

## LINDA C. SHARPE

SB 1969 (political science) MIT, later a doctoral candidate in political science; research analyst, Boston Model Cities Administration, 1969-1970, and Raytheon, 1974-1975; research associate, Joint Center for Urban Studies of MIT and Harvard University, 1975-1977; program consultant in planning and proposal writing, 1978-1979; senior researcher, Center for Community Economic Development, 1979-1980; instructor in urban politics, Northeastern University, 1980-1981; from senior analyst to transportation analysis group manager, Unisys Corp., 1985-1997; section manager and task leader, Cambridge Systematics Inc., 1997- ; recipient, achievement awards, Volpe National Transportation Systems Center, 1987 and 1996; member, MIT Corporation, 2000- .

I was born in Brooklyn, New York. My parents were immigrants to this country, from West Indian backgrounds. My mother was from Panama and my father was from St. Vincent, British West Indies. My mother was a housewife and my father worked in the New York City subways as a conductor. The conductor is the person who opens and closes the doors and is in charge of the overall safety of the train. My father owned a home in Bedford-Stuyvesant even before he met my mother. We stayed in Bedford-Stuyvesant, although many of our neighbors ended up leaving for Queens and Long Island.

I was educated in the New York City public schools. When it came time for me to go to school, my parents considered many different options. They did not want me to go to the neighborhood school in Bed-Stuy. They considered parochial and other private schools, but settled on a public school that was two districts away, in a neighborhood that was changing ethnically but had not changed totally at the time that I went to school. In elementary school, I received your basic public school education. I think it was a good school. We had good teachers, but the classes were large. There was a certain amount of ethnic rivalry between blacks and the exiting whites, but the students in my classroom remained largely the same from kindergarten through sixth grade.

When I was in the sixth grade, I had the opportunity to take an entrance examination for Hunter College High School. You had to be invited to take the exam; it was a major success to

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be invited to take it. I certainly knew very little about the school beforehand. It turns out that four girls from our elementary school took the exam. Hunter was an all-girls school, with grades seven through twelve. Four girls from our school took the exam—two black, two white—and two of us made it, myself and a white student.

My black classmate who took the exam and didn't make it had a cousin who went to the school and had access to the school newspaper. All the exam takers attended a little party at the home of the other girl who had made it. I remember I was invited to lie on the chaise in her living room. Then the girls showed me an article from the school newspaper, reporting the top scores on the exam. I had the third highest score. Fifteen-hundred girls took the exam and three hundred were admitted to the school.



*That's quite an achievement.*

I feel very confident in examinations. There were about 180 girls in my class, of whom ethnically about five or six were black, maybe two or three were Japanese-Americans and two Chinese-Americans. There were no Hispanic-Americans that I recall in our class at that time. It was a challenging environment, but I did pretty well. Throughout high school, I was a class officer. I performed well enough that everyone thought I graduated in the top ten. In fact, I didn't.

I concentrated on math and science. I really enjoyed the sciences. However, because it was an all-girls school, the prime departments were English, social studies, arts, and drama. I was involved in lots of socially conscious activities. This being New York City, there were many liberal, leftist intellectual types among the parents in our school. I was involved on the periphery of fundraising for SNCC and other liberal causes in the early '60s. Even before college, when the American public became more familiar with the civil rights struggle and with the anti-Vietnam and ban-the-bomb movements, I was tagging along to some fund-raisers and attending demonstrations. I can't say I was heavily involved. I didn't go to Selma. I asked, but my parents said no.

When it was time for me to apply for college, I knew I was interested in math, science, and engineering, but I still had my other interests in social and political movements. My high school counselors all wanted me to go to their alma maters: Smith, Wellesley, or Radcliffe—one of "the seven sisters," as they were known back then. But the summer after my junior year in high school, I attended an advanced placement physics course at Cornell University and became enamored of Cornell. It had a beautiful campus. I met some wonderful people and really enjoyed being there.

I was really determined to go to Cornell. Originally I had wanted to apply to Cornell's engineering school, but while I was there I interviewed with an admissions officer at the engineering school who told me, for reasons I'm sure you can imagine, that I would not be happy there. They had nine hundred students and only two women. I doubt they had any African-American students. He was very negative about my going there, so my feeling was, "Well, I won't go there, then." But I did apply to Cornell in arts and sciences as my first choice.

In order to mollify my guidance counselors, I applied to MIT because I did not want to apply to any of the "seven sisters," or to Swarthmore or any of the more artsy, liberal arts schools. Hunter, being an all-girls school, had very few students go on to MIT. So that choice really made people stand up and take notice. There were actually a couple of other girls who applied and attended. I'm still in regular touch with one. She works in Kendall Square for Lotus and her husband is a professor at MIT.

So I did apply to MIT. I scared myself by doing that. I took the AP math exam and my SAT's in my junior year of high school, and I was sure then that I would apply to MIT. I remember being very nervous during the SAT's. When I got my scores back, my math SAT was much lower than I expected. I had a very long session in the guidance counselor's office because I was hysterical about the score. The teachers were trying to console me by saying, "Well, it's a very good score—it's in the eightieth percentile and it's really nothing to be ashamed of." But I retook the exam and improved my score by one hundred points. It was just pure nervousness the first time. That's the kind of effect MIT has on an aspiring student!

I also remember an old friend of my father's saying that my father just couldn't believe I had decided to attend MIT. He would tell friends, "My daughter thinks she's going to MIT." He was delighted and a bit scared at the same time. When I actually got in, I still really wanted to go to Cornell. Of all the schools to which I applied, MIT delivered the least financial aid. The other schools offered full scholarships. My parents wouldn't have had to contribute anything at the other schools, but MIT was asking for a substantial contribution. My dad said, "Well, I'm going to be paying the bills and you're going. You're not going to get into MIT and not go." That was in 1965.

Parenthetically, there is something that's really changed about this society. In 1965, the Ford Foundation awarded National Achievement Scholarships for worthy black students. I was one of the first group to win the scholarship. The New York winners were reported in all of the New York daily newspapers—the *Daily News*, the *Times*, and the *Post*. When I look back through the clippings, they published your full name, full address, and your picture in the newspaper. That is just too dangerous to do in 1999. Many people don't list their

phone numbers anymore, and major metropolitan papers do not publish addresses of scholarship winners. The level of perceived threat is so much higher.

I won a scholarship, but my parents still had to make a substantial contribution to my education. MIT was a whole new school to me. I had not visited before I applied, so I came as a freshman never having seen the campus. One of the reasons I was excited about applying was because the political science department had been newly formed—in 1964, I believe—and had a well-known faculty. I came to the Institute with the intention of perhaps doing a double major, or at least knowing I was going to take political science classes.

*Did you know at that time that regardless of what discipline you decided to go into at MIT, you had to take the same basic science and math core courses that every student had to take before going into a major?*

The problem was that MIT did not place me out of freshman science and mathematics. At the other schools to which I applied, I would have gone in as a sophomore. I would have placed out of all of their freshman requirements and some of their sophomore requirements in science and math, based on my AP exam results. MIT was the only school that didn't allow that. They gave me only one semester in math.

*That says a lot in terms of how advanced you were.*

I was very well prepared. That was a problem when I got here, because I was too cocky about it. I should have taken some more basic math courses to improve my skills outside of calculus, which I knew well.

*Talk a little bit about your first impressions of MIT. You mentioned that you had not come up here until you actually came as a freshman.*

Having gone to Cornell the previous summer, I knew about thirty kids from that program who were also in my freshman class at MIT. So I already knew many people by sight. I didn't know them well, but I knew their names and their faces. That helped the transition. In addition, this was the late '60s and there were many new and radical changes in attitudes, music, and dress. There was a huge transition going on in Boston that had already started in New York; I had run into dress code problems, for example, in high school. My parents

were always very supportive about going down to the high school if I got into some trouble from time to time—nothing major, but trouble nonetheless.

*You did speak your mind, right?*

Yes, I stood up to authority occasionally. So when I got to MIT, I remember being really worried about who my roommates were going to be. I'd have two roommates and I was worried about compatibility. But that worked out well. I became very good friends with one of them. There was just a lot of exploration of the campus. Students were always excitedly talking about the latest album that had just come out—Bob Dylan or The Temptations.

And I was meeting other black students on campus. Frankly, I didn't expect to see many because of my experience in an elite high school and other selective programs. As I recall, in my freshman class there were three African-Americans and maybe one or two other people of African descent from the West Indies and South America, and a couple of people from Africa. I have to say I wasn't surprised, but on the other hand I don't think I expected there to be quite so few. So after the upperclassmen returned to campus, I started finding where the other black students were and who they were. I was just trying to figure out what courses to take, what Boston was about, where Harvard Square was, and where I should get my hair done.

*You've had a chance now to reflect a great deal about your undergraduate education. Identify what you would consider of special significance in your academic and collegiate relationships. When you look back on that experience on the undergraduate level, what would you consider very special or significant?*

I think it was the opportunity to meet students who were serious about a wide range of subjects, some of which may not have seemed serious at first glance but which engaged students deeply. People were involved with a whole range of activities, the gamut from tiddly-winks to social change and social revolution. Beyond that, there was the opportunity on campus to really come into contact with a wide range of very influential people and a wide range of artists and performers. "Cannonball" Adderley was part of the Stratton Student Center opening ceremonies. Some of these artists were very avant garde, like the Living

Theater and Charles Lloyd. Ravi Shankar was also a performer I remember seeing then. There were many cutting-edge artists who actually spent time on campus.

Then there was the opportunity to work with extraordinary people like Shirley Jackson, Fred Johnson, and Charlie Kidwell. The intense discussions and strategy sessions we had were an important part of my education.

*What would you say was best about your experience, and what would you say was worst?*

The best thing about the experience was the people and the lifelong relationships I formed. I think there is an MIT way of thinking. I feel comfortable working with people from MIT.

The worst thing was that it was hard to connect with some of the professors. It wasn't as if anyone was hostile; I can say that the faculty was very encouraging to me, they mentored me and fostered my career. But there was still a distance that existed between me and many of my professors that was difficult to bridge.

*At the time you were here on the undergraduate level, do you recall whether there were any black professors here? Willard Johnson was here.*

*Willard was here. Was there anybody else that you recall, while you were on campus?*

Jim Williams was in graduate school and about to become a professor. I don't remember whether he actually joined the faculty when I was still an undergraduate, but it was right in that time-frame.

*But Willard was the only faculty member that you're fairly sure of. There was a fellow by the name of Hayward Henry.*

He was after my undergraduate years at MIT; he was more involved with black students when I was in graduate school. He was at the center of a group of students. I was not part of that circle. I was an undergraduate before that time and a graduate student during that time, but I was not part of that circle.

*You're talking about 1965 to 1969. How would you classify the quality and availability of services for you as a student?*

I don't think MIT has changed all that much. I think there are services available if you take advantage of them, but many students choose not to. There were some people from whom I sought

help from time to time. I did run into some roadblocks. I was interested in many disparate activities and there was a lot of schoolwork that didn't get done when it should have. I had to really pull things together as a senior in order to graduate. I was able to mobilize some resources that did, in fact, help me. The wife of one of the faculty residents of the dorm system helped do this for students. I'd schedule time to go to the faculty resident's apartment, his wife would feed me tea, cookies, and encouragement, and I'd write my papers. It was kind of designated time where I had a mom substitute. I could get some work done and complete the work on a schedule.

Although I did find support as an undergraduate, I was a little too arrogant and headstrong. I did not take advantage of the resources that were available. They were available, though difficult to find on campus.

*It sounds like you were very active on campus, is that fair to say? You got into a lot of things, and it wasn't just book work for you.*

Right, absolutely.

*It wasn't that way in high school.*

It's still not that way. I like to be engaged in a wide variety of activities.

*That has a lot to do with being tired of it and wanting to go on to something else, maybe that's what it is. But talk a little bit about some of the things you really got involved in as a student.*

When I came to MIT, I tried to continue with some of the traditional student government activities that I had been involved in during high school. But I ran up against a group of people who weren't interested in working with me. I wasn't very interested in working with them either, so that ended quickly. I was a freshman class officer. I was also involved in Dramashop, and actually spent quite a bit of time doing that. I love being on stage, the smell of the greasepaint and all that. The theater was an interest that I carried through from high school. I was involved with some community activities, particularly when I was a sophomore. At that time I decided that even though there were lots of good things happening on campus, I really needed to get out into the community.

As a freshman, I took a freshman seminar. At that time, colleges would get together and have intercollegiate conferences on various topics.

MIT hosted a conference called “The Urban Challenge,” on urban affairs. Students in the seminar staffed the conference. From this activity, I gained a lifelong career interest in urban studies. While doing work for that class, I got to interview various key community leaders in Boston—Ruth Batson, Chuck Turner, and Mel King. That was before Mel came to campus, actually. My coursework was a vehicle for me to learn more about what was going on in the community. At that time, there was a lot happening—for example, the formation of the Metco program to offer suburban school slots to black inner-city students.

In my sophomore year, I decided to apply to Delta Sigma Theta so that I could meet black students from other Boston-area campuses. I was following in the footsteps of Shirley Jackson. When I came to MIT, a friend of our family’s had told me, “You’ve got to pledge Delta.” My reply was, “Sorority? Not a chance!” The Deltas had been inviting me to things when I was a freshman, and I didn’t want to have any part of it. But when Shirley pledged, and she told me a little bit about what they were doing and who everybody was, then I thought, “Okay, I can do this.” It was a great way to meet other black students and see what was going on at other campuses, to get involved in some community activities, and to gain lifelong friends.

Then, of course, in 1968 there was so much upheaval in the nation and in the world. There were protests on the MIT campus. There was a sanctuary for an AWOL soldier in which I participated. In fact, I recruited my friends from other out-of-town colleges to come and join us. I was upset that more black students weren’t involved with anti-war activities at that time. After Dr. King was assassinated, there was a series of meetings held on campus and I was involved in helping to bridge the gap between white students and black students. Then we started the activities that led to the beginning of the Black Students Union.

*You were clearly one of the leaders who helped to build some of the activities that we still have on campus, including the BSU. As an undergraduate, you were not a person who stands by. You were out there in the thick of things.*

Yes, in my own way. I don’t know that I was out front, but I was always there. I was always a body that could be counted on to get some work done.

I was there and trying to encourage other people to get involved.

*Well, that shows. You didn’t mention what you majored in and how you actually got into that particular area, what you focused on academically on the undergraduate level. Share a little bit about that, and about what you decided to do after you graduated.*

I majored in political science. I decided finally to major in it because it had the least requirements of any course of study, besides an unspecified degree. I was able to take courses in electrical engineering, economics, urban studies, mathematics, and civil engineering, a wide range of courses. I constructed a course of study that revolved around using computers to model complex social systems. I call it “a liberal technical education.”

*How does that relate to what you’re doing now?*

After I graduated, I worked for a year in Roxbury on a study of the public welfare system. Then I came back to graduate school at MIT and continued what I had studied as an undergraduate. I did not finish my Ph.D. That’s an issue, I guess, but with a small “i.” Over time, I have worked in social policy research. I am currently straddling research analysis and the computer system development in support of research. I currently develop computer systems that are used by transportation-related agencies to formulate and evaluate regulatory policy for transportation safety.

*You’ve stayed connected with the Institute in several ways over the years—particularly, I guess, through BAMIT. Talk a little bit about some of your work in that. There aren’t a lot of you who have been as consistent as you have been in terms of being connected with the Institute.* By the late ’70s, there was a critical mass of black graduates. People who were recent or relatively recent grads at that time, namely Kenny Armstead and Lorna Giles, spent a tremendous amount of effort to form BAMIT. Having been involved with the groups that founded BSU and the BGSA, I was there with BAMIT, too. BAMIT was an avenue for black graduates to build an ongoing relationship with an institution that had been bruising to most. It was very important for us to start the McNair scholarship fund and to have a vehicle for black graduates to stay connected. In the beginning, there was a very strong need for BAMIT to be independent of the Alumni Association in many real and symbolic ways. Now I think that’s changed.

*When you were a graduate student, had it not been for you, I wouldn't be here. You had a tremendous amount to do with selecting me to be the first black dean in the Graduate School office. You were part of that powerful group of students who kind of told the institution what we needed. Could you talk just a little bit about that era, in terms of some of the things that that group of you were involved in?*

Black graduate students recognized the value of having a black assistant or associate dean in the Graduate School office to address the barriers for black graduate students Institute-wide. Because all the departments act independently, there needed to be leadership from the dean's office in order to have a chance of increasing the number of black students at the institution, and of retaining them. So without a voice in the dean's office, someone who works there and who has power, there wouldn't be a way for that to happen. I think the Institute agreed.

*You helped them to agree, right?*

They agreed with that point of view. Then, when choosing candidates and coming down to the final cut, one of the issues was, "Well, if someone's going to be successful at MIT, they need a technical degree. They need a Ph.D., and at least a bachelor's degree in a technical field. Otherwise, there's no way they can be effective here."

*Then how did I get that job?*

We had a long discussion about why it was really important to consider a range of people and a range of degrees. Otherwise, there would not have been a pool of candidates to choose from. That was the next hurdle. Once we got a pool and evaluated candidates, the issues arose again. The students said, "We think Clarence is the person," but it took further discussion to convince the Institute that you should be hired without having a technical degree and, in fact, having a degree in a discipline that none of the MIT administrators recognized.

I think you made a very large impression on us in the interview. In fact, I have my notes. I looked at them recently. I think you just came across as someone who would have the fortitude to deal with the Institute. You were polished, quiet, and persistent, and would be able to make a difference—which you have.

*I have never heard quite that version. It was done behind closed doors. I was really impressed with all of you. I had*

*never seen a group of students quite like all of you.*

*If you were giving advice to a young Linda getting ready to come to MIT, what kind of advice would you give her? What kind of advice would you give to a black student coming to MIT today? Even though we're talking about cross generations to a certain extent, your knowledge of this place since the '60s is very important.* There are a tremendous number of resources here, and some of them are hard to find. Just ferret them all out. Take advantage of all the expertise, all the different disciplines, and all of the activities that are here. You're not likely again to find such a concentration of innovation, diverse interests, and frighteningly intense colleagues. At the same time, I think it's important to get off campus and contribute in the community. Boston has a wealth of cultures and resources. Meeting local residents in any context—church, volunteering, politics, civic and recreational activities—puts your stay here in a real-world context.

It goes without saying that you've got to work hard. Don't be put off by the competitive nature of the place or the fact that someone else is that much more well prepared than you are. No matter where you stand, there's always going to be that person who's more well prepared than you are. Even if you're the best prepared student when you get in here, you'll meet someone who is two years younger than you who is as well prepared. So the thing is just to get in there and not let the competition bother you. Just get in the arena with everyone else.

*If I understand you correctly, are you saying that the chance of being at a place like MIT is once in a lifetime?* It's the time of life when you're a university student and you have chances to do things that you wouldn't otherwise have. The thing about MIT is that there is a pressure to narrow your interests early in your academic career. I resisted that, and that's why I majored in political science—so that I didn't have to get narrow early. But if you're majoring in an engineering discipline, you're taking four engineering classes the last two years here in that discipline each semester. As you go through life and through your career, you're going to get even more narrow. You're going to focus in an area, you're going to get expertise in that area, and that's going to be your competitive advantage. You're not going to have as much opportunity to get breadth, or you'll have to work harder to get it.

At the Institute, the breadth is all around you—either the expertise of a student who lives next door to you, various lecturers who come through, performers, professors who are available, or extracurricular activities. But as you go through your career, it's not as possible to do that.

*If you were to make any suggestions to the administration of ways you think the Institute could improve or enhance the experience of blacks at MIT, what kinds of things would you recommend?*

We do have a cadre of black administrators and a lot of programs in place, but I think there needs to be a look at their effectiveness and how they can be improved over time, especially in relationship to the changing needs of black students. I think it's probably a mistake to regard black students, as few as we are, as being monolithic. Students come in as individuals and they're from somewhat different experiences and backgrounds. In an effort to help them all to success, I think it's important not to think that there's a one-size-fits-all approach.

I think numbers help. If the numbers can be increased, I think that can increase the success rate. That way people can see more different kinds of black people around on campus. I also think there needs to be more black faculty members. That's really a key deficiency at this time, in terms of helping more black students succeed. And I think there just needs to be a range of options open for black students in terms of living arrangements and academic help if needed.

*Is there any other topic or issue that comes to mind as you reflect on your own experience and on the experience of other blacks at MIT?*

I guess my experience at MIT was not typical. It was not typical of a black student, a black graduate student, and it was not typical of MIT graduates in general. But I think it was an experience that could only have happened at MIT. I think it was very good. To grow up with people like Shirley and Jennifer Rudd was great. I just wish MIT had admitted more of us so that there had been others in our cohort. I don't know if you're aware of this, but after Shirley and Jennifer were both admitted, for each of the succeeding three years, MIT admitted one black woman. I don't think it was, frankly, a coincidence that they admitted two that first year.

*That was not an accident—just two, right?*

Two, and only two. Then in each of the succeeding years, there was just one.

*Of course, they were admitted in '64 and you came in in '65. Are you saying in '66 there was one?*

Right, and she ended up not graduating. In '67, there was one.

*There were so few of you, you had to be tough.*