at all levels.

Chancellor Phillip L. Clay saw "multidimensional bad news" in recruiting minority applicants for graduate school. The applicant rate is flat and the yield is falling, so enrollment numbers will decline, especially for African-Americans, he said. Admission and yield rates vary greatly among departments, so Clay is asking representatives of graduate programs across the Institute to get together over the next few weeks to share best practices in the interest of increasing the yield among the graduate students being admitted this spring.

"We need to incorporate the 'reach out and touch someone' approach of the undergraduate admissions office into our graduate admissions," Clay said. Graduate student recruitment and admissions are handled by departments, not centrally as with undergraduates.

Minority faculty recruitment is the "most focused challenge we have," Provost Robert A. Brown said. He described it as a "supply-side problem" that must be solved in part by increasing the number of minority graduate students at MIT. "The challenge may not only be with recruiting faculty, but in the lack of progress with recruiting graduate students," he said.

"The race and gender diversity of our faculty should mirror the diversity of the students we're trying to attract and, more generally, the people we interact with in our nation and the world," Brown said.

Faculty members from a variety of departments spoke about the importance of engaging faculty and students in recruiting graduate students and faculty to their programs, and of the need for central support for these efforts. Some discussion focused on speeding up the graduate admissions process, on the importance of finding a national forum at the college level for graduate student recruitment, and the desirability of retaining graduate students once they begin a program. Affordable, local housing for junior faculty also was mentioned as an important recruitment aid.

In other business at the faculty meeting, the faculty approved a proposal for a new graduate degree (Ph.D.) in computational and systems biology. The Institute-wide degree program will be administered by the three founding units: the Department of Biology, the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, and the Biological Engineering Division (see [related story](#)).

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