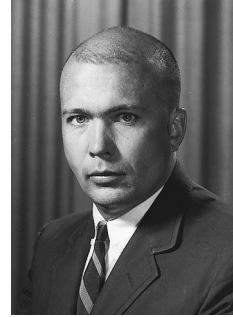


## THOMAS J. ALLEN

b. 1931, BS 1954 (physics) Upsala College, SM 1963, PhD 1966 (management) MIT; design engineer, Tung Sol Electric Company, 1956; research engineer, Boeing Company, 1956-1965; research associate, MIT, 1963-1966; joined the faculty of the MIT Sloan School of Management in 1966; Howard W. Johnson Professor of Management, Management of Technology Innovation Group, Sloan School; Hunsacker Visiting Professor of Aerospace Systems Architecture and Engineering, Department of Aeronautics and Astronautics, MIT; visiting professor, University College, Dublin, 1998-1999; appointed in 1993 to a ten-year term as MacVicar Faculty Fellow, MIT.



I grew up in Newark, deep in the city. I was not a suburban kid. I went to Catholic schools, to a grammar school near where I lived. I went to a high school right in the center of the city. In fact, the high school I went to was right in the middle of the black neighborhood in Newark.

When I think about the issue of blacks, I think about my father immediately. My father had a lot of black friends. He worked for the WPA back in the 1930s when I was a kid, the WPA being the Works Progress Administration, that job creation scheme of Roosevelt's. He worked with a lot of black people. I can remember black people coming out to the house for a visit. I was talking to my brother about this just recently. He reminded me that my father used to say, "We are all the same under the skin." He must have said that a lot of times because we remembered. When I talk about race relations or anything like that, I think about my dad. That was important. That was a key thing, that he brought us up in that way.

Now, the schools I went to didn't have many black students. There weren't many black kids in the Catholic schools in those days. There are now, but there weren't in those days. There wasn't more than a handful in high school in my time, even though it was right in the middle of the ghetto. It was really right in the middle of the ghetto. The other thing was that the school had such good relationships with the community around them that in 1967, when there were the riots, that school was right in the middle of the riots and not a window was broken—not a thing was touched.

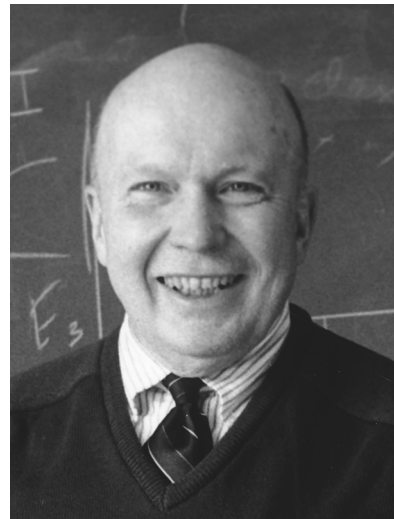
Edited and excerpted from an oral history interview conducted by Clarence G. Williams with Thomas J. Allen in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 11 March 1999.

It was just completely out of respect. If you remember '67 in Newark, it was pretty bad.

*It was considered the worst, although there were other similar situations.*

Yes. There wasn't a window broken, while buildings around the school were burned right to the ground. Then what happened after that—this is a side issue, nothing to do with me personally—was that a lot of the white folks who were sending their kids in there because it was a good education stopped sending them in. The enrollment went down and they closed the school. It stayed closed for a year, I think, and then a couple of young priests said they were going to reopen it and do it on a different basis, bring in more black kids and maintain at least a fifty-fifty ratio.

They've done that. There was a television thing on it and a newspaper article and a magazine



article written about it. It was a big, big success, and the alumni have raised a lot of money to keep it going. It's an excellent education. These are kids coming out of the projects, kids with a pretty tough background. There is not a single lock on any locker in that school. They brought a bunch of kids up here on a soccer team. I went down and saw the game, and you never saw such gentlemen in all your life. They're local kids. They came in all dressed in jackets and ties. When I was introduced to them, boy, that was quite an experience for me. It was an experience for them too, "Here's this old guy who went to my school."

There were a lot of blacks in the college I went to. I went to Upsala College in East Orange, New Jersey. There was a large black population there, so there were a lot of black kids in the school. But the significant place where I really interacted with blacks was in the service. I met a lot of them there. You really gained respect for people there, when you're dependent on them. That dependence builds up and that in turn builds respect.

There were a couple of people I remember well. One was a guy named Genino Walker, whom I played football with. He was one heck of a guy, a tough football player. He bailed me out many times, he really did. You form a bond and a real friendship that way. Another guy was someone I met when I was working for Boeing out in Seattle. I was playing handball out there in the YMCA. I was on the court one day throwing a ball around and he challenged me to a game. He was a big man. It turns out he was a former all-American lineman from Iowa State. This guy was about forty years old at the time and I was about twenty-five. He seemed like an old man to me. He was one big guy. We started playing and he bumped me. He said, "I like to play rough." We used to have terrific handball games.

I didn't know right away that he was a dermatologist, Homer Harris, with a big practice in Seattle. This was in 1957, and I think most of his patients were white. He was really a great guy, a real gentleman. On the handball court, though, he was anything but a gentleman. Somehow we got very friendly—not on a social basis or anything like that, but because he was older not because he was a different color. We used to meet down at the handball club often. Being a dermatologist, he

even tried to save my hair at one point—I'm bald. That respect and friendship that evolved there was very, very strong.

There were a number of people like that whom I've known over the years. We're just good friends. I have white people who are good friends and black people who are good friends. When I think back on it now that you bring this topic up, there were a couple of people like that who were significant in my life.

*How did you happen to come to MIT, and what were your early impressions of MIT?*

I was scared to death. Remember now, I was just a kid from Newark. I went to a little dinky commuter school as an undergraduate. The only reason I went there was that it was the only place that would give me an athletic scholarship. I was too small and too slow for any of the big schools.

I majored in physics in college because they didn't have any engineering. When I went to work for Boeing, I was in electrical engineering. Then I thought, "Maybe I'd better learn some electrical engineering." I took a few courses at the University of Washington when I was out there, then Boeing transferred me back to the east coast. I thought I should get a master's degree in electrical engineering. I went first to Northeastern, and then I came over here and talked to people here. My wife—we weren't married then, at the time we were going out together—said, "Oh, my boss went to MIT. You should go to MIT." She talked me into coming over here and applying.

I made a big mistake. I walked in across Killian Court the first day and went in up the steps of Building 10. That's such an impressive entrance way. It's the worst place for someone who has never seen the place to walk in. It just scares the daylights out of you. I went up and I talked to someone in the department, filled in an application, and so forth. They let me in, to my surprise.

I remember the first days in class, when I met all these students with foreign accents and everything. I said, "Gee, I'm in the big leagues now!" That was scary.

*What years were those?*

That was when I was here as a graduate student, 1959 to 1966.

*Do you have any sense of the presence of blacks at that time?*

There weren't very many. There were some very good ones in my undergraduate school in East Orange. That's to that school's credit. It was a pretty diverse population there, even in those days.

*Move from your graduate student days to the point where you became a professor.*

Like a lot of things, it was just more accidents. I went ahead and worked on a master's degree, and I was planning to go back and work for Boeing. I was sitting in a classroom one day with a couple of other students working on some problems on the blackboard. It was a weekend, I think. I saw a brochure there about the School of Industrial Management at MIT. I didn't even know there was any such thing. I said, "Hey, this looks interesting. Maybe I'll go learn something about economics, go down there and take a course." They had a course called "Seminar in R&D Management." As an engineer, I said, "That sounds good." It was the first time it was ever offered. I got to know the professor who taught the course, Donald Marquis. They had just gotten a large grant from NASA to start a major research program in R&D management. I talked to him one day and he said, "Look, you're finishing your degree and going back to work. Why don't you take a year off, a leave of absence, and work for the summer? We'd like to have somebody from industry."

So I went to Boeing, asked for a leave of absence, and they said, "Okay, for one year." Then I got an NSF grant myself during that year to do some more research. By that time, I decided I'd be foolish not to apply for the Ph.D. program. So I did, and then I did a Ph.D. in management. Then they hired me on the faculty. I had no anticipation of that. Me a professor at MIT? Not a chance, not a chance.

*What's your assessment of the black presence on campus during your time here as a professor? I'm particularly interested in your viewpoint with regard to your area, management, and in general as far as faculty and administrators. How have you seen that over the years, in terms of the lack or development of the black presence on campus?*

There definitely has been an increase; when I go way back, one new black student would have been a marked increase. I've been an advisor to a lot of students, and a lot of them have been black stu-

dents. I can remember the early '70s, I guess it would have been, when there were several students who were really struggling. These were black students who had been admitted and who were really struggling. How much of it was due to the fact that maybe the Admissions Office made some mistakes, and how much of it may have been due to the fact that there was prejudice against them and it was hard for them to perform? It's hard to separate what those causes were. It stands out in my mind because you saw the difficulty much more then than you do now. You don't see black students struggling now like they did then. Partly that's because there are more black students now. Also, I think the white faculty may be getting a little better. It's still a tough fight, but it may be getting a little better, although I hear some viewpoints expressed that make me think things aren't getting better. But hopefully, they are.

I remember a case with someone who had all the ability, but he was having a tough, tough time. He wouldn't study. He just wasn't preparing himself. I gave him a real fatherly lecture. I said, "What I'm going to do now is keep an eye on you. I want you here in this office. I'm going to get you a desk and I want you here every day, so I'll know where you are and whether you're working or not." Well, you couldn't even imagine what that did for this young fellow. I gave him a desk in the inner office with the graduate research assistants. He moved in and, let me tell you, he fixed that office up. He had bookshelves, he had everything. He lived for that office. He was there all the time. He studied hard. He went out and became very successful. He got a job with AT&T. It was a tremendous thing, but all I did was get him a desk.

*This was an undergraduate student?*

Yes, an undergraduate student. He wasn't a UROP or anything, so officially not on the books to get a desk. But I said, "I want to keep an eye on you, so I'm going to get you a desk and I want you here every day. I want to see your face right here." Man, I tell you, what a difference that made! When I reflect on that, it was just to have somebody who was concerned enough about him to do that. He never said anything. He just worked hard, and I felt tremendous about it. As a teacher, you think back and you say, "I think I've seen some things where I've helped somebody out." That young fellow gave me that feeling.

*Have you seen him since he left?*

No, I haven't.

*What would you say about black faculty in your area?*

There have been very few in all the years. There just haven't been many.

*What's your view about what accounts for the lack of black faculty in management?*

I honestly don't know. I think they have been honest in trying to recruit, I really do. At least I know some people there have been.

*You don't have any blacks there now.*

I know. There's a cloud of racism that people have to recognize in themselves, I found when I was an associate dean.

*I think it's important to say how you see that kind of racism.*

Racism is so ingrained in this society that people don't see it in themselves. They don't see it very well. Without even thinking, two people will walk in—one's white, one's black—and they assume the black isn't as capable. Yet they don't know a thing about either one of them, nothing.

When I was associate dean down there, I can remember how you could just see it. When I would bring in a black candidate, they would discount that person right away. They'd say, "He's not going to perform and we can't get rid of him if he doesn't perform." I got so mad, so angry about that. They didn't say that openly, mind you, but you'd have to be pretty dumb not to see it by implication, through the way they behaved and said things and so forth. It was there. Very often it was not overt. It was ingrained in them. They'd just assume right away that the black person is not as capable. They don't even know they're making that assumption, I think. It's just, "We have a) and b), and b) isn't going to do as well as a) would." How much that has affected faculty hiring, I'm not sure. I just don't know enough. But I've seen it so much in the behavior—not in everybody, of course, but in so many people you wouldn't expect it from, people who espouse liberal values. It's deep. These aren't rednecks I'm talking about. These are people who make wonderful talk. They'll talk up a storm. I don't like criticizing people, but it's true.

I can remember one situation that I was very upset about, but I'm happy now because the job was going to be in a particular center where there

were going to be all kinds of problems. I was so happy for her sake. She's a very capable woman and she might have saved it. But it was tough, it was going to be tough.

*I value your work in this arena and your relationship with a number of us. You know how you say people who talk the talk don't always walk the walk? You fit the walk-that-walk bill in several ways. When you reflect on the nature of some close relationships that I know you've had with black professionals here on this campus—I'm thinking of one, in particular—what are some of the highlights of your understanding of these things?*

It's hard to say. I go back to what my father said years ago, "We're all the same under the skin." That's true. My relationship with black people is the same as with white people—they're people, damn it, people. It's the same way with faculty colleagues. We're colleagues. I don't give a damn what your ancestry might have been. What's that got to do with anything?

You take Wes Harris. There's a great man, I think. He's a heck of a guy. He's really solid, strong, and everything else. He's Wes Harris, not Tom Allen. We're just friends, that's all. I've known Wes for a long time.

*That's a part of you, but other people don't always have that.*

White folks are very often uncomfortable with black folks, you can see that. You've seen people talking about two nations growing up side by side.

*If you had to give advice to a young black administrator or faculty member coming to a place like MIT, what would you say?*

Hang in there, because you're going to have a tough time. I've felt it, and it wouldn't have been as much as a black person would. I always thought, "Why am I here? Somebody made a mistake." We all go through that phase. Coming from where I came from, MIT was just such a reach that I thought I didn't stand a prayer of a chance of succeeding as a student, let alone as a faculty member. But I stuck it out. You hang in there and gradually people begin to accept you. It's a good place in the long run, but it's a tough struggle. I think you need to come prepared for that. You've just got to dig in and get rid of that self-doubt. We all have it, so don't figure you're the only one.

What I would say to whites about blacks is, "If they don't understand, we don't understand."

We don't understand how people will react in a situation. What I say in my class is, "How you react to a situation is very much determined by your background and experiences." A young black faculty member coming in will be worried, plagued by self-doubts. He's going to interpret things in different ways. Whites say, "Why did he behave like that?" They interpret it from a white perspective as to why. But I say, "No, no, no. You've got to stop and think. If you were in that situation and you were black, and you saw a lot of white people around here and not many black faces, how would you react to that situation?" They don't even think about that, but it's different.

But I think one of the things about young black professors is that by the time they get to be an age to be a professor, they've seen so many experiences like that that they know how white folks are going to react in different ways. Black folks are misinterpreted because white folks don't understand why they're doing this or why they're doing that. There's a perfectly rational explanation for it, but they don't understand it.

*It's a very good point.*

I'm not articulating it very well.

*It's very clear to me.*

*If you wanted to improve the relationships between black faculty and white faculty, administrators, and students—and between other folks who are different from each other—what suggestions would you make to the administration?*

Just that we're all people and we've got to get more people. We can't keep ourselves separate.

*But in order to be able to do that, you've got to have people who are different in the same arena.*

Yes, exactly. Whether you can do that administratively or not, I don't know. You've got to get people together. There have to be more blacks here, for one thing, if you're going to improve relations. There are only a few and not enough to make a difference. You've got to get more into the system. Once you get enough of them in the system, you get to know them and that breaks down stereotypes. You say, "This guy a) is not the same as this guy b). They are different people." Suddenly, that opens up people's eyes.

*Our departments and schools have their own government. And their own culture.*

*Their own culture, right. I can't think of a place that fits that bill more precisely than the Sloan School.*

Yes. It's different, it has its own culture.

*It has its own culture. When you look at the structure, you have a very large administrative category. But you do have a structure there. Then you have a faculty that really has a lot to do with influencing that group, because most of the people up there come from there. In my twenty-seven years here, when I look at that area, they started down a path. They have had some people who happened to be black, for example Phyllis Wallace, who was the only black tenured faculty woman in the Sloan School. But then it changed. There may be one or two still in that group, but they have very little to do with the top—and never have, since I've been here.*

Phyllis Wallace was the closest to it.

*When you look at it, and that was in the early '80s, I think we were probably better off in that particular school then than we are now.*

It's a shame, exactly.

*A lot of other places here have done the same thing, not only your school. We know one thing that has to happen if we're going to develop this relationship.*

We've got to get some numbers. Even then, we know from experience that that's something that can slip away. People just slip away. The situation will just erode. Even the Martin Luther King fellowships haven't done anything dramatic.

*We do need more faculty members like yourself. I know, and have watched, a lot of things that you have done. I watched one particular situation where you really walked the walk and talked the talk: you were the chair of a certain search committee.*

And you were on the committee.

*I was on it. I learned more about you on that search committee than anything anybody had ever told me before. And then there was what you did after the search committee was finished.*

I didn't do much. I just hung around.

*You can say that, but I know better.*

That's a place where we really needed relationships. He needed to have a good friend who was not black. It was very important. I realized that.

*That hasn't been the only case. What we are lacking, in my opinion, is more people like you. There is such a minimal number of people like you who are white.*



You make me think of something. Very often I talk with companies about engineers going into a company. I always say, “What you want to do is find an older engineer—pick the right one, though—and you can pair them up in a relationship, as a mentoring thing.” If we can do that with young black faculty in some way, that would be good. I don’t know if old black faculty would be mentors, or old white faculty. The key is to find the right ones and pair them up. Give them an informal role and say, “Here’s this young fellow. Be a friend to him, work with him.” Try to build that friendship and get them to work together in some fashion. Find ways to establish those bonds. But you’ve got to find the right ones, the right pairings to do it. That might be a way to help with the process. There just aren’t enough senior black faculty to do it.

*And it seems to me it shouldn’t necessarily be black faculty, even if there were enough of them.*

Yes, that’s right. Cross-relationships can really help. That’s what white people should do. Let’s flip it around. Let’s say that I belonged to the other group, that ninety-five percent of the population at MIT was black and I’m a white coming in here. Am I going to bond with the few white people? If I could find one black person who was a real friend, who gave me a connection into that majority community and gave me some advice—someone I could really trust as a friend—I’d feel a heck of a lot more secure.

*That’s very well stated. I think most people who have been in a minority position would feel that way.*

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

I think about what black faculty and students are facing and I think to myself that it’s a cultural mismatch, much like what I faced. Most of the people I was with when I first came here were out of suburban backgrounds, their parents had gone to college, and all that sort of thing. When I first came in here, that was strange. I think to myself, “Tom, remember how you felt and multiply that maybe ten or maybe a hundred times, and that’s how blacks coming in here must feel. They feel that much worse than you did.” You can understand the problem with the place when you think of it that way.

*I can appreciate everything you’ve said, because I know you’re a person who has not only talked the talk but walked the walk as well.*

We need diversity. There’s all kinds of people. They come from different subcultures and so forth, but there’s always something that they have to offer.

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/6689.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/6689.001.0001)

# Technology and the Dream

## Reflections on the Black Experience at MIT, 1941–1999

By: Clarence G. Williams

### Citation:

*Technology and the Dream: Reflections on the Black Experience at MIT, 1941–1999*

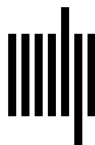
By: Clarence G. Williams

DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/6689.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262286305

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2003



The MIT Press

First MIT Press paperback edition, 2003

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This book was set in Bembo by The MIT Press.

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Williams, Clarence G.

Technology and the dream : reflections on the Black experience at MIT, 1941–1999 / Clarence G. Williams.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-262-23212-X (hc. : alk. paper), 0-262-73157-6 (pb)

1. Massachusetts Institute of Technology—History.
2. Afro-American college students—Massachusetts—Cambridge—Interviews. I. Title.

T171.M49 .W55 2001

378.744'4—dc21

00-052707

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