

## GERALD S. ADOLPH

b. 1953, SB 1976 (chemical engineering), SB 1976 (management), SM 1981 (chemical engineering) MIT, MBA 1981 Harvard University; engineer, Polaroid Corporation, 1976–1981; from associate to principal, Booz Allen & Hamilton Inc., 1981–1985; currently senior vice president and partner; board member, Executive Leadership Council, composed of senior African-American corporate managers; chair, Corporate Advisory Board, University of Michigan School of Business Administration; board member, NAACP Legal Defense Fund.



I was born and raised in New York City, in Harlem. In fact, I grew up on 141st Street between Seventh and Lennox Avenues for about the first ten years of my life. From then until I came to MIT, we lived up the block on the corner of 141st and Seventh Avenue in the Drew Hamilton Projects. It's right next door to St. Charles Church, the church that I was raised in, a Catholic church. It's arguably the lead church in Harlem. At least it's the one that the Pope comes to when he wants to come see black folks, and it's the one that was always out on the edge and doing something different. It still is today.

Both my parents were Catholic, and I was born and raised Catholic. The first school that I went to was St. Charles Borromeo School, which in my early years was sharing some space with St. Joseph's on 127th Street. Later, they built their own school. For fourth, fifth, and sixth grades I was at St. Charles School on 142nd between Seventh and Eighth, taught by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and lay teachers. The Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, if you're not familiar with the various Catholic orders, is an order that's sort of dedicated to teaching in inner cities and on Indian reservations and so forth.

In seventh grade, I went to what was then called an experimental school. Putting the label "experimental" on anything almost always ensures the kiss of death. It was the Monsignor William R. Kelly School, an experiment by the archdiocese to try and take some students out of inner-city environments. These were not only African-American students, these were people from the Bronx and

Manhattan—typically in inner-city, less-privileged environments, but kids who they thought might benefit from a very different style of education. It was experimental, it was novel, it was on the edge. But in effect it was taking a university-style approach to teaching and bringing it to the seventh and eighth grades. At that time, in the mid-'60s, it was a unique and novel approach. Instead of having students spending all of their time sitting in chairs, facing forward at the blackboard, there were debates and labs and other sorts of things that probably would not have been available to me otherwise—language labs, in addition to just language coursework.

That was a unique experience, seventh and eighth grades. It was an all-male school, unlike the co-ed school that I had been in for the prior six years. It was taught by the Christian Brothers,



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which is an order of religious men who are not priests. They're brothers who provide a variety of services, primarily teaching. From there, I went on to Cardinal Spellman High School in the Bronx. Now both sides of Catholic education come together, because Cardinal Spellman was run by the Christian Brothers and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. It was a co-institutional school, meaning that there were men and women there but we generally didn't go to class together. We met at lunchtime and after school, and by the time you got to senior year and some of the advanced placement classes, those were co-ed. But it was really almost like two schools co-existing within one.

I think the theory at the time was that men and women benefited from some sorts of dedicated separate education, but also benefited obviously from the interaction outside of the classroom. I think that theory then went out of favor and virtually everywhere went co-ed. As you probably well know as an educator, there are now some arguments and theory, at least from women educators, that women would benefit from some same-gender education. There's now a pendulum swinging back towards wanting to preserve it at a variety of levels. I'm sure we'll go back and forth on that forever.

So that was Cardinal Spellman High School. From there I went on to MIT, which, as you'll notice from that train of logic, was the first non-Catholic school I had ever been in. The first thing, I guess, to observe about the education is that I was a little fortunate compared to most people coming out of a Harlem environment, in that trying to make it through the New York City public schools and getting anywhere, you're already starting off with one arm tied behind your back. The Christian Brothers and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, because they are so committed to education, gave me as good or better an education as I could have gotten in a very expensive suburban private school. But they did it at economics that my parents could afford.

My father worked for the sanitation department through most of my life. He had some other odd jobs—for example, picture hanging—but at the peak times when I was in school and he had to pay for the primary education, he was at the sanitation department. He started off in his early years throwing garbage cans in the back of a truck.

By the time he retired, which was long after I had left MIT, he was a senior official only two levels below the commissioner. He was deputy superintendent for Manhattan.

I suppose one of the immediate observations, and it connects to my education, is that you have my father who had maybe a year of college, but who managed to rise through the ranks in an organization and go from the blue-collar side to the management and white-collar side. He was always extremely involved in the Tenants' Association, Catholic War Veterans, and Parish Council. Growing up, any organization that I can envision, it seemed like my father was a part of it. I was exposed to leadership early, and by somebody who didn't necessarily bring a ton of formal education but did bring a fair amount of smarts. He went to Stuyvesant High School.

*That's a very good high school.*

Right. He just got caught up in World War II and never completed his higher education.

My mother was born in the Bahamas, raised in West Palm Beach. She came to New York for high school and nursing school, and met my father during that period. She worked on and off as a registered nurse while we were young. She would essentially put her career on hold, and then eventually went back to work full time as we got a little bit older and into high school. She continued to work and even, subsequent to her retirement, went off and got a master's degree in nursing.

So probably the second observation you would make is that here's someone who had a certain awareness and commitment to education that went well beyond just getting a paycheck. And, as you can imagine, that sort of influence played out all the way through the early years of my life. The drill was very simple. You came home from school, she sat you down at the table in the kitchen while she was doing dinner or whatever she was doing, and made sure that the homework was done. Her theory, as she would tell us in later life, was that she assumed we didn't have much energy left at the end of the day and she was going to get what was left. If subsequent to that there was any energy left for playing, then so be it. But she wasn't going to do it the other way around—play first, have dinner, and then maybe do homework. She was convinced that homework wasn't going to get done that way.

She was from the Bahamas. My father was a native New Yorker, but his parents were from Dominica. There is a strong strain through folks of West Indian descent around education being particularly important to success, in some cases maybe even almost an over-emphasis. I know a lot of times that people will believe that education is the answer. It's obviously part of an answer.

That's sort of a brief thumbnail sketch of the educational emphasis in the family. I have two younger brothers and you can see the track record of my parents. By the way, it's not our track record—it's my parents' track record. I'm convinced that you are merely the reflection of your parents' track record, and the only way you know whether or not you've accomplished anything is, "We've got to watch and see what your kids do." My parents' track record had me going through Cardinal Spellman, then on to MIT, and then to Harvard Business School. My younger brother, Ron, also went to MIT and graduated as a civil engineer. My youngest brother, Mark, decided that the third one through MIT just wasn't going to happen. He wasn't going to do that. He went to Stanford, graduated as an electrical engineer, and is currently at Microsoft. Later on, he went back and got his master's degree in software engineering also.

So it's that kind of path and track record. We always joke about that because my father was one of two children. All of his children went on to become engineers. His sister, my aunt, had six children, most of whom seem to have some sort of art talent—singing, dancing, one is a cartoonist. So we said that we could see all of the technical talent flow through one side of the family and all of the real talent flow through the other side of the family.

*How did you find out about MIT and make the decision to come here?*

Startlingly, most of the major decisions of my life were accidents. In fact, I am a perfect example of two axioms. The first is that it's better to be lucky than good, but the second is just the value of being prepared. Given that my parents had me prepared, when opportunities presented themselves, I actually could take advantage of them as opposed to saying, "Oh gee, darn—I really wish I had done this, that, or the other."

I wound up at Cardinal Spellman High School. Interestingly, my parents—unless they

exercised a little unseen force that I've still to this day never sort of figured out—actually let me pick most of my own schools. Now it turns out that I picked schools that they would be happy with anyway. But the nuns, and a couple of nuns in particular, did me a great service there. There were a couple of things they told my parents that sort of played through and, like any good Catholic, my mother would do whatever the nuns told her to do. One thing they always said was not to reward children for education, to teach children that education is its own reward. So in my house, A's and B's were always treated with great nonchalance. I now discover later in life that they went off and bragged to all their friends, but to us they completely nonchalanted the A's and the B's. Anything less than that was treated as if the world had ended, a complete and utter disaster, and how could this occur? We never got any rewards or benefits for getting the A's. I guess in a way we got to keep our room and board. But the other thing the nuns said was to allow us to pick our own schools, because otherwise you'd have that whole rebellion thing and push back and so forth going on.

So first of all, the choice to go to Cardinal Spellman High School was mine. I think I picked mostly Catholic high schools, except for Bronx High School of Science, because at that time those were the better schools in New York City. Amongst them, the only one at the time that I was interested in that was co-ed was Cardinal Spellman. I narrowed down the decision to Cardinal Spellman and Cardinal Hayes. One is co-ed, the other is all boys. What kind of choice is that for a thirteen-year-old? So I wound up at Cardinal Spellman, which was at the time probably the number one or number two high school in the city.

Coming to MIT, or getting ready to go to college, I did what most people do. But at that time the counseling that black kids got was just abysmal. There was NSSFNS, the National Scholarship Service Fund for Negro Students. I have never quite understood what they were about, but everyone with whom I've compared notes has a similar experience. If you haven't talked to Greg Chisholm, ask him about NSSFNS. They come into the high schools. At Cardinal Spellman there were about twenty-two hundred kids, about two hundred of whom were black. This was not a high school oriented to blacks, but many of the

high schools, believing that they were doing us a service, opened their doors to this organization to come in and do this national testing, give you recommendations to schools, and presumably scholarship access. You would fill out this form as to what kind of school you wanted to go to. I had always said that I was interested in math and science. I took the advanced placement math and chemistry and physics courses in high school. I was a Star Trek fan and would watch anything science fiction, read science fiction, thought I wanted to be an astronaut. It was pretty clear what direction I was heading in. I always had very good grades in English and history and things like that, but I tolerated them—I hated them. It was fairly clear what I wanted to do.

So you fill this thing out and they looked at your grades and so forth. I said I wanted to be in a major city, I wanted to be at an institution there. I wrote down schools like Harvard and Yale and so forth. They came back, and I think their number one recommendation for me was Leister Junior College in Pennsylvania! It got worse from there. They respond to your choices as well as giving you choices. They told me I couldn't get into City College. But all you need to get into City College in New York is to be a New York City resident. It's open admissions. It was ludicrous. Basically, if you did not go to one of the schools that they selected, you weren't getting any money. It's probably not fair for me to make an accusation, but I'm not sure that was one of the more helpful organizations I had ever encountered.

When talking to guidance counselors, I would be looking through the list and might say, "Well, gee, I like math and science. It looks like the best schools for that might be Caltech and MIT." I'd go to a guidance counselor at Cardinal Spellman—mind you, I had top grades at Cardinal Spellman—and they'd look at me and say, "Oh, you can't get in there." That was the sort of stuff that you'd get. I know you've spoken with Phil Hampton, who was a roommate of mine for a number of years. Phil loved history, but he became a chemical engineer and came to MIT because some guidance counselor pissed him off by telling him he could never get in.

So this was not a unique experience. I picked MIT because I knew I wanted math and science, it was the best in math and science, and it was in Boston, which filled some things on my social

checklist in that it was in a major city and not in the middle of nowhere. I didn't want to go to the middle of nowhere. I'm a New York City boy, born and bred. Also, it was in an environment that had a lot of other schools around—female schools, male schools, what have you. It was close enough to home to be able to get home on Thanksgiving or weekends if I wanted to, but far enough away that my parents were not going to be just bopping in on me. I mean, I actually had some criteria that I had worked through at the time.

You probably wanted me to tell you about the quality of classes and professors and all that other stuff, but those weren't the criteria. MIT was the best in math and science, so I figured some people had figured all that other stuff out already. I applied and got in. This was late junior year when I was doing this. I had no prior understanding of what MIT was versus other schools, no prior preparation in the college courses and all the stuff that other people have where by third grade they already know they want to go to Harvard and be a lawyer. I didn't have a clue. All I knew was that I liked math and science.

I came to the Institute thinking that I wanted to be a chemist. My exposure to what I liked was math, chemistry, and physics. Even at that early age, I couldn't figure out what one actually did with physics. Even later in life, I still have yet to run into that frictionless, massless pulley. But I could kind of connect with chemistry, and said, "I think I'll be a chemist." I got to the Institute, and I think it was the first organic chemistry course there that convinced me that maybe that wasn't exactly the wisest course. In '71, we firmly believed that something was missing. In the first organic chemistry course, 5.41, it just felt to us like something was missing between that and the advanced placement chemistry that I had had in high school, because I couldn't have gotten that dumb all of a sudden. I will point out that later—at least in the late '70s, I don't know if they have it now—they created a new course, 5.40, to precede 5.41. So I feel vindicated on that. But really what happened is that chemistry just seemed like a lot more repetition than I thought. It wasn't quite as applied.

Again, another stroke of dumb luck, a person I was actually dating my freshman year at MIT was in the chemical engineering program. I had never heard of chemical engineering. Chemical engi-

neering is not a hot topic of conversation on 142nd Street and Seventh Avenue. I had never heard of it, didn't know what it was. She essentially told me, "Well, it's sort of like chemistry and physics blended." "Aha! I remember physics from high school." That's how I got into the chemical engineering program. I got into the Sloan program just because I had taken a few electives and discovered sort of an interest in the business side, the economic side, and so forth. I also took some law classes. I took a dabbling of a lot of different things in humanities.

*Did you actually do a double major?*

I did a double major as an undergrad, bachelor's. I then did the master's degree in chemical engineering and then I went off to Harvard for an MBA.

*I missed that, the double major on the undergraduate level. I knew you had gotten into chemical engineering, but I missed the Sloan degree there.*

Just a BS. There were four tracks at the time. I took the organizational psychology track.

*Overall, what would you say about your experience at MIT? When you reflect back on it in general, what were the highlights of your experience there and what kind of impressions do you have?*

I think, for one thing, there were an awful lot of people who went through MIT pretty much with their noses to the grindstone. Those people, by the way, probably all had much better grades than I did through MIT. I did not by any stretch of the imagination blow the Institute away. I didn't blow the Institute away in part because I had lousy work and study habits going in. There wasn't anything in elementary school that had ever challenged me. All through my early years, my mother would pick us up from school, bring us home, and she'd bring home the daughter of one of her very good friends. Her friend would take us to school in the morning and my mother would bring us back in the evening. My friend Sharon was always the very studious type, excellent work habits. I had lousy work habits, didn't want to be bothered. I was perennially number one in the class and she was always number two in the class. My mother would always say, "Why can't you be like Sharon?" I'm thinking, "Why would I want to be? She's number two."

Then when I got to high school, I had to work a little bit harder, but not really. My friends used to

tease me because I would be in the advanced placement math class and they would just marvel at the fact that I was doing calculus homework on the train going to school in the morning. They couldn't even fathom calculus and I was saying, "Oh man, I needed to do this last night," and I'd be sort of knocking it out on the train.

So I didn't come to MIT with the best of study habits. You couldn't cruise. The first thing that happened was that I had to figure out, how am I going to survive? I'm not sure that I ever developed great work habits, but I developed habits that worked for me. I am a procrastinator. That's just sort of me. Even when I have tried at this stage in life to say—"You know, I've got something to do two months from now. I've got a speech to write, a presentation, maybe I ought to get a head start on it"—the brain just won't kick into gear. I work best under pressure. Part of what I learned there is, "Okay, if that's me, how am I going to work under pressure?"

You've got to be very methodical, very organized, and you've really got to be able to hit it if you're going to work in that mode. Some of the nights I remember sitting in the BSU lounge where we would have the group support sessions which were all night. We'd have all-night study sessions during exam time or people doing term papers. We'd be in the lounge with coffee, and that's it. Everybody would be sitting there all night long studying, a little known fact of the BSU lounge. Everybody knows about the great parties we had, but nobody, I think, knows or talks about what went on during exam periods, sort of the support that unofficially used to occur there.

I had to figure out, "How am I going to survive when I'm under duress? I can't just coast on talent because everybody at MIT has talent." Talent was not a differentiator. That was a necessary but not a sufficient condition to be accepted at MIT. The other thing is that I really did take advantage of a complete experience at MIT. As I said, there were a lot of people who had noses to the grindstone and didn't do much else. I played basketball, I dabbled a little bit playing some tennis, I was in the Black Students' Union, I did the radio station for a little while. I did a whole series of things around Boston. I really sort of took advantage of all those other things, many of which at the time were fun, but I can point to them now and they were actually valuable learning experiences.

Now I spend an awful lot of my time standing up in front of large groups of people, giving presentations and speaking. There are people who are deathly afraid of speaking. One of my favorite jokes is from Jerry Seinfeld, before one of his shows, talking about a survey. The survey was about what people in the United States fear the most. Number one on the list was public speaking. Number two on the list was death. He said, “Imagine this. In other words, if there’s a funeral, most people would rather be in the coffin than have to do the eulogy.”

Well, there are three things in my life that were particularly important in making me comfortable with public speaking. The first is that when I was at a very early age—in the Catholic church, when the church changed its doctrine and went from Latin to English and involved the laity—one of the things they did was have people stand up and read the scriptural passages. Here I was at a very young age standing in front of a lot of people. The first time I did it, I was so nervous I couldn’t even see the page. But I did it every single week. I wasn’t speaking, I was reading, but that’s the first step of getting comfortable in front of a lot of people. One of the programs that I was in, the Archbishop’s Leadership Project, stressed being able to stand up and compose a speech. Some of the educational activities stressed that.

But now, by the time I get to MIT, what do I spend four years—actually ten years—during my entire duration in Boston doing? Working on a radio station. So by the time I get to Booz Allen and consulting, an environment where being able to communicate orally is important, it’s second nature to me. It’s sort of interesting, because within Booz Allen they have looked at me and said, “Boy, this guy is a very polished presenter and one that we look toward in that regard as a role model.” A lot of it is rooted in just those sorts of exercises. It’s the experiences outside of just the books and the classroom. Actually, when I look back on it, I even wish I had done more.

I’m glad that my double major was in Sloan. I think that it would have been, at least for me, a disservice to do what so many others did where they had double majors that were, say, chemical engineering and math or chemical engineering and chemistry. Those were easy to do because a lot of the core requirements overlapped. But I would suggest that everyone in every school be a double

major, at least have a major and a minor, and require that the other one be something completely far away from the prime major. I wished I had done more language, more music, more things like that that I am now paying ridiculous amounts of money to learn. You go to Berlitz and take one of these language courses, and it ain’t cheap.

So the things that I think stand out are just the broader interactions beyond the classroom, whether it was in the BSU, the radio station, or wherever. I think the highlights of MIT were outside the classroom. It was the broader interactions that I think stay with me even to this day. As I say, I didn’t blow the Institute away on grades, but I think the blend of what I got in the classroom and out of the classroom actually has given me more than having straight A’s. If I wanted to be a researcher or a college professor, I probably needed to go get those straight A’s, but it was always clear to me that there was something else that I wanted to do. Within the classroom, there was material I learned, but it was also just as important to learn the discipline of how to really get my work habits better in shape.

Probably the third component actually occurred after MIT, but the seeds of it were sown there. Between doing the radio station and other things, I always had a bunch of different balls in the air. This, by the way, is my father’s influence coming out. If you remember what I said about him and his organizations, that was him. So here I am in all these organizations trying to juggle that with class. Then while I was in grad school at MIT, I was actually working full-time at Polaroid.

When I went to Harvard Business School, I was still working full-time at Polaroid the whole time I was there. Then there was even a period the first semester at Harvard, where I had screwed up and I hadn’t finished my master’s thesis for MIT. So in my first semester at Harvard, I had a forty-hour work week at Polaroid, first year at Harvard Business School, and at night I was trying to finish the silly thesis for chemical engineering. The experience I had playing football in high school and basketball at MIT, where the whole athletic emphasis says you can’t quit when you feel like you’re about to throw your guts up and die, really helped. Somehow you sort of suck it up and then keep going. I had weeks at a time where I was perennially walking around dead asleep. But you say to yourself, “Well, if I can only get to this point,

I can make it.” You talk your way to that point. Then if you can only get to the next point, you can make it. When I finished the first semester, I thought about leaving the job, but I said, “Well hell, if I could do the thesis, business school, and work, certainly I can do only two of them.” I talked my way through the two years that way.

Again, later in life, you get into these crunches. Something will happen today with a client, we’ve got to grind overnight, or I’ve got to get on an airplane. Next week I’ve got to take an airplane to fly all night to Germany, have a meeting first thing in the morning, turn around, and come back to New York. People say, “Well, how can you do that?” Somehow it seems easy compared to some of the nonsense I did at MIT and Harvard. So there’s all sorts of elements that come into this. It’s not just the chemical engineering curriculum.

*If you had to say what were the things that were worst about MIT and the things that you think were best about MIT, how would you respond?*

What was best about MIT? Well, I think a few things. First of all, it clearly, I believe, lived up to its reputation as being the best place to go for math and science. Now, you can debate the extent to which that is more true at the graduate level than the undergrad level, and you can debate the extent to which that is more true for doing research at the Institute as opposed to just the quality of teaching at the Institute. But you can have that debate about most major universities, quite frankly, particularly those that have a heavy research bent.

So first of all, MIT certainly lived up to its reputation on that front. Academically, it really did orient you a lot more toward the thinking side of life. It oriented me much more toward the research side of life. That’s not necessarily technical research, but I still have a strong research bent to me. I remember going off to summer jobs and being next to Northeastern chemical engineers and discovering that, while I could write lots of equations about a heat exchange or a pump, I actually had not a clue what a pump looked like. Meanwhile, these guys from Northeastern were teasing me because they were slapping in pumps and valves and stuff. Hell, I had never turned a wrench. I thought, “Are you kidding me? That’s what engineers do? That’s news to me.”

So there are some drawbacks from the pragmatic side of what MIT teaches, but that’s not what its orientation was. It lives up to its billing. You need to understand just what its billing is and think through whether or not that’s really what you want. I think the institution actually does a good job of not falling into the nerd trap. If you remember at the time, MIT actually had more intercollegiate sports than any other university in the nation, and obviously stressed participation and involvement. I always thought that that swim test for men but not for women was a little bogus, but some of the other things that went on in the athletic program were okay. In New York City you pay seventy bucks an hour for a tennis lesson, but at MIT you could get PE credit. In effect, the Institute “paid” you to play golf or basketball or what have you. So I think it does a good job of trying to make available and to emphasize a broader set of development. There are a lot of people who opt out of that and don’t take advantage, but I think MIT provided a lot on that dimension.

Off and on over the time that I was there—and I guess if you include graduate school, I guess I was there for probably eight years—the Institute sometimes was extremely supportive of black students, and other times just sort of behaved as if it had other things to do and was kind of tired of the topic. Clearly, when I first got there in ’71, we were at the height of everybody being a lot more sensitive to where we were. By ’81, a year after the election of Ronald Reagan, black people were definitely out of vogue. You can watch the admissions classes follow exactly that pattern. You know this better than I do, but in ’67, ’66 or so, there were something like twelve or fourteen black folks at MIT. Then we had the entering class a couple of years later that numbered in the seventies. Well, all those black folks didn’t suddenly get smart seventeen years prior to that date. It wasn’t like there was something in the water that the mothers suddenly all drank. So someone did something to get us admitted. Similarly, when the numbers then started to drop off, one could surmise that people stopped doing something or started doing something else.

So at least during my tenure, which was the early ’70s, there were some things that were very supportive of blacks. We, of course, tortured the administration about other things that we thought

they should be doing, but the basics around admissions, financial aid, and Interphase were fine. Interphase was an important support activity for a lot of people. I didn't go through Interphase, but it seemed like it was pretty important. There were tutorials. A lot of the basic stuff around the educational package was in place and there was a clear demonstration of support. By the time we got to the mid-'70s and late '70s, some of that had cooled and we were having, I think, some more serious differences with the administration.

*The issue of Chocolate City has come up quite frequently. If I remember correctly, you were probably one of the organizers or certainly one of the early members of that organization or that group.*

No. For the first few years, I lived in Burton on the third floor. I was in an all-black suite, so probably your point is still taken, but it just wasn't as obvious as Chocolate City was. In Burton, we actually had agreements. They weren't very implicit either. I remember sitting down talking about incoming classes and who was going to go where, but we had agreements that certain suites were all-black suites, just like the sixth floor of McCormick was viewed as an all-black female floor. Chocolate City was a little more obvious. They had parties, they had a name. In Burton we had all-black suites, but they actually had a name. They were better packaged and, as a result, turned out to be a lightning rod.

*So you never lived in Chocolate City, then?*

No, in fact, I think I was probably off campus by the time they built that dorm and opened it.

*Do you have any perspective about the work of that kind of setting? Given that the times have changed, of course, and they're not the same as they were when you were in school, but as a real outstanding professional, what's your view on that issue?*

I think you've got to pick this up at two ends. First of all, you've got to talk about the individual as well as what's going on in the group. If an individual comes out of a predominantly black, deep-South environment or an inner-city northern environment, perhaps went to all-black schools, is uncomfortable dealing with people of other races and so forth, then while Chocolate City or an all-black suite at Burton might be a comfortable environment, it's not the experience they need in a university setting. If a person comes out of a

very multicultural, multiracial environment or, at the other extreme, might even be having some identity issues around that—maybe they even grew up in an all-white environment—then a Chocolate City may be exactly what they need. Jesse Jackson talks about one of his children, I forget which one, whom he sent to a historically black college and university.

*It was his daughter.*

He talked about it because he said the child was coming in and saying some wild stuff that proved to Jesse that she wasn't quite connecting with her history and her culture and maybe had lived too sheltered a life. He said, "Could I have gotten them a better, more high quality academic education? Yes. But that's not the full package of the education or what this particular child needed."

I think on an enduring basis, almost independent of what's going on at the time, one of the questions that we have to ask ourselves is what the individual needs. If an individual needs to get connected, then that could be important. I grew up in Harlem, but by the time I went to MIT, my parents actually had moved to Rockland County. My youngest brother spent his high-school years in Rockland Country Day School in an all-white environment—totally different. In fact, his perspectives on things are very different as a result. Who his friends are and how he interacts is very different. He might have gotten a very different experience out of Stanford in an all-black subculture. That's observation number one. By the way, that suggests such an option ought to be available. If it were not available, then you couldn't accommodate that individual who needed it.

The second issue is that just because it exists to provide some reinforcement and cultural support, just because it exists for all the positive reasons, all-black environments can never exist for the negative reasons. They can't ever build barriers around themselves and develop an us-versus-them outlook. Maybe it was just the signs of the times where, in the '60s, the black power movement had a real edge and a bite to it. But by the late '60s and early '70s, it had almost become part of American pop culture. It was almost cool in the majority's eyes to be part of this. In fact, we used to joke about how it seemed like the more militant your language and the bigger your afro, the more white girls were attracted to you.



So “all-black” had gone from scary to being kind of interesting. The Black Students’ Union had an A-league intramural football team at MIT. MIT had A, B, C, D league football. “A” was all of the frustrated athletes who were pissed off over the fact that MIT didn’t have a real football team. If you remember, it was live blocking with no equipment, and they used to park an ambulance next to the field every Sunday. There were only the Black Students’ Union, Lambda Chi, and SAE, which were both sort of jock fraternities, and one other which I don’t remember, but they got wiped out every week. There were only four teams. But it was war. It was absolute war every Sunday. But the interaction between the BSU and those other groups, other than some isolated incidents which you always have, was never institutionally negative—“us versus them.” It was frequently the BSU versus the university, but it was not versus other students.

So that’s what I’m saying. You can’t get caught into that us-versus-them thing, because now you turn something that was positive and reinforcing into something that is isolating and actually teaching the wrong messages. I finally found the example to give our Caucasian brethren the right perspective. One of my colleagues, who is white and a partner in the firm, was talking about what it was like to be on assignment in Japan. It’s interesting the phraseology that he used, unprompted—“No matter how well you speak the language, somehow they’ll never accept you. You’ll never be one of theirs and they’re always speaking in code and behind your back.” He talked about how socially tough it was to find the kind of music or whatever you like, how it’s even tough to find somewhere to get your hair cut, how there was a tendency of the Americans when they walked into the cafeteria to go and find each other and sit somewhere together. And he said, “You go into Asia and there are American clubs where people sit together.” He used all the same language that we use in a majority institution, because all of a sudden, in that environment, they found themselves in need of some reinforcement and support.

So I don’t think that this is all peculiar or unique to black folks. It’s just an experience that you have to get outside of the country to realize that there are other people who have exactly the same needs.

*Tell us a little bit about what you actually do. So often people talk about you, but I don’t hear people talking about what you do, because they don’t know what you do.*

People didn’t know what I did before. Other than MIT folks, they didn’t know what I did when I was a chemical engineer either. Have you ever tried to explain that to people who are not engineers?

*I suspect that it would be better to at least hear something that you would say, giving an explanation of the kind of work you are really involved in now and any kinds of notions that you think you’ve been able to rely on, the skills you think you have picked up in the MIT experience that have helped you most in being top of the line professionally in the field you are in.*

Well, it’s management consulting. Booz Allen and Hamilton does all kinds of consulting—strategy, operations, manufacturing, logistics, supply chain, information technology-related consulting. We have a whole other section of the business called the World Technology Business, which does a lot of technology, infrastructure, project management, and other kinds of consulting for governments and for commercial clients. I’m in the commercial sector doing mostly strategy, a little bit of organization and operations work, but mostly strategy for clients. For the seventeen years now that I have been there, I have always worked in technology-related businesses—technology in the broadest sense of the word, not the Wall Street sense of the word. I’ve worked with chemicals, pharmaceuticals, aerospace, telecom, industries like that. I don’t spend a lot of time working with banks or insurance companies, for example. The thread that I’ve tended to focus on is either new or emerging industries—things like biotechnology, which I’m involved with a lot now and was involved with the first time everybody started talking about it in the early ’80s, and industries that are undergoing some very significant change where the past is not going to be like the future. That’s almost like reinventing business all over again, but with a technology bent to it.

Business consulting is helping managers to solve problems. My focus is on the business side. I need to understand the technology enough to be able to translate it into business issues. It really is not technology consulting per se, but the technical background helps you to speak the language, be fluent in almost anything, and be comfortable

with it. A lot of people are just deathly afraid of anything that looks too technical. I may be deathly afraid of some problem sets from MIT, but not anything that I see out in the world here. There's the logical problem-solving approach that one goes through. Some of my favorite subjects, in which I actually had perfect grades when I was in high school, were logic proofs, theorems, geometry. I always got a little bored with algebra. I'd crack complex equations and at the end I'd add  $2x$  and  $3x$  and get  $6x$ , because I wasn't paying attention anymore.

But the logic that says how do I figure out what the pattern is, and how do I make some order out of chaos, is very similar to what we do in strategy consulting. Frequently, we will have vague unstructured problems to solve and we have to constantly move back and forth between the big picture—what are we trying to accomplish and what are the major themes—and a lot of data and information and micro-details. You've got to go back and forth between the two without getting lost. How do I take an unstructured problem and a vague open-ended question and turn that into some more defined questions that I know I can answer with data or analysis and solve the problem?

Booz Allen tends to be analytically oriented, which obviously plays to a background like mine as opposed to people who go more on just sort of their gut feel or business experience. It's problem-solving primarily for clients with some technology wrapped up in their problem, as well as economics and business, and it is the perfect marriage of a Course X and a Course XV kind of a world. My career flows directly from those early experiences, even though once again I was dumb lucky to find and choose it. When I was in business school, I had never heard of Booz Allen, McKinsey, or any of these consultants. Once again I got lucky and had the preparation to be able to take advantage of an opportunity when it came along.

Just to give you an example, one of the things that I thought I was going to do, or that I might have been interested in doing after business school, was the Industrial Liaison Program at MIT. The reason was that it tried to link the innovations that were going on around the institution with businesses, and to commercialize MIT technologies. Even though I can express it now—I couldn't express it then—it was always consistent with

where my interests were. It was more on the business side of technology than on the invention side of technology. I always say that I think I'm a reasonable businessman and a good consultant. It's a good thing, because I probably only would have ever been a mediocre engineer. When recruiters from the consulting firms came to Harvard to recruit, I discovered a match and was fortunate to be able to take advantage of it.

*Knowing what you know with all of the experiences you've had professionally, as well as the experiences you've had with several institutions, coming through them, what kind of advice would you give a young black like yourself coming to a place like MIT at the present time?*

I suppose the first thing—and, of course, it's easy to say in hindsight, but I actually think I took some reasonable shot at this while I was there—is try not to be overwhelmed. For many of us, particularly coming out of the inner city, it is the first time you're in an environment where people are consistently as smart or smarter than you are. And in many cases, even though you have straight A's or are a top student or whatever in high school, you will also find that you're missing some things that the majority had that you didn't get, just because of the nature of where you came from. So the trick is not to be overwhelmed. Then the other thing about the Institute, and this is not unique to MIT because Harvard Business School does the same thing, is that it is deliberately intimidating. It's part of the test and it's part of the toughening, but it's deliberately intimidating. So the first thing you have to do is not get intimidated and overwhelmed by that experience or by the quality of the people around you. I think if you look at the most successful people in life, they tend to embrace people when they get in a pool of really bright ones. A lousy manager looks below himself or herself, sees really smart, up-and-coming people, feels threatened, and pushes them down. I've seen this in organizations. A high-flying manager looks below, sees really bright and talented people, and says, "Those folks are going to make me look a hell of a lot better—all I've got to do is harness them and direct them." Part of where you learn that is at a place like MIT. How do I deal with a collection of people who are as smart as or smarter than I am, and as motivated and as talented?

First, just take the pressure for what it is because it's an important part of the learning

experience. Second, no surprise given what I've said before, is to experience the full array of what any undergraduate experience has to offer. It's not all in the classroom. Even in the classroom, you should experience the full array and make sure that the kinds of things you're doing with your electives really aren't just more math and more science. In fact, does MIT still have pass/fail?

*Yes, first year.*

I know some schools have the option of a pass/fail course in later years.

*Not after your first year at MIT.*

Well, the problem with this—and this takes a little internal fortitude to do this—is that the net result of the pressure to get into grad school, particularly if you want to go to medical school or law school, and therefore having pristine grades plus no pass/fail, works exactly contrary to an educational process. What I should do if I want to be educated is to pick an arena in which I am weak and go take a course. On the other hand, if I have to optimize my transcript to get into medical school, that's the last thing I'd do. That's one of the reasons why you see MIT students taking lots more of what they already know they can do well in. You see students elsewhere doing that. It would be nice if the university could create more alternatives, but I think if you're weak on the communication, the history, or if you have an interest in something, folks ought to just take a shot. It turns out that having one or two grades around that aren't quite as pristine as you would like may not be the end-all, because as you know, many recruiters tend to focus—if you're going to medical school—on the things that were in your core. Now if they see something outside the core, it's actually pretty explainable. In fact, when you show in interviews that you have the initiative to go address and attack your weaknesses, that's usually viewed as a positive.

So just take advantage of the whole experience academically. I mean, I took constitutional law classes. Who knew? I might have wanted to be a lawyer. It turns out I didn't, but I can understand now when I hear people arguing about some of these things before the Supreme Court. All of a sudden, I'm interested and at least I know how to hear what they're saying. I'm not a lawyer, but I know how to hear it because I did something that broadened me. Then, of course, all the other experiences that you have around campus—be it the

athletics, the clubs, opportunities to practice some leadership—I think are particularly important. So I certainly would do those.

*There's a book that Derek Bok and William Bowen, the former president of Princeton, just wrote. It's a study of about twenty-seven or twenty-eight selected colleges and universities, looking at what black students have done from 1970, the early '70s to the '90s.<sup>1</sup> Essentially, one of the things that they concluded in looking at all the data was that black students who finished during these years have actually been more involved in community services after they have finished school than their white counterparts. I notice that either based on your father, or for other reasons, you have really paid your dues in that regard.*

Just as an aside, I'd really be interested in seeing something about students from the mid- and late '80s and '90s, and how they turn out. The reason I say that is, let's face it, given the times that we came through, most of us were active anyway. That was the norm then, to be active. When I was in high school, I was in the African-American Student Union and we formed the Third-World Coalition of High School Students. One of the important development experiences I had was a group called the Archbishop's Leadership Project, which was started right around my junior year in high school and continues even today. It was a program started to orient on leadership and developing leadership, and of course it encouraged us to get involved in some community activities. I think a lot of folks in that generation probably would have been more active anyway in community things than their white counterparts. It would be interesting to see if that trend has actually continued to where everyone tends to be a little less involved these days at the university level. Universities are less of a hotbed for social activities, but are African-Americans more involved than others? I think that would be a positive sign if it were the case.

*Are there any suggestions you would make to the administration of MIT in regard to how to improve or enhance the experience of blacks at MIT, based on your experiences so far?*

I don't know. It's tough. Some of the advice, I think, actually enhances everyone's experience.

1. William G. Bowen and Derek Bok, *The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.

MIT started, just when I was leaving, really being more stringent about forcing people to think about humanities and other things as a broadening experience, rather than just taking more math. This whole notion of a pass/fail or an additional option, with something that maybe even doesn't appear on the transcript or whatever—to induce people to think about broadening and leaning toward weakness, about addressing weaknesses rather than only building on strengths—I think is an important part of it. If the emphasis that the Institute has put on extracurricular activities still exists, that's good. There used to be a lot of ways to actually get credit for things, either formally or informally at MIT, that I think put an emphasis on a broadening experience that was very unusual, from what I can tell speaking to my peers. The whole Independent Activities Period in January, I think, is unique. Did I in a number of years take that as a vacation and blow it off? Sure I did. But there were also some times where I actually did some interesting things with it.

So all of those sorts of things, I would say, for goodness sakes, don't let any of those get away. It's sort of the first and foremost. I think the second thing is, as we move into an environment now where it is only a matter of time before the forces of darkness turn their attention from the public institutions to the private institutions in their attack on affirmative action and race-based components in admission, that it's going to become even more important to be willing to stay the course. There are a lot of things that MIT can do that lesser institutions can't do. For example, Harvard in the business school environment decided a few years ago that they weren't going to look at GMAT scores. They just decided they aren't interested in that anymore. They did that, in part, because they're Harvard and they can get away with it. Stanford University, in the business school, does not release any grades or rankings. They said, "As far as we're concerned, that's no one's business other than the student's."

So certain institutions or lead institutions can take a stand against certain things that induce negative and other unwanted behavior. If you don't have the GMAT, you've just taken away one more component that the forces of darkness can point to and say, "Well, why did you take that student, that African-American student, as opposed to the other one?" As long as the SAT or GMAT or similar test

is there, they'll make the argument. After the attack, if you try to argue—"Yes, but all the other data show that it's not really a good predictor of success in business school"—you are now in a very weak position. Think now proactively about how to bulletproof one's programs and take away all of those silly arguments. I think if you look at the Texas case, Texas actually did a bunch of things deliberately to get their affirmative action program banned and overturned. MIT is capable of building a program for minorities that is coherent, that makes sense, and that allows you to defend diversity in the classroom. I think that's going to be the next big battle coming along.

The support activities that MIT had on campus that I talked about before—Interphase and so forth, assuming that many of those are still in place—are outstanding and need to continue. In a lot of cases, I think the challenge in this day and age is maintaining a commitment to some things that they were doing twenty years ago. Perhaps there are some other things that will occur to me that can be added, but we are very much in a mode of trying to defend, unfortunately, what we had that has worked so well, and not go backwards.

The notion that a student is a generic student coming in some black-and-white box, and is indistinguishable from others and therefore does not need differential consideration in admissions and support once they get there, is wrong for any ethnic group. At the moment we're trying to defend ours, but it's just clearly wrong across the board. There are individuals, international students have different sorts of needs, everybody's got different sorts of needs. I'm on the corporate advisory board for the University of Michigan Business School, and it's really ridiculous the attack that we're coming under. As someone pointed out, Michigan would be able to bring people in as athletes and they could bring people in as foreign students, they just won't be able to bring them in as black students. What kind of logic is that?

*It doesn't make sense. Is there any other topic or issue that comes to mind as you reflect on your own experience and on the experience of other blacks at MIT?*

Probably the only other thing, and I suppose this applies to the student body in general, is really a continuing outreach to the lost souls along the way, because college in general—and MIT in particular—is such a high-stress environment. We all know of people along the way who lost it, in some

way, shape, or form. In some cases, it was the passive form of dropping out. In some other cases, we actually saw some behavior that was bizarre bordering on psychotic from some people. It's important to really try to keep an eye on that, try to pick those folks out, and make it okay both for other students as well as the faculty and counselors to embrace them and bring them along. I think it's particularly important, rather than relying on the Spartan approach that says, "We'll turn up the pressure cooker—those who survive we know are proven, and those who have fallen along the way obviously they didn't have the right mettle." I don't even think the Marines take that approach anymore.

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# Technology and the Dream

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

By: Clarence G. Williams

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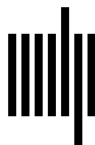
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