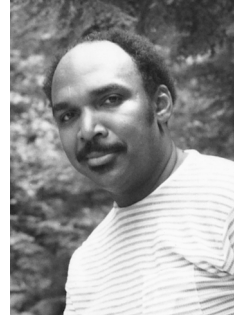


## JOHN A. MIMS

b. 1940, BS 1966 (education) Chicago State College, MEd 1976 (student personnel services and administration) Harvard University; assistant director of undergraduate admissions, Chicago State College, 1966–1968; MIT, 1969–1975, with special responsibility for minority recruitment; associate director of undergraduate admissions, Yale University, 1976–1980; director, Talent Search Program, 1980–1985; budget assistant to director of programs, 1985–1986, and outreach supervisor, 1987–1988, California State University at Pomona; associate director of undergraduate admissions, University of California at Davis, 1988– ; member, Commission on Human Resources, Committee on the Education and Employment of Minority Group Members in Science, National Research Council, 1974–1978.



*John, this report on the minority applicant pool study. That was done by you, right?*  
That's correct.

*And you said Lynne Richardson helped you to do it.*  
Lynne Richardson worked for me in the Admissions Office as a student aide. She would do some of the research and assist with some of the challenges.

*How good would you say she was?*  
Better than me: great. I'm serious.

*You are proud of so many students.*  
To start with, Lynne came from her junior year of high school. From when she was a freshman, she worked in the Admissions Office. She worked four years in the Admissions Office and had a desk outside my door. See, I'm not dumb in who I pick to help me. I figure that was one of the smartest things in the world I ever did. She used to write a lot of the speeches for the Black Students' Union presidents, then the boys would go out and give the speeches. She would sit back very quiet and docile-like, but she was never docile. Never be confused, okay? But she was very lady-like.

*Very kind, but as tough as nails under those tears.*  
You got it, under the tears. She had a lot of pain. Do you know her mother passed away, her aunt passed away?

*While she was in school.*  
And when she got ready to go to medical school, the reason she picked a school in New York is because she wound up being the surrogate parent to her cousin. She had a little eight- or nine-year-old girl when she went through medical school

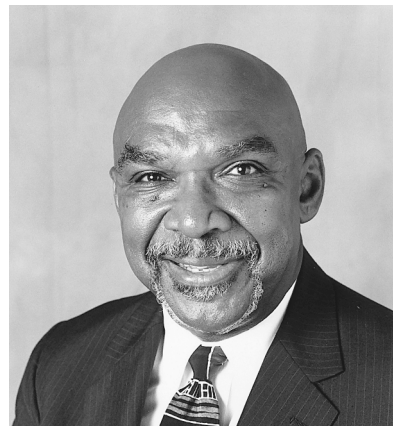
Edited and excerpted from an oral history interview conducted by Clarence G. Williams with John A. Mims in Los Angeles, California, 13 March 1997.

who was like her little sister. But also, she was the parent for that girl. When she graduated medical school, this young lady was graduating junior high school and they had a joint party. And because Lynne played basketball, she coached the junior high school basketball team that this little girl was on while she was in medical school, so that they could be together. And she graduated on time. She's special people, period. That was a long time ago.

*Let me come back to you. All of us knew a lot about you in terms of the job you were doing, at least when I came in 1972. But what I think a lot of people don't know is that you were really the first black associate director of admissions.*

Assistant director.

*You came in as assistant?*  
And I left as assistant.



*I always considered you as associate. You paved the way for a lot of folks. But the point is that you were the man in that Admissions Office, certainly for us and for others who didn't know it. You set the stage for everything that has happened since, in my opinion.*

*But before we get to your actual work and experience you had there, where did you grow up? Tell me something about your family and your pre-college days, and what you did after you finished high school.*

I didn't know it when I grew up, but I was brainwashed to go to college the day I was born. I say that looking back in retrospect, and I mean that.

I was born in Boley, Oklahoma. It's an all-black town. The reason it was black is that when there was the rush for land, blacks were not allowed to settle in white territories, so they went out to territories that the whites did not want. And that's what Boley is, an all-black town. In the 1920s, it was like twenty-five hundred people, with several banks, stores, its own schools. The people in Boley ran their own schools, so you had educated black people who told all of the children, "You will go to college." That's where my uncle grew up. That's why he and many of his brothers and sisters went on to college in the 1920s, because that's what they were expected to do.

I have five brothers. There were six boys and a total of twenty-one brothers and first cousins. Out of the twenty-one of us who came out of Boley, one way or the other, nineteen of us went to college all during the 1940s, '50s, and '60s. That's primarily because we were brainwashed that we were going to go. That's something at one level you don't take credit for, if you understand what I'm talking about. I look around at the reverse. The next generation that grew up all over the country, only half of those young people went to college. Some are in jail and some are in other places. The further we got away from that Boley legacy, the fewer people were successful.

*Who was responsible, would you say, for that major achievement of going beyond the typical educational process?*

My mother and father strongly believed in education. My father went to Hampton in the 1920s. He led a student demonstration as president of the student body. They took his scholarship away, which was the same as expelling him. He didn't graduate, but he punished them—he sent my three oldest brothers there. One of my brothers taught there. I've got two sisters-in-law from Hampton.

*So you have a real tradition, family-wise, at Hampton.*

In some ways, yes. What happened, though, was that when I was a senior in high school, I always assumed I would go to college, but my father had a heart attack in April. After that heart attack, he was only working half-time for the next year or two. So I went to the military after high school, I didn't go to college. I went to the military and spent two years in Germany. That exposed me to German. When I went to college, I wound up taking four years of German and was president of the German Club.

*When you came back you were fluent?*

Yes. I had a very, very serious disrespect for the French, who were nasty to everybody even in the 1950s and '60s. They were not polite to you from the first day you got there. Strangely enough, while there was some racism in Germany, there were lots of Germans who were far more friendly. I enjoyed Germany a lot more than I enjoyed France.

*What years were those?*

'59 to '61.

*So when you came out of the service, how did you decide what school you were going to go to?*

Purely luck. I came out and I was working in Detroit trying to just go to school and do everything on my own. I was twenty-one and I was going to do it all on my own. I was going to night school at the University of Detroit and I got a job at a ham factory, stuffing hams into the plastic bags. I didn't realize that that factory was setting up for Easter, so at the end of January they laid us all off. I thought it was a permanent job. I didn't realize they had no intentions of me working there permanently. When I got laid off, I also wound up being forced to work overtime—chose to work overtime—and missed my finals. So I flunked my courses at the college I was going to and got laid off the next week.

That's when my uncle told me that my parents had moved to Chicago, and he said it was time for me to go home and go to school. I moved to Chicago and in September I started at Chicago State. Four years later I graduated. That's when I considered myself lucky, because my parents were there and I could just go home and go to school and graduate on time, with support.

When I was at Chicago State, I worked on the newspaper and wound up being editor-in-chief. That became political. It was particularly

interesting, since at that time Chicago State—which was really Chicago Teachers College and Teachers College South, with a couple thousand students—was about ninety-eight percent white in the middle of the South Side of Chicago. Being editor-in-chief of the newspaper meant that there were three blacks on the staff, and you had to figure out how to politic to get there. It was also in the middle of the '60s, with demonstrations and riots and a whole lot of other things, so they were some interesting times.

When I became a senior and registered to graduate, originally I was going to graduate late because I had a stipend to go to Germany that summer. I had taken four years of German, but I decided in February I didn't want to go to Germany in the summer because it meant I would not graduate till December. So I changed my mind and said I would take summer school for my second teaching course, because I was in special ed. I did regular teacher training and then, in the summer school, I would do my special ed teacher training and I would graduate in August.

The day I filled out the papers to do that, the dean called me up and said, "I want you to come in and talk to me." I said, "About what?" He said, "Well, we have a position on campus I want to talk to you about." I said, "Fine, I'll be there on Thursday." I hung up the phone and then I thought about it and called him back, saying, "You have a what? I'll be in there in the morning." This was Monday night.

So I went in, and what he basically did with some money was hire me to work in Admissions. When I started to work in Admissions, there was only one other black working in college admissions in the state of Illinois, and that was at the YMCA College in Chicago. The only other non-white person was an Asian-American, who was the director of admissions of a two-year community college in Evanston, Illinois. Everyone in Admissions was white at that time, in 1966. When I started to recruit, what would happen was that I would visit a high school and discover that while there were white recruiters, most of them had never visited any of the black high schools in Chicago. So when you would show up, people would be surprised that a college rep was showing up.

Those were some weird times. The biggest advantage I had was that the Admissions Office had not hired me, the dean had hired me. The

Admissions Office had never recruited anyone but white students. In fact, I walked into campus one day and no one was in the Admissions Office. I discovered they were having a counselors' meeting upstairs. I went upstairs. There were a hundred high school counselors, and not one of them was from a predominantly black high school. Right on the campus of the college was a high school that was predominantly black, and not even that counselor was invited to the meeting.

So this was very deliberate, what they were doing in the mid-'60s. This was not by accident. They were busy showing how the university was hiring two attack dogs with policemen to guard the student parking lot, so that the white students would be safe when they came. Chicago State at that time was in the middle of a predominantly black area, but again, the school was ninety-seven or ninety-eight percent white.

And that's when I started to work in Admissions. I went to a meeting one day at a junior high school. There was this assembly to talk to students about going to school. There was a gray-haired white man on stage interviewing this little black kid. I walked in and wondered, "What is that old white man doing up there?" I sat there and watched him interview the kids and, by the end of that session, David Dudley was my mentor and I understood why he was up there. He was absolutely phenomenal in the way he worked with young people.

We worked together on the Pullman Foundation. The Pullman Foundation would give scholarships to minority students, black students primarily, in Chicago. David was on it. I got on it because he invited me on it. He was the director of admissions of the Illinois Institute of Technology. We worked together there for another year or so, and then one day David said, "I put your name in to some friends of mine and they will be calling you." I said, "Where?" He said, "At MIT." I said, "Why?" He said, "They're looking for a black admissions officer, and I recommended you." I said, "Where's MIT?" He said, "In Cambridge, Massachusetts." I said, "Is that a good school?" At that time, I had never heard of MIT. He said, "Yes, it's a fairly good school. I think you'll like it."

So Roland Greeley called me, and they flew me out and interviewed me. After the interview, I was offered a job.

*Who was involved in the interview?*

Roland Greeley, Julie McLellan, Pete Richardson, Sam Jones from financial aid, Dan Langdale, and Peter Buttner. That's where I met all those guys, right there during my interview. All those folks were right there leading the charge.

*Do you remember anything striking about that interview?*  
I think so, yes. For one thing, I had rented a car. It was my first time to Boston. We rented a car. I think I left the keys in the trunk when I was going in and it got stolen. That's one of the things I remember, that the rental car got stolen while I was in interviewing. I had parked it on Mass Ave.

I remember I was supposed to stay at the Garden Hotel in Harvard Square. I drove around trying to find that one little slip that you get in to get to it about five times, and finally my wife, who had come out with me, got in a taxi, I drove the car, and the taxi took us to the hotel because we couldn't find it.

Everyone was friendly—very, very friendly. They were laid back. This was the end of September, and I told Roland Greeley, “I just started working and I'm naive. I just started doing the recruitment and I sure don't want to stop the recruitment season. When do you want me to come?” So he says, “Why don't you come in January?” So I said, “Okay, I'll come in January,” and that was a done deal. I was offered Admissions at the end of September to start January 1.

*You were offered the job after you were interviewed, while you were on the trip?*

We were talking about that basically, yes. See, one of the things that happened—and I didn't know it at the time—was that I basically had the job when I came unless I messed up. David Dudley was previously the associate director of admissions at MIT.

*He knew about MIT because he worked there.*

Not only that, but David Dudley was also the director of admissions at Columbia University for a number of years. He's part of the “Eastern establishment” in that sense. So when he recommended me, I was innocent till proven guilty, quite frankly. I didn't realize it, but the job was mine unless I messed up. That was the old boy system. They didn't interview ten people. If they liked the first candidate, they took him.

That's who David Dudley was. He was a phenomenon unto himself. When he was at Illinois

Institute of Technology, he was the affirmative action program. He did all of the tutoring for the black kids who came into that school. He was their STEP, their summer program, and he did all of those things. He tutored them in anything they needed.

*You've been offered the job, you accept the job, and you come into this strange place that you really didn't know that much about at that point. Do you recall coming on that job in January and what you were really faced with? In a couple of months there, you were the person they were going to depend on, I suspect, to change the whole culture of this place.*

I do remember some of that. I remember Jim Allison. I met him during the interview and he was one of the most helpful people to me, one of the few black people I met who talked to me. When I came in January, the first week I was there, the students officially came to my office and asked if I would come to a meeting on Sunday at, let's say, three or four in the afternoon. I came to that meeting at three or four in the afternoon, and they grilled and interrogated me.

*Had that ever happened to you before?*

Never—no, no, no. At the end of the meeting, they were very formal and they said, “You can leave now.” I was shocked. I said, “I beg your pardon?” They said, “This part of the meeting is over and you can leave.” What I discovered, and what I did not know and what the administration had not told me, was that in October the students had come to the Admissions Office and said, because this is what was happening all over the country, “We demand that you hire a black admissions officer.” The director of admissions said, “We've already hired him.” “What do you mean you've already hired him?” “He'll be here in January.” So they said, “He's coming in January and he was hired by white people? He must be no damn good. We don't trust him and he's an enemy.”

It was January 1969 when I showed up. I thought the day I walked on campus the black students would be the best friends I ever had. What I did not know, and there was no one to warn me of this, was that they were my worst enemy because the day I walked on, they did not trust me. I was already hired and they didn't get to interview me, and I was being hired by hostile people who they thought were negative people. So I had to be no good.

I didn't talk to a lot of the black faculty members at that time. There weren't a lot of black staff. What I do remember very vividly was, maybe six months after I had been there, that I came in early one morning around 6:30 to get something in the office. During the day shift, when you walked through MIT in early '69 or '70, you would see custodians all over the place. There were one or two black custodians, but there were hundreds of white custodians. I walked in at 6:30 one morning—I was in the basement—and I saw a hundred black custodians. They were all on the eleven to seven shift. They did the heavy cleaning and left before anyone showed up to where they could be seen. That was culture shock for me. That just blew me away. I was not prepared for that.

The other thing that happened was that when the black community of Boston discovered that MIT had hired an outsider, they were furious. The people in Boston said, "You mean to tell us out of all the black people in the city of Boston and Massachusetts, you have to go outside the state and you have to go halfway across the country?" They were livid, literally livid—and hostile, I might add. There was a lot of anger there.

When I tried to find a house or an apartment—I was going to rent first to see what we had—it's a long, long story, but the discrimination in not recognizing where you can and cannot live was there. I had a young cousin with me. I made a decision, since he was in elementary school, that I wanted to find a decent school system. What I discovered in Boston was that in the black community all the teachers were white. There wasn't a black school system with black teachers. It was black students being taught by white people and most of those kids were not learning. So I made a conscious decision to move to a school district such that if this kid were to be taught by white folks, it would be in a district where the kids were being successful. That's when I decided to rent in Newton, which was ninety-eight percent white.

That was a problem there. We started to join a black Baptist church in Roxbury, and they immediately came to the conclusion, "Since you live in Newton, you must be rich, wealthy, and have no problems, so therefore you can solve *our* problems." Pretty soon I found a black church in Framingham, where we were suburban people with our own problems and everybody was fighting to survive. No one assumed you had it made,

because you were getting hit upside the head all the time with the problems you had wherever you lived, and the fantasies were not there.

Those were some of the problems. One of the other things that happened, we started networking in Boston and different people would get together at the colleges. David Evans was at Harvard. He would invite all the black college admissions people over for lunch, and we would sit and talk. Then Brandeis would invite them over and they would talk. Then it happened on my watch. I was having a luncheon and I had a budget, I might add, so we had a number of black people in the community over that day. We probably had twenty-five or thirty folks for lunch. There were a couple of the state colleges and some smaller colleges in the group. Finally, they couldn't take it anymore and the blacks stood up and said, "I'm tired of you guys showing off. We don't have budgets, so we can't afford to invite you to our schools, and all you do is flout your damn wealth." The anger—and I had been there less than six months. I thought, "I'm using this stuff for black folks. I thought this was great, and *bam!*—you get slapped upside the head by someone who doesn't have it who thinks you're showing off." So you got attacked by many sides.

Then what happened, the problems came out and it was not just admissions. The black students who were there in '69, the campus police were not used to seeing them on campus, so when the students walked across campus they would get stopped, sometimes two and three times the same night by different police officers. The kids were hostile because they were being stopped and harassed. And it's, "We know you're not a student here. I'll let you up slowly so you can show me your ID." The kids were always at that time, angry and hostile and not very happy about what was going on. No one really accepted the fact that there were that many black students walking around.

In January, February, or March of '69, one of the graduate schools called me up. I got to the meeting and they said, "You're in Admissions: do you think we should admit these black students?" I looked at them. These folks were asking me whether or not we should be admitting black students to master's and Ph.D. programs. I'm saying, "I don't know. I don't have any idea. I can hardly figure out how to get these kids admitted to cal-

culus downstairs as undergraduates, and what the parameters are.”

Those were mind-boggling times that were coming up there—the different people with all these expectations, people calling you up and saying, “Oh, you’re black, we want you on the committee. We want you to come in here and do this and we want you to do this. Tell us what you think about this.” All of a sudden, you were an expert for everybody. That’s when I went to the dean of the Graduate School and suggested that they needed to hire someone in the Graduate School office. He was not receptive to it at that time.

I went to that Council meeting. All the people from the departments were there. When it came time for new business, I raised my hand—the only black person in the room. The dean of the Graduate School was there, and I said, “Excuse me, sir. I would like to recommend that, with all the problems coming up, you hire someone in the Graduate School who is black.” The dean hemmed and hawed, and he finally said, “Well, this is not the appropriate body to discuss that. It’s a student affair. I think we should refer it to the Graduate Student Council.” One of the best things happened that day. A little white kid who was the president of the Graduate Student Council stood up and said, “Sir, I don’t think we’re qualified to deal with that,” and he pushed it back on the dean. Instead of “Yes, I’ll take it,” the dean was hemming and hawing.

So what happened, the dean tabled it. When I got back to my office, five of the advisors for the departments of the Graduate School were down in my office saying, “Yes, I don’t know how to deal with these black applicants. I would love to find somebody to do that.” Out of that discussion, we wound up deciding to have a search committee and the dean agreed to hire someone in the Graduate School. After a long and exhaustive search, they made a decision and some dude from some place showed up. His name was Clarence Williams. You might know who I’m talking about.

*I might know who you’re talking about.*

I’ll tell you, Clarence, I don’t know if you know this or not, but once they had interviewed the candidates, I talked with you.

*Yes, I remember.*

Because I was on that search committee, when it was all through, they would send them by me. I

got this one fellow—one of the finalists—and he said, “Boy, am I glad to see you. Tell me something. Can you get tuition for your kids while you’re here?” That was the first question out of his mouth. I’m looking for somebody to cover my back at the graduate level, do you hear what I’m telling you? This fellow had no idea that he was the last person on my short list. He was like, “What can I get out of this place?”

The good part about that—and I say this in testimony to you, quite frankly—is that a year later the dean deliberately came to see me and said, “I think your fighting for this position was a good move.” I was always leery how folks like that might then stab you in the back and try to get rid of you and do you in. I felt very good the day he told me that and we could move on to something else, at least I could. That was another weight off my shoulders. Those were the types of fights we had, if you would—trying to get people into different positions.

What was that group called, the one Paul Gray chaired?

*The Task Force on Educational Opportunity.*

The Task Force, thank you. We were at one of the first Task Force meetings in late March, early April. The black students were there, and let’s just say they wanted to know who were the students admitted. Some folks in the Admissions Office said, “We don’t know yet, because we haven’t compiled all of that information.” So they asked me, “Mr. Mims, when will we have that?” I said, “I promise you I’ll get it to you as soon as I can.”

When we left the meeting, I walked downstairs. Until that point, I had resisted wanting black students to read admissions folders, because I thought it was the responsibility of the staff to do that and we shouldn’t burden the students with it. I walked into the director’s office with some more key people in the Admissions Office, and I said, “As of right now, I’m lobbying to have students read folders, because I’m not going to be stabbed in the back or caught on the side of the Admissions Office ever again in a lie.”

The report of every black student we admitted, and who they were, was sitting on my desk. But a certain person in that office had decided they did not want the students to see it yet, so they said, “It’s not ready, we haven’t done it.” With students at that time walking in and out of my office, if they had walked in and seen that report, they

would have said, “You lie right along with the rest of those people.” I got mad at that. The last thing I wanted personally was to have students reading folders, but I felt pushed into it. I said, “I’ll never be caught on this side here to where I’m sand-bagged like that.”

*It’s part of that whole scenario when you first came and you had to develop a strategy to try to recruit numbers that we had never had before at MIT. When you go back and look at the time when black students started coming into the institution, at the time when you were hired and the numbers began to have some consistency, you were expected to do a lot of things. Pressure was on you to come to that Task Force every year and indicate some progress relative to these numbers.*

Yes. One of the things that was clear was that the students wanted to do something. One of the things we did in those first couple years was lobby and send lots of students out to recruit. It’s a very interesting thing—most of those students came back and said they didn’t want to go anymore. This was in ’70, ’71, ’72. You see, there’s one thing—and the same thing is true today in the University of California system that I’m working in—most black students do not want to believe: “You’re telling me I’m one of the few people who looks like me. I don’t want to be special. I’m normal. You can’t tell me that in this whole country you can only get thirty, forty, fifty, seventy-five, or a hundred people. There ought to be thousands and thousands of folks like us.”

There is a pain that the students have. They would never say it publicly, but when they would come back, they would say it—“I didn’t really believe when I went to that high school that there were only two or three qualified kids who could really make it at MIT, and I didn’t know what to tell the rest of them.” It became very painful for them. While they would protest and make all types of public posturing, it was frustrating to them.

The other thing that happened is that we wound up having two black students. Keep in mind that at this time Latinos and American Indians and these other groups were not at the forefront of all this, and that’s why they were not discussed at this point. They were a decade away in some ways, five years to a decade away. They were not part of the primary issue at that time, even though we recruited them. One of the things I did was go to the College Board for data. I got ethnic data and other sorts of things that the College

Board was developing, so I could start looking at the demographics of where people were. Then we would go and recruit in cities all over the country. A couple of years I had ads in *Ebony* magazine. We would try to just throw it out there.

*You developed some unique strategies that, at that time, nobody had ever done in the country. One of the things was something about busing people in.*

Yes. Again, I have to say that the person who let me do all of this stuff was Paul Gray. The Admissions Office was not opposed to it, but Paul Gray was the one who came up with the moneys and protected us. In fact, when we were attacked for why we were spending all these moneys on this thing, he explained to the faculty one day, “This is not MIT money. We have outside separate funding for this, so none of your money is being spent on these new things.” The benefactor for a long time didn’t want to be known. I don’t even know if you know who the person was, someone from Ohio. In the late 1960s, an MIT alum from Ohio put up all of the moneys for all of the stuff we were doing. He never wanted credit for it, so I’ll leave him nameless.

*A white alum?*

A white alum. Paul had deep pockets for whatever he thought he needed to do. This anonymous white man said, “Go for it.” He’s the one who made a lot of things happen.

What happened this one year, I wanted to do a conference and bring two hundred students to campus. I brought 250 students, juniors, in June of ’72, I think it was—’72 or ’73. What happened was that from New York, Philadelphia, DC, and Buffalo, we took buses and bused the students to MIT. From Chicago, Atlanta, and St. Louis, we flew students in. From Texas, we flew Chicano/Latino students in.

*This was based on the profile you had.*

Based on the profile we got on these students, right. They were all very, very good students. I will never forget the budget Paul Gray gave me was thousands and thousands and thousands of dollars. Paul sat down, looked me in the eye, and said, “Out of these 250 students, how many are going to actually show up at MIT?” That stumped me. I looked at him and said, “Probably no more than ten percent.” He said, “Then why are we doing it?” I said, “To pay dues. We haven’t told the black community before that we care. Now is the time

to let them know we care. Some of these kids later on might even come to graduate school. It's exposure, and we're trying to let them know we have a commitment to them." He looked at me and said, "Do it."

That was it, it was that easy. Keep in mind, all of the people—Julie McLellan and her whole staff, all of those ladies, all of these little ladies who worked there—most of them were white. There were a couple of blacks over there. I don't want to forget them. You know who I'm talking about? The ones who sat in what I call the two back rooms over there. They made all of that happen. None of their kids were coming. That's what's so special about it. All these folks made it happen.

We flew those kids in, we brought them in on buses, and what happened was that each department had a special show-and-tell. Doc Edgerton agreed to do his show. Cryogenics had a show for doctors on the freezing of blood. Oceanography had something. At that time, they were looking at an oil spill off the coast of New York City, and that was the research they were doing there. Each department was pulling forth some of their best professors and some of their best show-and-tell for these kids when they got there.

We went for a couple of days and went through all of this. Because the students had left campus for the summer break, the high school students lived in the dorms and ate there. One night, about thirty of them decided they were going to go to the Prudential Building, and that's when I decided I needed to walk with them. All of a sudden, that was a new role. I hadn't quite done all the planning on security at night.

A year or a year and a half later, I did a report. Twenty-six students, eventually, out of that group came to MIT. But like anything else, out of that whole group, I got a letter that a lady had sent for her niece to the MIT president, complaining about the non-commitment to black students during this trip. I'm going to tell you how things always bite you where you don't want to be bit. This was a little girl who showed up in the office and who was a B student, who was not going to be admitted, and where she was coming from, I had three empty spaces on the bus. I told her, "When you get back to your city"—she came in at five o'clock one evening to talk to me and she was going home—"I've got a trip coming up in a week. I'll put you on the bus, I'll bring you back up here, and I'll let

you see MIT." Her GPA was 3.0, and there was no way we were going to take her. She wanted to be a doctor. Remember that cryogenics and freezing of blood? We sent her where there were two MD's, and she had no idea of what they were, because to her they weren't doctors.

When she got back she wrote a complaint, and the person who was sponsoring her sent it to Karl Bynoe of the affirmative action program for the state of Massachusetts, talking about the lack of commitment that MIT had to helping minority students. I had to respond to that. What made it even worse, the bus that she was on was dilapidated, had no air, and it was a hundred degrees outside. That bus to DC was a Greyhound bus. After it left New York in June, the air conditioning went out and they could find no more Greyhound buses between New York and DC. They couldn't get them out of Philadelphia and Newark. So the driver, having all these kids on board, said, "I'm driving through and taking these kids home." That's what the girl complained about. The only one to complain was the one who was the least qualified. She had no idea. The director told me, "If you ever invite an unqualified person again, I'm going to write you up on that."

So that was what we did. The students each year would attack you for not admitting a hundred black students. A hundred was their goal. They would attack you, they would criticize you. But there were always enough students who loved you who kept you there. Don't ever be confused about that, but there was always a group beating the hell out of you every day because you had "no commitment to anything."

*One of the things you talked about that you had probably a better knowledge about than anybody else is this whole thing about determining which student can really make it at MIT. You had to make some shots on that. I want you to talk about how you did that process. You understood what you were trying to get, that thirty or forty kids.*

I would have to say the balance on that team was between Pete Richardson and Paul Gray. They were on the team. We always had another faculty member who read folders. The other person in the office who gave me a lot of insights was Bryce Leggett. He was a heck of a mentor to me. Roland Greeley was the leader, but Bryce was the intellectual philosopher who talked about things.



The question came down to this—and we still use it in Admissions today, it was very clear for black students—did you get the best grades where you were in the most difficult courses available? Then we could put less weight on the SAT's. A score of 550 in math was the minimum we would go to. But that kid normally had a 3.8 or 3.9. The truth of the matter is, that was not the normal admissions criterion for MIT.

One of the first things they did in the summer program, Project Interphase, was invite white students. What they discovered was that the 4.0 white kid with 1000 or 1100 SAT's, most of those students washed out. But if you had a 4.0 black student with 1000 SAT's, that student graduated MIT. If you had a white kid with a 4.0 and 1000 SAT's, they found it very difficult and normally did not graduate MIT. That's because those SAT's meant more for that kid than for our kids.

Let me tell you what happens right now, today. You go to the College Board. Right now, in 1997, the College Board will give you a graph showing that there's a direct correlation between SAT's and family income and ethnicity. The students with the highest SAT's are Asians, the next curve line is white, the next line is Mexican American, and the last line is African American. They go from \$10,000 income and below to \$60,000. The \$10,000 is here and the \$60,000 is here. It's as distinct as it can be.

That is an ethnic, culturally biased test, documented by the College Board. What it really amounts to, to turn it around, is that the richest people have the best chance of giving their kids the best education. That's really all it amounts to. It's not like it's prejudiced in that way. But the truth of the matter is, if you take someone who is \$75,000, \$80,000, \$90,000 a year, and they're college-educated, the vocabulary they use in the home is far more sophisticated than someone with a fourth-grade education. The books and things that the kid sees around him are such that the youngster growing up in that environment hears a whole different type of conversation at home. So it shouldn't surprise anyone that for the wealthiest, most successful people, their kids as a group have the best chance of having the highest SAT's.

*So then, the few blacks who come out of these very impoverished areas and end up being at MIT, even in the '50s and '60s, are very rare.*

That's right. Those people of any ethnicity are the exception to the rule. There are always exceptions to every rule. You will find a kid on welfare with 800 SAT's, but if you were to look at all of the people with 1500 SAT's in any group of people, the majority of those folks have over \$60,000 a year incomes. There's always an exception to the rule.

This is why, with the reverse exception to the rule, one of the things that made me fall in love with MIT in this sense was this. They had this kid who came to MIT—550 math—and he was in the Interphase program. The second summer he was there, I looked up and these stupid folks had him teaching math. I was livid. I said, "Boy, there's no commitment here." I went through and I watched it and I questioned, but then I watched the students who were coming out of this guy's class. And the kids were in total of awe of him, Sylvester Gates. Sylvester didn't have a 600 math score, and he ended up getting a Ph.D. Not only that, but the faculty there discovered he was brilliant as a sophomore. What happened was that he had taken the SAT's in his junior year in high school and never took them again. At first I thought, "They definitely don't know what they're doing," but I was never more wrong in my life. Those are the fun times, when you get those things.

There were lots of fights at MIT, from students, from faculty to staff. Students never trust administrators. We were in difficult times. Some students did trust you, though, and that was the good part.

He was the leader. He made it happen. Howard Johnson and a lot of other people gave him permission, but I think he took a big risk. It was not popular, there was no guarantee as to how it was to come out, and as a trained scientist, there was nothing in his background that said he knew how to relate. I think he was very special and unique for taking that task on and being committed to saying, "I'm going to do it and I'm going to do it fairly."

We came to a point, and I think you were there, where the Task Force was almost terminated. Paul went from September to February or March hearing some major lies. He stuck that out before finally the students came forth and said, "We were trying to be political. We didn't think it would go this far." I might add that was also one of the worst nightmares I had at MIT. In a September meeting, I walked into that meeting

and the students said, “We did not agree to have the Office of Minority Affairs in that office. We wanted it in this office and we never agreed to have it in that office.” And Paul Gray said, “Yes, you did.” I was the only administrator in the room who had been in the June meeting. Paul turned to me and said, “John, what do you remember?” I said, “They agreed to it.” The students looked me in the eye and said, “No, we didn’t.”

I walked out of that meeting and there was a senior black faculty member, to whom I said, “May I talk to you for a minute?” He said, “I have nothing to say to you.” From that September until February, we didn’t talk. We had several black caucuses talking about these things, and that faculty member stood with maybe a hundred black people in the room—you might have been in the room that day, I don’t know if you remember it—and he said, “There are some black administrators who are so desperate to have their little jobs that they will say anything the white man tells them.” The students sat there and laughed like crazy, knowing doggone well who they were talking about.

One of the things that happened at that time, which was very painful, was that Hayward Henry said, “I want you to come to my black history class and talk to the students about it, because they have been talking about you in class.” To his credit, when I walked into his class, he said, “Here’s the brother you’ve been talking about. I’m going to leave.” He did not stay there. You know how somebody could sit in the back and heckle and do a whole lot of other things one way or the other. I walked into a class of about twenty-five black students, and he turned them over to me and walked out. I learned something from him. I hadn’t expected that, but it is something I will always remember.

I talked to the students that day, gave them my perception of what happened, and that this was what we were doing. Many of them who weren’t involved in anything sat there and listened. But they were confused because their student leaders were telling them, “This is a lie.” We had walked into a February or March meeting and the first thing the students said was, “We were trying to be political. We didn’t know it would go this far. We didn’t know it would turn out like this.” The faculty member who had been talking to me and haranguing me all over the place turned around

and looked at me. At that point the kids said, “We agreed to it in June to get out of June, but we knew we’d get what we wanted in September.” Paul Gray said, “I’m glad to hear that, because I had come here today to close down all of these meetings permanently.” They had had it. The Task Force and everything else would have been terminated forever. Paul wasn’t going to sit through another meeting. That’s why I’m saying he went through a long period of allowing students to come to be accountable and responsible for their actions. A lot of pain went down through all of that.

When I left MIT and people discovered I was applying to Harvard Graduate School, the same faculty member who was in all those meetings came to me and said, “I would like to write you a letter of recommendation.” I will just sum it up by saying the letter was stellar. I always would like to think that that was his way of apologizing. He never did it directly, but I accepted it because it helped. I got to Harvard, and that’s a fact, in part because he wrote an outstanding letter. I didn’t even know me, in that letter.

*That was a very tough period for you. I mean, you talk about pressure!*

Now here’s what happens. You’re going through this with the black students and a whole lot of other black issues. At the same time, you have Admissions people who are saying each staff person reads X amount of folders on time. That’s where Bryce Leggett came in. Bryce meant it, I think, positively. He would say things like, “I don’t want to deal with those problems, so if you deal with them, I’ll read some of your folders. You go out there and play those games. I’m not so sure I can handle that, okay?” Particularly with Bryce, anytime you used profanity or M-F or racial slurs around him, he was through with the conversation forever. He was not going to indulge any of those indignities. We were at a conference once and the dean of Princeton—a black dean down at Princeton—talked one time about these issues. Bryce came back and said, “That’s what the students are talking about,” because he had heard it on his level. He would do things at his level, but he didn’t understand it and he wasn’t going to deal with it.

My biggest thing was that I never disciplined myself to do the grunt work. I’ve never disciplined myself, and I’m guilty of that. There are

reasons for that historically, I think. They're not excuses, they're explanations.

I also think that Pete Richardson had no idea of what that budget meant to a black person. They had given me a \$25,000 budget, and Pete, when he became the director of admissions, in his petty mind was determined, "I want to be in total control of everything in my office." He was going to take that budget away. It was not that I wanted it; it was that it was a symbol to the black community that they had a little piece of MIT and that the white man did not control every dollar. Pete had no idea of what that meant. That was the tragedy of it. He had no idea. That was a bond that the president had given to the black community; one man who had no idea took it away—"I want to be in charge of my budget, me, me, me, I, I, I." From my perspective, he was exceedingly narrow and selfish.

I walked out of his office one night and, when I closed that door, I slammed that door closed. I thought all the glass was going to fall out. That's when Julie McLellan came and said, "You know, when you disagree with your boss, it's time to move on." That's Julie, okay—"It's time to move on. He's the boss and you're not. Figure out what you're going to do next." From that point on, it was only me figuring out where I was going to go next.

I have one other story in this that I will tell. It was coming June of '75. I was interviewing for jobs. I went to Boston University to see the vice president of student affairs. I met him. He didn't have a job, but we were going to talk about creating a job. I sat in his office and he said, "What would you like to do?" I looked at him and said, "I would like to not work." He said, "What?" I said, "I'm tired of working." The Vietnam War was going through this. We had all the Vietnam protesters. We had every black demonstration you could have. From '69 all the way through '75, I had been working at the Institute with lots of craziness. I told myself, "I don't want a job—I want to go to school."

I got up from his desk and thanked him very much at 9:30 in the morning, got on a bus, went all the way up the street to Harvard, went into the School of Education, and said, "I want to go to college in September and get a master's." They said, "You've got to be crazy," because January was when everybody applied. I said, "I wasn't ready in January. I'm ready now. Who do I talk to?" She

looked at me and said, "You're crazy." I said, "I have to talk to somebody—who do I talk to?" She said, "Let me see if this fellow is in," and she called a guy named Charles Vert Willie. She sent me up to see him, and I talked to Dr. Willie for about an hour or an hour and a half. When I left, he said, "When you come in September, I will be your advisor."

I went downstairs and the lady said, "The last test is being given at three o'clock this afternoon. Go take it." I went down, walked in, registered, took it, filled out all of my papers, and waited all summer. Then I told everyone at MIT I was leaving.

In August, I was having a going away party on a Wednesday. Julie said Paul Gray kept asking, "Has he heard anything from Harvard yet? Will he be having a going away party not knowing where he's going?" Julie kept asking me, "Have you heard?" On the Monday, I had not heard and Paul kept saying, "Should I call?" He wanted to call, but he wanted me to do it on my own. On Tuesday morning, I called down and asked them, and they said, "The faculty have been on vacation, but they all signed off. We are typing your admittance letter right now and we will mail it to you." I said, "No, you won't. I'm coming and picking it up right now."

I ran outside, jumped in a taxi, went down to the Ed School, and walked in when they were finishing up the letter and getting it signed. I took my letter right there. That Wednesday I had a going-away party and they said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I've been admitted to Harvard, and here's the proof."

When I left in September to go to Harvard, one person came up to me at MIT and put his little finger in my face and shook it at me, saying, "Your job is to graduate Harvard on time." I looked at him and said, "Yeah, okay, I hear you." And he said, "Your job is to graduate Harvard on time." I said, "Clarence Williams, I hear you." And I left.

The next June, I passed all my courses. I was getting ready to graduate and I was waiting on this one educational research course. I called my professor and he said, "I don't know what you did, but you turned left instead of right on your research. Everything you did, while you did it all right, it's all in the wrong direction, and I'm not going to grade this paper. You have to do it over in the summer." I saw that finger pointing at me saying, "You have to graduate on time." I told

him, "I can't come over the summer—I have to graduate now!" He said, "I haven't got time for you now." I said, "You don't understand. I've got to graduate, okay?"

This was a Monday. We kept talking and he said, "I have to turn grades in at noon Tuesday morning." I went to his office at ten o'clock Monday morning and he said, "This is what you didn't do on the research here. This is what did not happen. I want you to do that and have it on my desk at eight o'clock in the morning. If you don't have it here, then I can't get it in on time for your grade."

At nine o'clock that same next morning, I'm due in New Haven, Connecticut, for an interview at the Admissions Office of Yale. So I went home and I started redoing all this typing and computing, but my calculator was out. I had fifty regression problems and stuff that I was sitting there playing with. A friend of mine, who is a mathematician, told me, "The way that's working, all you need to do is about every sixth, eighth, twelfth, fifteenth, or twentieth problem. You'll see the slant of all that research." I said, "Get the hell out of here. Leave me alone now. By the way, I'm coming by your house in the morning. I have a six o'clock train to catch to go to New Haven. I'm going to come by your house and leave this paper, and you have got to have it to my professor by eight."

I stayed up that whole night and did all fifty problems by hand. It took me that whole day and that night. Some time around four o'clock that morning, I finished the paper. I took a shower, I typed it up, I went by this guy's house and woke him up, and I said, "Friend, if you don't have this on this faculty member's desk at eight, I'm going to kill you." Of course, being a friend, he got up and got it there.

I got on a six o'clock train, tipped the conductor, and said, "Would you wake me up in New Haven, Connecticut?" I went to sleep, woke up in Connecticut, went to the interview—"Hi, guys, how are you doing?" That was it. I came back, called my faculty member that night, and he said, "Because your paper is late, I gave you a B-plus." He went in with those fifty problems and randomly worked out about a dozen of them in different parts of the paper. He said, "You actually did all of the work." He was shocked because he knew somewhere I had done it, but through random sampling he knew that if I got twelve right, the

rest of them were right. He said, "You really did it all, didn't you?" I said, "Yes." He said, "If you had turned it in on time, you would have gotten a better grade."

That was it. I walked to the phone, called my folks, and said, "I'm flying you up for graduation." And I graduated. I got a job offer at Yale and moved on. That was it. You said, "Graduate on time."

*When you first went to MIT, who were some of the black administrators there and how, in your opinion, do you feel things were with our efforts in terms of administrators and faculty during that period?*

When I came there, there were no black administrators, literally, dealing with any students on the academic side of the university. That was January, 1969. That June, Jim Bishop graduated. After he graduated and got his doctorate, he was hired in the dean of students office for September. A year later, Mary Hope came. A couple of faculty members, Frank Jones and some other folks, sat in periodically on the Task Force. Wesley Harris came and was perhaps one of the most involved faculty members on the Task Force. Then more administrators started coming. Benjamin Franklin Moultrie, in financial aid, was at all Task Force meetings. He came in September of '69. He's absolutely crazy. Ben Moultrie would do financial aid, and package those kids and help them and counsel them twenty-four hours a day sometimes. There were a number of African-Americans who were helpful.

Being very frank, though, the people who kept my sanity were Dan Langdale, Pete Buttner, Julie McLellan, and all of the office staff. The office would let you do the things you needed to do. There was Larry Huff in financial aid. There were a lot of folks like that, including the folks who read admissions folders. The first students who read the admissions folders were some of the brightest. For integrity in the way you read admissions folders, we bought them attaché cases. They would put the folders in an attaché case and lock it up, and it had to stay locked when it was in their dorm. They had the key so that they could take the folders to their dorms, but no one else could get into that attaché case. Warren Shaw and the two fellows from Atlanta read folders. The sad part about that is that every year a student read folders, the rest of the students would then distrust them and felt they sold out, because they didn't

admit all these people they thought they were going to admit.

The students saw all the information, they read all the folders. It was very clear to them who they should and should not admit, and they were wonderful. They kept your sanity. There were lots of students who came by and said positive things, too. There was Ron McNair. I was driving down the street in Compton and passed the McNair Middle School. There was a picture of him there. When I realized it, at the next block I pulled over and tears were rolling down my cheeks. What I remembered about Ron is that he would tutor the other graduates and undergraduate students. He was so unassuming and would always have time for them. That's because he was so bright himself. He was one of the few graduate students who put no pressure on. When I talked to him, he would help me relax. He would just say, "Hi, John, how are you doing?" He would remember your name. So when I saw him that day, that picture of him, it just blew me away. All of these feelings came back.

There were a lot of people around there, including stoic Shirley Jackson. She was serious. I think most of the time she mistrusted me, but she was fair. There were just a lot of people around there, a lot of folks. There were not a lot of black administrators. What bothered me is that we eventually got into divisions or camps. There were some people who I thought were very, very divisive, very, very negative, and who sabotaged other black people. I will leave them nameless. That was perhaps the worst part. In fact, one person was very busy organizing and holding small groups. He would come and say, "Why don't a couple of us get together to talk about how to solve problems?" What you would discover later is that this same person had four different groups doing that, and he was busy pitting one group against the other to see how it came out—to the point where, when some of the people left that experience, they didn't want to trust anybody. Yet you have to learn how to overcome that to move on to the next level.

There were lots of political issues. Sitting on the Task Force thinking about something, I remember a white faculty member who explained to me, "I'm against affirmative action, I'm against integrating my school. Look, I moved into a neighborhood that's white because that's who I want to live around. That's where I want my kid to go to school. That's me, and that's why I came to MIT."

That April, when softball season started and my little cousin was getting ready to leave my house in Newton to go play baseball, a kid ran down the street and said, "Hi, Elliott!" They ran off to the playground, and I looked up and there was the faculty member who lived a block and a half up the street from me. We didn't have to be friends at that point, because we both knew where each other stood.

I had faculty members who explained how, based on affirmative action, they hired two black girls in their department who were totally unqualified, and the white girls—secretaries—would have to do their work because these two girls didn't know how to do the work. It was the hardest concept for them to understand. Affirmative action never meant you hire unqualified people. They never could get that. When we blasted that home to them, they were taken aback. You're not supposed to hire anyone who is unqualified. Those were the types of frustrating problems you had. You would be on committees talking to faculty members, talking to students, talking about academic problems and getting those kinds of reactions.

One night, a young female graduate student was walking down the hall of Building 3 at eleven o'clock at night, looking like a zombie. I stopped her and talked to her. She was a doctoral student flunking out all of her courses. I called a black faculty member in a related science department, because there were no minority faculty in her department. When he got through evaluating her, in her undergraduate courses she had not taken three key science courses that you needed to be successful in the doctoral program. They had admitted her, did not tell her that, and that's why she was flunking out. They had programmed her for failure. The faculty member interceded and insisted that they allow her, and pay for her, to take those three courses before she started her work in that department, and that she should start it all over.

Those were the types of games that people could play. She was walking around thinking she failed on her own, but she didn't have a prayer the day they admitted her. You had some negative people doing things and you'd have lots of positive people doing things, and you had to balance all of this madness that was going on because you never knew when you were going to find it. That's what was happening back then.

*Warren Shaw is an interesting guy—a CEO, the only black who is a CEO of a major investment company in New York City. A lot of folks have mentioned he was very supportive. He was a great mentor for them.*

He was. The other two fellows from Atlanta were, too.

*What do you tell a kid to be like in order to be successful? What are the things you have seen that made these kids like the Jim Gateses of the world? What have you seen in all these kids that have made them outstanding? I have seen many of them. A lot of them you admitted. I talked to Darryl Dawson out of Charlotte, North Carolina. He talked about you. There are a host of them. These men and women are doing it. If somebody in the next generation said—“What am I looking for here when I see this diamond in the rough?”—what’s your answer to that?*

For MIT, you had to admit a student who had already been successful, so in some ways it was easy. We didn’t admit non-successful students. You read the essay, and one of the things most of those students learned early in life was to believe in themselves. They learned to believe they could succeed, and that’s why they did succeed. That’s why they studied, that’s why they read. Most of them had a support group. When you get through looking at all of it, somebody was pushing them. Those who did not have support groups and those who did not have people pushing them, fewer of them graduated.

*By the way, this man who finished MIT in 1950 said exactly the same thing you just said: “You’ve got to believe in yourself.”*

Yes, you do. That’s what I’ve seen with the students who came. I remember seeing a picture of Syvila Weatherford from Compton. Syvila showed up for the first Interphase with her mama from Compton, and I loved every minute of it. She was a little grown lady at eighteen, full grown. She had confidence in herself. That’s what I think it was. Plus, that confidence was translated in the fact that she actually studied and read all of the academic material when she was in school. She didn’t short-change on it.

My theory as to why we do not do as well as we used to do has several parts. Number one, the people who came through the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s, while many of them have done great things, there’s a large number who have reached those glass ceilings. They have not been able to go as far

as they thought they would be able to go. The second thing I’ve got to list is that after Dr. King was assassinated, Malcolm was assassinated, and both Kennedys were assassinated, folks learned that if you talk too much, you get killed. I think since then a lot of folks have hidden and have gone into consumption without quality, so we strive for the Chivas Regal and we strive for the Mercedes and we strive for the clothes and we strive for the house, but we don’t strive to push the next generation further.

I’ve watched too many young people coming up today. I was at a college meeting last night with parents, and a number of students there who were on the honor roll with a 3.0, and who think they can go to most of the UC’s, do not understand today that most of them with a 3.0 are in the bottom four percent of the University of California’s class. They don’t understand what I’m working with right now in California, for example. There are serious misconceptions. Seventy percent of the black students in California who apply to the UC system apply to UCLA and Berkeley and one other UC, when you apply for three. The GPA’s at Berkeley and UCLA are 3.9. Then there’s “some little farm school,” as they like to call our place.

A little girl just told me, “You’re a farm school up there. Why would I go to Davis?” This is the University of California at Davis. But our median GPA is a 3.72. Again, less than four percent of our students are under a 3.0, and these kids walk around with a 3.2 like they can go anywhere in the world. It’s a false sense that is forcing us to do with mediocrity.

The other problem is that too many of our parents make \$80,000 and spend \$82,000, make \$50,000 and spend \$51,000, so there is no money to send kids to college. And lastly, I think we are in denial. We don’t really like to talk about how bad it was, and that’s what pushed a lot of people to a better understanding of how bad it was in days gone by. But we just don’t want to hear about it anymore. We want to cover it over or sugarcoat it, and I think that’s the biggest weakness we have that creates mediocrity, period.