

DANIEL T. LANGDALE

b. 1937, AB 1959 Ohio University; from lieutenant to captain, US Army, 1960-1964, serving with the US Army Signal Corps in Germany and at the Army Pictorial Center, New York City; staff, General Telephone Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1965-1966; assistant to director of student aid, MIT, 1966-1968; director of student employment, 1968-1972; associate director of financial aid, 1972-1977, 1991-1996; associate director of admissions, 1977-1988; assistant dean, Graduate Education Office, 1996-1997; served as director of admissions, California Institute of Technology, 1988-1991, where he developed strategies to diversify the student body, including admission of more women and racial minorities; admissions and financial aid consultant, 1994-



I'm now assistant dean of the graduate education office, formerly associate director of both admissions and financial aid. And, as you know, I was the director of admissions at Caltech for three years.

How many years have you been at MIT?

I've been here for about twenty-eight years, I guess. I went out to Caltech in '88. Actually, I think I had a fairly significant impact on affirmative action out there, which I understand has been sustained. When I got out there in the fall of '88, they had no black kids in the freshman class, would you believe? And that was 1988.

They had none?

None, but it's a small school. We had, I think, about sixteen blacks in the class the next year, maybe twelve. There are only two hundred freshmen in all.

They bring in only two hundred freshmen at Caltech?

Yes. The approach we used was making calls and being nice to these young people when they contacted us. It was that simple. Honestly, that's fundamentally all I feel like I've done here in the last thirty years—just be a good administrator and a friendly human being. Then I've benefited from the friendship of you and John Mims and Ben Moultrie. I consider that I have the rough equivalent of a Ph.D. in interracial relations. I understood early on something about what it was like to be black in white America. I read *Black Rage*, I read the book called *Black in White America*.

I had never been taught about race. I was born and raised in Cincinnati by a father who had lived in the inner city and had friends who were

black and so forth. I never saw them as a youth, because by that time we had moved out to the suburbs. But at least I never had the experience of having any racist language or any kind of an attitude expressed by either of my parents.

I spent five years in the Army, where I worked with black people. While I was at Ohio University also, there were some black guys who were in my dorm. I began to realize that there were other people of color in the United States. It's not easy to learn that when you live in a white suburb. One of the attributes about the world, of course, is that twelve or fourteen percent of the population is a relatively small proportion of the people. And when they're isolated for all the social reasons that we know, people like me can get to be eighteen or nineteen without having really spent much time in the company of a black person. But when I got



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into the Army, I had black guys working for me and on relatively infrequent occasions, I'd be working for a black person. I was a lieutenant and captain in the Army, so it was only occasionally that anybody outranked me who was black, even in the '60s.

So after I got here to MIT, I think I've always been a good deal more comfortable. I haven't been one of those suburbanites in America who somehow were nervous around people of color, thinking that somehow the difference was really dramatic. Of course, John Mims and I picked up this fantastic friendship when he first hit the ground here. We hung out.

Now, you were working in the Admissions Office when he first came here?

I was in financial aid when Roland Greeley hired John Mims in the fall of '69. From that time on, John and his wife and Sharry and I just hung out constantly. We'd get pizza or something three or four nights a week. We really adopted each other. I think that a distinct part of the attraction was the fun of intercultural comparison. It was kind of fun to recognize what the similarities and the differences were in our youth. I'm always too much of a Pollyanna, I think, in this respect because I keep wanting to highlight the similarities. John and I would recognize that in his youth, whatever the cultural attitude was in this regard, his day-to-day experience wasn't really markedly different than mine.

And Sharry and his wife, who both came from sort of impecunious backgrounds, also had shared experiences. I remember one night at the Faculty Club, the two of them walked up to this table full of hors d'oeuvres and found these pickled pigs' feet. Of course, they had eaten those parts of the pig when they were little kids because that was basically what their parents could afford to buy. So the two of them were getting hysterical about the fact that here were these two women—one from Chicago and the other from South Dakota—recognizing this cultural similarity that was then contrary to the major culture, which thought that pigs' feet was some kind of a delicacy.

Anyway, we had a good time because we were thirty-something and enjoyed each other's company. But during the course of that time, I think that I benefited from John having illuminated me about what life was like if you had to

continue to face doors that might be slammed in your face because of your skin color.

So my enterprise here has always been to make sure that no black kid—and, of course, Mexican-American kids came along later, and the occasional Puerto Rican and Native American—was ever rebuffed. I never ever wanted a kid to either be in my office or to leave it scratching his head and wondering whether some behavior on my part had been a product of his or her skin color. So basically, all I've ever done in my own humble view is treat these kids at least as well as I ever treated a white kid. It's been my kind of rule of thumb. I've always treated white kids the way I wanted my own children to be treated. So I'm just a nice guy.

Of course, back in the early days at the Institute, people started to work on this environment—thanks to Paul Gray and Al Hill and Jerry Wiesner and others, with the instigation of people like Shirley Jackson and Fred Johnson and Michael Von Sawyer and Richard Prather. I remember these kids like it was yesterday. All this energy was there, and the Institute—through my boss, Jack Frailey—was endorsing the idea of people like me, a financial aid officer, being helpful. We had the resources, and we had the will and the way and every intention. As best we could during those revolutionary days, we continued to try to keep pitching hay, so to speak, to this energetic thing that was happening.

You mention your and John's relationship, which I think is very unique. It emerged out of this environment, really. This is not a fluke—I mean, this has been going on for years. I know that you are extremely close. Obviously, you have learned a lot from him and he has learned a lot from you. Talk a little bit about what you have learned about being black at MIT, or about being black in America, that you think is unique.

It's an interesting question and I have pondered this. Of course, I've come to a much better understanding of various facets of what racism implies during this thirty-year period, thanks to you and John and other people. It's one of the realities. Just to return to the enterprise, the Institute, of course, was appropriately and pointedly recruiting, hiring, and admitting some of the best people—black, white, and brown—that there were. And I was thinking, how is it that all these people—John Mims and John Mack and Ben Moultrie and Brad

Haley and Nelson Armstrong and Eddie Grado and Margo Tyler and Ike Colbert—became pretty much who I consider really close personal friends? And John is my best friend. He and I definitely bonded.

I think one of the reasons is because these are superior human beings. So in some ways, in part the answer to your question is that having the opportunity to associate, to benefit from the company of these excellent human beings, I began easily and quickly to understand that the burden that was formed as a product of three hundred years of bondage was a burden that I would never really understand and that I would always give the benefit of the doubt to. In other words, some kids seem to some as being sort of disabled. Some black kid comes in and, let's say, is using Ebonics, or some attribute in this regard that seems not to sort of align with the cultural norm in the United States. I'm perfectly comfortable about accepting the fact that he's different because he's a product of a very different, long-term cultural experience.

I can easily accept the fact that in 1997, the impact of slavery still pertains. I actually believe that a good deal of that impact is upbeat and positive. The black people I know have a certain humility—call it “soul,” to coin a term, right? There's some sort of an accommodating attitude about difference, about having to get along, and about dealing with the exigencies of life that just strikes me—and this is probably racist on my part—as being born out of a gene pool that has somehow survived three hundred years of terror, really.

I don't think the nation has remotely come close to acknowledging the reality of three hundred years of slavery. There's a great deal of cultural cover-up that's been going on in this country since the Civil War, with all the pictures of little children dancing in dust and old black men playing the violin and that sort of thing down by the slave cabins. I know that these people were working sixteen hours a day and being fed table scraps and being clothed in castoffs—and contemplating, from time to time, poisoning their owners. It was an ugly damn business, really, and I don't have to explain this to you.

So surviving that is an incredible accomplishment. I'm not suggesting that somehow genetically the current black population has been winnowed out, but I just think that there's a shared

awareness of having to somehow make your way in life that has yielded a behavioral pattern that is admirable. I'd see it in these kids who somehow persevered, sort of survived the MIT experience, which of itself is a very demanding one. The experience overloaded them, and they were carried down further by the prospect of thinking maybe the C that they earned in 8.02 was a product of their skin color.

I just had such respect for all these kids I ran into. Most of them were excellent students. I think again that you and John Turner were important influences on my perspective. I could go on for quite a while naming names of people who in some significant or day-to-day basis were illuminating my awareness of what it was like to be black in white America.

You have a lot of knowledge about the experience here—much more so than others, I think. There are very few whites at this Institute who over the years have engaged in the whole issue of really connecting with blacks the way that you have, in my opinion. So you also see the part of us that suggests we may be a little off in our thinking about the white world. Where do you see some things that you think in general perhaps we can improve on, based on your assessment of how we have seen the situation? That is, we may term things racist when they may not be, or we may be too hard on a situation because we didn't look at it in another way. Do you follow what I'm saying?

Yes. I think that's part of the burden of being a minority, of being black. I don't actually see that impacting in the same way either with the Mexican-American, Native American, or Puerto Rican kids. I think that the movement sort of, in an understandable way, combines those four sort of gene pools. But I think in any kind of sociological cultural analysis, you definitely would want to separate them out. A black person, I think, is constantly compelled to raise up this filter, “Is this other person's behavior in my direction a product of his humanity? Is he just an ugly, evil SOB? Or, is he a white person who generally speaking is a nice guy, but he's got this attitude because I'm black?”

This is one of the reasons that I have such spirited affection just for somebody who makes their way in life being black. Blacks have this double demand to understand the larger culture and then to understand how to get along with it, being

a sort of picked-upon minority. Sharry you probably remember as a student, now a professor of human development. I think it might have been Howard Ramseur who wrote the paper that I would refer to about the necessity to instruct black children in this sort of double culture. You have to teach them how to be human and, at the same time, you have to teach them how to respond to a predictable racism.

That's one aspect of being black, just that constant vigilance. The intelligence required I can't comprehend. I mean, you've got to have some superior intelligence to be able to keep all of these discrepant feelings somehow in proper balance. I'd go across the street and I'd start to get on the bus. If some bus driver, let's say a white bus driver, shuts the door in my face and pulls away, I call him an SOB. But if that happens to John Mims, he's got to figure this happened because he's black.

I remember one time we were walking over to the Faculty Club. This is an interesting story that I think illuminates my appreciation. We were late for this meeting we were going to. We each had a briefcase of papers and I said, "We'd better run." Then I thought for a second and said, "John, we'd better make damn sure that we are exactly neck and neck. If you're behind me, some police are going to come by in a car and think you're chasing me to steal my briefcase. If you're in front of me, they're going to think you stole my briefcase and I'm chasing you to get it back." It's sort of a representation of the fact that it's essentially a no-win situation, whereas here I am, in effect enjoying all these benefits of being a white, middle-class American. Somehow it's the demand for fair play, it seems to me, that always has been present in my own outlook and attitude about any difference.

But it's what life is like in this country, even in this era. I guess that the answer to your question is that I think a lot of times a black person, friends of mine, have been compelled to see racism where it may not, strictly speaking, have existed. It turns out that the bus driver really was just an SOB or the cop comes by in a patrol car and wouldn't necessarily have assumed that someone had either stolen or was going to steal something. But I think that guard that you have to keep up is what is so demanding of energy. I think of the kind of psychic energy that must be drained off, understanding all this and keeping it in balance if you're black.

That's why when some black freshman came in and said he was struggling with his curriculum, I thought, "Man, if we could illuminate these racist realities, this kid might win the Nobel Prize in six years. I mean, here he is making B's at MIT, while he's carrying not only the typical load but also the load of being probably poorly taught in the third grade, all those kinds of things that one can trace." I see people who all too often don't understand. I shouldn't pick on them. This is, of course, proping me up as the only one who understands how all that works. But I keep thinking, "Isn't it amusing that we all understand the reality of racism in the abstract, but somehow converting it to dealing with a nineteen-year-old who himself is a product of one of these cultural realities, somehow that conversion—making that exchange—seems to be so difficult for some people?" I think it's what I'm always working on and why I think I'm always so inclined to be forgiving. I'm inclined to suppose that the Euro-American culture that came in here and trampled on all kinds of sensibilities, whether it's Native American or Mexican-American or the enslavement of black people, I just think—never mind whether it's a debt—that there's an obligation that each of us as individuals is compelled to pick up and respond to, especially when it doesn't cost us anything.

I was saying to Sharry yesterday that I'm a little uncomfortable about being identified potentially as a white ally, because I've not been in the street. I haven't really done anything that costs me anything. I've sort of done MIT's business for it the way I think the Institute wanted me to do it, and I've been a friend to students and to staff. But it isn't like either financially or somehow psychically I've made some big kind of investment here. I mean, I look at people who have made a big psychic investment—at you and John, for example, whose personal lives are used to some great extent. I go home at five o'clock, put my feet up, and have a beer, while John would be in here till seventy-three holding the hand of some black kid and wondering if we really should have admitted him—"Why not let him go to Howard and have a nice life?" I mean, this is the kind of stress that the black administrators here have felt for years.

There's another area that I'd like to have you focus on. One is related to the whole area of trying to bring more blacks into the administration and faculty. You've watched

this for almost three decades. First of all, are we where you thought we would be, say, during the Mims era? If not, what's your diagnosis as to why we are not where we should be relative to the increase of black administrators and faculty, as well as where those people are placed in terms of positions of some authority?

It does look like we just haven't been able to tap the pipeline, so to speak. It's easy, maybe too easy, to say that this begins in the first grade when the white suburbanite majority is elbowing black people away from the table. This happens as a product—maybe again not in any racist way, but just as this kind of human tendency to advance one's own best interests. So everybody is elbowing hard, but the white people have gotten more advantage in this. They get more of the books, they get more of the goods. By the time kids are fourteen, you can begin to see the fallout. That's the way I explain why even thirty years later now, twenty-five years later, the representation of black kids in the freshman classes still may be half of what they represent in the population at large. An even worse statistical reality is what's true for staff and faculty. I guess I don't think we're coming close to doing the job in those elementary years, to use the school system as a way of defining the chronology. We're not empowering these kids somehow. We're not giving them the tools.

I actually heard a thing about the decline of affirmative action in California which strikes some chord with me someplace. The joking line about it is, "It isn't that white people don't believe in affirmative action, they just don't believe in it for black people." It's like—we white people, we've been affirmatively sort of advancing our own gene pool, if you will, which I think continues this racist attitude and has continued to be at the root of the problem. So you get black administrators in here and black faculty, but when it comes time to make a department head or a director, damn few directors around here have been black in the thirty years I've been here. In fact, I'd be pressed to be able to name any. For vice presidents and so forth, it's like that old line back in the '60s and '70s—when it comes time to replace yourself, you're inclined to get something that looks like what you've been shaving every day. That typically doesn't include women and it doesn't include black people.

I think you have made the point very clear about some of the issues related to increasing the number of black

students, particularly on the undergraduate level. Maybe you can help me have some insight on the graduate level, particularly now that you are in that arena. But let's focus too on the administrators and the faculty. You've watched that process, at least from a distance if not closer. During the '70s, especially, we were able to bring in a few blacks in different areas—the early '70s especially in your area, financial aid and admissions. John Mims came in '68 or '69. During the '70s and early '80s, we came up to maybe thirty or thirty-five black faculty and administrators throughout the Institute. The fact is, if you look again at the '70s and look now at the present, these people basically are either gone or in the same areas and the same places, with very few exceptions. The person may have changed, but the positions are the same. What's your diagnosis relative to why we have not been able to have, say, a black person who may be the director of admissions?

I know exactly what you mean. I am constantly in this mode of self-deprecation—not really putting myself down, but I have relatively little confidence in advancing my point of view. But I think that the answer to your question is that it's got to do with what I was talking about, that we don't believe in affirmative action for black people. In effect, we're willing to be forgiving of ourselves, ourselves being this white population. We know we have shortcomings, but we'll go ahead and hire this guy as a director of communications: I use that example because there's no such person at MIT. We know that he's sort of got these shortcomings and these weaknesses, but we're not going to have to face our constituency, being accused of making the obvious mistake of promoting somebody, putting somebody in that job who was black with these kinds of shortcomings.

It's the ultimate racist inclination, the ability to defend a decision. That's my explanation—that people, when push comes to shove, are unwilling to take that little step. Instead, they say, "Okay, everybody's got strengths and weaknesses and we're going to put this person in here with his or her strengths and weaknesses. But we're not going to risk having somebody be able to criticize us for doing this stupid thing of putting somebody in there who everybody knows wouldn't be adequate to the job, because they're black."

I'm not sure I'm making myself clear. In other words, the black is at least as competent as the white person, but all of their little flaws can then be sort of put down into the column that says,

“Well, this is what you would expect from a black person.” So if you’ve got a white guy in there who screws up the job and you’re his boss, you can shrug and say, “Well, how was I to know that this guy was a nitwit?” But since the whole country in the main is committed still to the proposition that somehow black people are diminished as a general rule, it’s easier to explain away the shortcomings of white people.

I remember the stories about Washington, DC. If you were a Nigerian diplomat in 1840, you were paid a certain amount of respect and dealt with like any citizen would be. But to be a black shoemaker who comes into the city, even if you’re a free man, there’s this attitude that pertains. I never really have understood that. It’s just something that has never aligned, has never harmonized with my view of the way the world works. But it’s easy for me to explain why it is that somebody can’t quite break the glass ceiling or get put into this position of authority.

Now, of course, it does happen around the country very occasionally—and, as often as not, it seems to me, with a considerable amount of success. Who was the man who just died a few years ago, the black guy who ran General Foods or one of these humongous corporations? And the president of TIAA-CREF, until a year or so ago, was black. There have been a number of people who are black in these positions. You’d think that the system would say, “Geez, this does seem to work.” I don’t know, that’s the only way I can explain it.

I think the issue of risk is a very important piece to this whole issue of trying to move to another level. We didn’t do all that well in terms of bringing the numbers up the way I think we could have here at MIT in all of these categories. But now we’re at a point where even those who have been here for some reasonable period of time are now looking at why it is that we cannot, say, have some members climb into the higher level of the administration. One group of people will say, “We have a flat organization. There are not that many opportunities, so it’s difficult to do this.” It could be inside or outside, but again, we’ve made no change. My position is very clear on it—I think that we basically are not prepared to take the risk.

Yes. I may be one of the last people at the Institute who actually got promoted. In 1969, after I had been here three years, I got made director of student employment. It was just about the time that

the search committees were ordered. You could no longer merely promote a staff person, you had to have a search. And the purpose was to find women and people of color whom you could put into the pool. I think the Institute somehow has managed to do that up to some level. There have been damn few hires around here, whether they were white or black, when there weren’t people in that pool who were either female or minority.

I’m not sure it happens up at the vice-presidential and presidential level. I don’t see why it shouldn’t, especially with the senior jobs. There should definitely be a person of color on the short list, because this is MIT. John Slaughter is a friend of mine out at Occidental College. His wife worked for me when I was at Caltech. I thought he should have been on the list when they hired Chuck Vest. He had run the University of Maryland and he ran the NSF. Then we’ve got people on our corporation board, I guess.

I mean, here I am. I’m down there struggling in the trenches over the years and I wholeheartedly endorse the idea of a search, I don’t want to be misunderstood. But somehow why hasn’t the diversity idea sort of pervaded up at these upper echelons? You’ve got somebody in on each of the three-person or four-person short lists. I think twenty-five percent of the pool ought to be black, let’s say. Somebody at some point is going to have to make it happen, it seems to me. But yes, it’s the risk factor and, I think, a kind of hesitancy to hazard some corporate group being able to say, “Obviously, we should do this.”

There’s a little bit about your background that I think needs to be recorded, and that is your family. You’ve mentioned a little bit about it, but could you spend just a minute talking about where you grew up, and your family?

I grew up in Cincinnati. It’s on the cusp of the Confederacy, so to speak. Even when I was a kid, my grandmother would tell stories about her mother experiencing the Civil War. The reality of being black, the reality of ghettos, the reality of having a foot on your neck were clear to me when I was a kid.

Cincinnati was a pretty segregated city, really. But again, my father had grown up in the city and played ball with black guys, so somehow he had an innate respect and tolerance. He was a reasonably educated man—not a college graduate, but a

comptroller in a life insurance company. He was a respected member of the community, on the school board, and so forth. He had nothing but respect that I ever could see for people, period. I never heard either of my parents run down any group, whether it was religious or racial. That's why I don't really have all that much disaffection for people I consider to be racist. Sharry and I were talking about the line in *South Pacific*, about how you have to be taught to hate, people have to be taught to hate. And I wasn't. My mother would tell stories about being bounced on the lap of some black woman in her church when she was a little kid. She would use the "N" word from time to time, I regret to have to report, but I think really almost in more of a descriptive way rather than any kind of a slur. In those days, people did that.

I trundled off to Ohio University. It's interesting, because three black guys on my floor were in their own room. This is sort of the equivalent, I think, of Chocolate City, although I'm not sure how much of a legislation there was that made that happen. But these guys became friends of mine, and there were blacks with me in the Army. So I've had the benefit of that contact. I think a lot of us white middle-class Americans are not inclined to be exposed. A few years ago I sent you that little piece, I think, about the business of biking into work. White males have almost always got a tail wind, being bolstered and blown along. But I think if you're black in this country, often you're driving into a head wind.

I don't know, I wish that somehow more of my fellow Americans would be persuaded just by the sense of fair play and recompense. One of the things I keep expecting to happen is for some group of lawyers to get together and decide to take the United States to court for all the unrequited cost of the labor of three hundred years of black people building this country. Nobody pays much homage to the fact that black people—who represented eight or ten percent of the total population in 1840, thirty million people in the country and four million were black—built the country, contributed to its economic well being, and so forth. Can you imagine how much money you would personally get if some black lawyers sued the U.S. and won, with interest? I mean, it's a humongous number. And then this talk about the cost of welfare and affirmative action is just crazy.

There are not too many people I know here who are white who have the respect that you receive from a large percentage of blacks, so it's very important that you lay out what you want to say about certain things. You're one of those rare human beings. I'm sure John will agree with me on that.

All those years of abuse I took off of him. We used to laugh. Every once in a while John would just get to railing about what it was like here to fight and to be swimming upstream constantly. I'd say, "John—Jesus, you know, I'm the only white guy you know who will stand here and listen to this." Then he'd laugh. But basically, I think I just have been the beneficiary of a great institution. With all of its shortcomings and flaws, MIT is the tops. The people they've hired here have just taken the time to give me an education, both black people and white people.

Take somebody like Sam Jones. I won't go on about it, but here is a man raised in kind of a racist context in Oklahoma and Texas, yet with the vision, the sensibility, and the education really to recognize the need and contribute to my education about some of the specifics of the history of the country and so forth. There are people like that—not quite like Sam, but people willing to take the time to teach all over MIT. That John and you and all the other individuals of color would, despite their experience with so many white people, still have the forbearance to take the time and make the often painful effort to illuminate my view is quite remarkable. I believe that that teaching, and the willingness on the part of the majority to make the effort to learn, is the ultimate and the only hope.