

February 7, 2007

To Whom it May Concern,

I am distressed by MIT's refusal to honor Professor Sherley's request for a review of his tenure case and an inquiry into the mishandling of the case. The Provost, Chancellor, and members of the Biological Engineering Division state that the decision to deny Professor Sherley tenure was a fair one. Professor Chomsky and his colleagues, in a letter to the Tech, summarize compelling arguments contrary to that conclusion.

Quite apart from arguments of fairness, process, conflict of interest and so forth, the significant obstacles confronted by members of the MIT community who are minorities are being overlooked. Those obstacles and their effects need not manifest themselves in the open to influence outcomes. Indeed, such obstacles may well be invisible to the Caucasian Professors in Biological Engineering and others who claim racism played no role in Professor Sherley's case. And yet, they are frequent, cumulative and insidious. Without a thorough examination and discussion of the real situation of your minority colleagues, it is not possible to deem the process fair, and it is not realistic to expect that MIT will fulfill its stated mission of increasing minority representation.

I was the sole African American member of MIT's Biology Department from 1997-2001, when I resigned. Some of my experiences during that time undercut my status and represent the kind of racism that Professor Sherley is opposing and that his BEH colleagues claim does not exist. For example,

1. My presence in the faculty lunchroom was challenged by a senior faculty member.
2. A senior member of the Biology Department asked me why there are so few blacks in neuroscience. I responded, "Why are there so few African Americans at MIT?" He countered that anyone could be a neuroscientist, but *this* is MIT!
3. A senior faculty member in the Biology Department commented on how much I resembled a former summer student in his laboratory, who was also an African American woman.
4. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) expects programs that receive training funds to "demonstrate successful efforts to recruit and train students from underrepresented minority groups." Though the Biology Department increased its recruitment efforts while I was a member, it did not rethink its training methods. I submitted a specific plan to the heads of the department and the graduate committee designed to support all students, particularly under-represented minorities. I received neither acknowledgement of nor response to that plan for approximately two months, when I demanded a response.

Though other experiences may have been less overtly racist, they were demoralizing and damaging to my scientific career.

1. The Biology Department Head refused to discuss the requirements for tenure with me.
2. I was never given a graduate teaching assignment, reducing my exposure and my chance to build a vibrant research team.
3. The department's formal mentorship system was flawed and inadequate.

4. Though a prospective graduate student was openly hostile to me during his interview, he was accepted into the Biology Graduate Program over my strong objection.

Sincerely yours,

Dr. Sylvia Sanders
Assistant Professor of Biology, MIT, 1997-2001
Associate Investigator,
Howard Hughes Medical Institute, 1997-2001