

## **A second plea for help to end racism at MIT**

Dear faculty, staff, students and friends at MIT and abroad:

This open letter has a number of purposes. First, I wish to thank those of you who have offered, so graciously, your support, your counsel, your encouragement, your activism, and in some cases your genuine reservations for the protest path that I started on December 19, 2007. Your concerned engagement has lifted my spirit and my hope that change can come, that the grip of racism on American life can one day not only be loosened, but also eventually eliminated completely.

A second purpose is to share with all that, thus far, MIT's upper administration has not addressed my protest demands. Therefore, I continue with the plan for the next phase of my protest. Unless MIT's upper administration addresses these demands, I will begin a hunger strike at 9 AM on the morning of Monday February 5, 2007 outside of the offices of President Susan Hockfield and Provost Rafael Reif, Room 208 in Building 3 on MIT's campus. I will protest in person every morning in this location for as long my health allows it. Thereafter, I will continue my hunger strike even if I am unable to stand in person at the door of 3-208. I am hopeful that I will not have to stand alone and, when I am no longer able, that some among you will rise to stand in my stead. Racism must end at MIT.

Some of you may be aware that mine is not the first voice to call attention to entrenched racism at MIT. In September 1986, hardly a generation ago, then Dean of Student Affairs, Shirley M. McBay, chaired the Minority Student Issues Group that issued a report on "The Racial Climate on the MIT Campus." This report received national recognition, but cold resistance from MIT's upper administration. In the preface of the report, Dean McBay wrote,

"MIT must think anew about its policies and procedures for dealing with racism and racist behavior on its campus. It must reaffirm its intent to provide a supportive and non-hostile environment for all who study, live, and work here."

Dean McBay's clarion words still apply today, twenty years later.

The question must be asked whether changes in the degree of racial discrimination at MIT over the past twenty years reflect anything more than national trends. Has MIT led in redressing racism, or has it only reluctantly followed the limited pluralist changes in the greater American society? It is noteworthy that the McBay report did not consider racist practices in tenure promotion at MIT. MIT has not evaluated the role that racism plays in its abysmal record for tenured minority faculty. Instead, MIT takes the racist approach of throwing up the hands and shrugging the shoulders with the convenient excuse that there is a pipeline problem, when the actual barrier is racism that obstructs the end of the pipeline, a pipeline that is full of invisible tragic stories of racial discrimination. Racism is enabled and fostered by secret procedures; and tenure evaluation is one of the most cloaked processes in the Institute.

I discovered racism in my own tenure promotion case at MIT; but I am determined to shine a big bright searchlight on the racially-motivated human tragedy of career destruction and death in MIT's minority faculty pipeline. I protest not only for myself, but also for the many who were persecuted before and the many who might otherwise bear the injury of racism in the future. In ten years, when my daughters are attending universities like MIT, I want to see change. I want to see talented, hardworking minority faculty filling the ranks of tenured faculty based on their brilliance and industry, not still absent because of the capricious whims of faculty and high-level administrators who are motivated by racist ideologies.

### **Statement of Protest Demands**

On January 24, 2007, Provost Reif changed his plan to terminate my appointment on January 31, 2007. He extended it to June 30, 2007. However, he stated in his letter,

“This extension provides ample time to develop and implement a transition from MIT that allows you to continue to advance your professional career and provides an appropriate transition for those who currently work in your lab.”

Thus, he continues to obstruct my right to a fair and just hearing of my complaint that my tenure case was unfairly decided because of racial discrimination, conflict of interest, and improper actions on the part of members of the MIT faculty and the MIT Corporation.

The explanation for Provost Reif's persistent preemptory attitude that I should leave MIT before receiving a fair investigation will expose a rotten spot of racism in MIT's internal institutional policies regarding the hire and tenure evaluation of minority faculty. I hope that the honest and just among you will seek an explanation. The complaint itself delineates the racist practices of members of the BE faculty, in particular its head Professor Douglas Lauffenburger.

At my request, I met with Associate Provost Claude Canizares and my MIT advocate, Prof. Kenneth Manning, on the afternoon of January 24, 2007 to share my protest demands and their basis. These demands are:

1. Professor Sherley must receive an immediate grant of tenure as an admission that his tenure case was unfairly reviewed and decided and that his formal complaint against the negative decision was unfairly handled.
2. MIT must acknowledge the racism discovered in Professor Sherley's treatment as a faculty member in Biological Engineering (BE) on the part of Provost Robert Brown, Professor Douglas Lauffenburger the head of BE, and other identifiable faculty members (e.g., Professor Steven Tannenbaum). MIT must acknowledge that Professor Sherley's experience is not an isolated one. MIT must announce an immediate commitment of resources, faculty effort, and administration effort to develop new effective policies for

eliminating racism at MIT, with special attention to institutional and individual racist practices that constitute unfair barriers to recruitment and tenure of minority faculty.

3. MIT must obtain the resignation of Provost Rafael Reif because of his demonstrated obstruction of the formal grievance proceeding that addressed Professor Sherley's complaint.

### **Statement of Merit for Tenure**

A third purpose of this open letter is to address a question that some are asking.

“Exactly what has Professor Sherley done to merit tenure at MIT?”

I have established an internationally recognized research program focused on the investigation of adult stem cell asymmetric self-renewal. Asymmetric self-renewal is the signature property of adult stem cells. At the time of Prof. Douglas Lauffenburger's decision to withhold my tenure case from review by Engineering Council, I had 8 invitations for international university seminars and professional meeting plenary presentations. Since that time, the number of international invitations has increased to 14, including a research presentation at the Vatican in Rome. In addition, I have contributed original chapters to two books with international editors and authors.

I have led groups of talented undergraduates, graduate students, post-doctoral fellows, and research scientists in a research program that discovered the first known molecular and biochemical pathways that control adult stem cell asymmetric self-renewal. Our work identified the quintessential cancer gene, p53, as a key regulator of adult stem cell function. At MIT, this foundation of new knowledge was used to address the most challenging problems in stem cell biology. These problems are expanding adult stem cells in culture, discovering markers for their exclusive detection, and investigating their molecular function. In 2003, my group published the first-ever rational method for routine expansion of adult stem cells in culture. In addition, in 2002, we published the first-ever direct demonstration of the validity of a profound adult stem cell hypothesis that had not yielded to other laboratories for more than 25 years. The report of our accomplishment and method induced a flourish of new scientific studies on this topic.

At the time of Prof. Douglas Lauffenburger's negative decision, my MIT faculty personnel record (FPR) listed 45 major publications, 36 as a principal investigator, and 26 at MIT. (I spent the first 6 years of my principal investigator career at the Fox Chase Cancer Center in Philadelphia.) There were 95 invited seminars and conference plenary talks, 93 as a principal investigator, 61 at MIT, 5 for industry, and 8 international. There were 12 patent applications and technology disclosures, 11 at MIT, and 1 licensed. Twenty news articles had appeared in scientific journals, university newspapers, and general newspapers noting the impact of my group's research. My program was funded with \$747,000 per year in direct costs.

Despite the distractions and personnel contraction of the past two years spent pursuing a fair investigation of my complaint, my group has continued to be productive. My current FPR lists 62 major publications, 53 as a principal investigator, 43 at MIT. There are 119 total seminars and conference plenary talks, 117 as a principal investigator, 85 at MIT. There are now 18 patents and technology disclosures, 17 at MIT, 1 licensed. Our program is funded with \$1.2 million per year in direct costs.

These achievements put my research program in a unique position to identify exclusive markers for adult stem cells, enable applications for new cellular therapies, and continue our research to elucidate unique properties of adult stem cells. They have also lead to significant scientific and service awards. To my knowledge, I am one of only 4 professors at MIT who have received the Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences Award. The other scholars are Professors James Dicarlo, Paul Matsudaira, and Earl K. Miller. I am the only MIT professor who has been inducted into the Pew Science and Society Institute as a member of the first entering class. I am one of 5 professors at MIT who are recipients of the Ellison Medical Foundation Senior Scholar Award in Aging Research. The other scholars are Professors Robert Weinberg, Leonard Guarente, Susan Linqvist, and Robert Horvitz. I am one of two recipients at MIT of the NIH Director's Pioneer Award, a \$2.5 million award for innovative research. I am also one of two MIT recipients of the Spectrum Trailblazer Award; and I am a 2005 recipient of MIT's Martin Luther King, Jr. Leadership Award.

### **Evidence of Provost Rafael Reif's Obstruction of the Tenure Decision Complaint**

In my previous two open letters, I have spoken to Provost Reif's action to obstruct my complaint of an unfair negative decision by Prof. Douglas Lauffenburger based on racism, conflict of interest, and the impact of the improper action of Susan Whitehead, a lifetime member of the MIT Corporation and the chair of the BE Visiting Committee. In addition, the failure of Provost Robert Brown to disclose his close personal relationship with Professor Lauffenburger and his spouse Professor Linda Griffith completely invalidated the investigation of my complaint before Provost Reif took over. However, Provost Reif's adjudication is also devoid of integrity. Provost Reif's own words written in his final decision letter sent to me on December 22, 2006 clearly demonstrate his obstruction of my complaint.

What shall we say about a Provost who responded in the following manner to the charge that the BE faculty provided an advisory tenure vote to the head of BE, Prof. Douglas Lauffenburger, when they were not themselves familiar with the tenure case?

"4. The Committee found that neither BE nor any other departments with which the Committee was familiar had or enforced a policy that required senior faculty to read all materials in a tenure case before the meeting to consider that case, so that if your materials were not read by all senior faculty in BE before the meeting on your case, you were not treated differently in any material sense from others considered for tenure."

What shall we say about a Provost who responded in the following manner to the charge that Prof. Douglas Lauffenburger repeatedly hid the fact that I was the first appointment in the new Division of Bioengineering and Environmental Health (BEH), which later changed its name to BE? My appointment letter signed by Provost Robert Brown on July 1, 1998 states “Division of Bioengineering and Environmental Health,” but Provost Reif wrote,

“3. While you feel that you should have been acknowledged as the first faculty member hired in BE, the Committee found that you were in fact hired in the Toxicology division, prior to the formation of BE.”

What shall we say about a Provost who responded in the following manner to a charge that a conflict of interest existed that prevented me from obtaining a fair evaluation of my case for tenure?

“1. The additional findings of the Committee did not change their earlier conclusion that the evidence does not support your allegations that conflicts of interest adversely affected the consideration of your tenure case.

2. The Committee found that it was appropriate for Professor Lauffenburger to solicit an internal reference letter from Professor Griffith, given the overlap in your research areas and the fact that you had not asked that she be excluded from the list of referees.”

Such juxtaposition of ideas is incomprehensible, except as a frank obstruction of the complaint. To their credit, it appears that the investigation committee considered the conflict of interest complaint, despite the Provost’s earlier instruction that they should not.

Another inconsistent juxtaposition occurs between Provost Reif’s first negative decision letter, sent to me on January 23, 2006, and the currently discussed one from December 22, 2006. On January 23, 2006 he wrote:

“The Committee pursued the question and learned that, after Professor Lauffenburger reached his decision not to bring your case to Engineering Council, he asked both the Dean and another department head in the School to review your case to advise him whether or not they agreed with his decision, and they both said they did. The Committee reported that obtaining such confirmatory opinions has been done in other cases in the past, as well.”

The chair of the investigation committee, Professor Steven Lerman, told my MIT advocate, Professor Kenneth Manning, that the “another department head” was Professor Wesley Harris, who is African American and chair of the Department of Aeronautics and Astronautics. Professor Harris had acted as my confidential tenure advisor for several

years, and I continued to consult with him for a short time after Professor Lauffenburger's negative decision. To others, he has denied playing this role in Prof. Lauffenburger's negative decision. It is also important to note that Prof. Lauffenburger did not use this decision process for the tenure cases of two white faculty members who he evaluated for tenure at the same time.

In Provost Reif's December 22 final notice, he writes:

"11. The Committee confirmed that Professor Harris did not see the tenure case for you that was presented to the BE faculty."

However, he does not say that Professor Lauffenburger did not consult with Professor Harris for a confirmatory opinion. Surely, this glaring contradiction in the Provost's own words indicates a lack of integrity in the grievance investigation. An explanation for this contradiction must be demanded. In addition, the chair of the investigation committee, Prof. Steven Lerman, now refuses to discuss this important matter.

What shall we say about a Provost who continues to pervert my complaint of inadequate independent lab space to one of lesser lab space than other junior faculty? The fact that I have been allotted only 355 sq. ft. of independent lab space, despite repeated requests for adequate independent lab space to Prof. Lauffenburger, is *prima facie* evidence of racist MIT policies for the hire of minority faculty and racist practices by individuals who administer resources to minority faculty. Every laboratory scientist knows the crucial importance of independent laboratory space. Yet, for my entire 8 years at MIT, I have been abandoned to face alone the many prohibitions on my research program because of sharing space with senior faculty who were forced to provide their own space by the racist actions of Provost Robert Brown. Provost Reif wrote only one obtuse statement regarding my complaint about the quality of the research space I was provided by Professor Lauffenburger.

"10. While the Committee's first review had determined you were not provided less funding or space than nonminority junior faculty, they considered the additional information you presented concerning BPEC grants, support for the Dupont Alliance, and space, and found no basis to change their earlier conclusion."

Finally, what shall we in the MIT community and abroad say about a Provost who wrote the following response to the charge of racism in MIT's tenure promotion process, but decided to ignore the importance of the report that provoked it?

"12. Although one personal opinion differed, the Committee found strong evidence that racial prejudice did not affect the evaluations of your tenure case among the BE faculty, and found no evidence (as opposed to that opinion) to the contrary."

Thus, the Provost chooses to ignore the significance of an independent report that racism played a role in my tenure review in BE at MIT. In the McBay report of 1986, MIT learned that the voices who were willing to accept the risks of speaking out against racism would be few and suppressed. This important lesson has been forgotten. I am one who has decided to take up Shirley McBay's clarion call to end racism at MIT. I hope that you will join me in the struggle.

Yours sincerely,

James Sherley