

## MARGARET DANIELS TYLER

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I grew up in Roxbury, which is probably less than ten miles from the MIT Cambridge campus. I was the oldest of five children, all of us either adopted or from foster homes. My father was raised in New York, my mother in Mississippi. My mother finished the eighth grade, my father almost finished high school and then went into the service. They still live in the same house that we grew up in.

I was lucky enough to attend Catholic school for twelve years. I say lucky for a couple of reasons. I grew up—in high school, anyway—during the '70s, when there was busing. Many of my friends had their education disrupted by that process, such that they were never able really to get back on track. I was kind of sheltered. I was sheltered from the violence of busing, but also from other opportunities that might have expanded my horizons, programs like Upward Bound and such. If you went to a Catholic or private school, you weren't eligible. At the Catholic school I attended, the expectation was that you would either get married or get a job. There was not a college track, so to speak. We didn't have a guidance counselor, and we didn't have anyone encouraging us to take SAT exams or anything like that.

In order to pay for that education, I worked—or, I worked to help my parents pay for it, because I was the oldest. I have worked since I was thirteen. My first job was cleaning. I used to clean the convent—dusting, polishing, using the heavy floor polisher. Every day I would have to polish the floors, dust four or five flights of stairs, wash dishes, and whatever else they wanted me to do on that given day. I did that for a couple of years, and then

I worked in the library for a couple of years. But ever since I was thirteen, I've worked.

In November of my senior year, I had some friends who went to Upward Bound. I got on the bus one day to see if I could sign up. Of course, when I got out there, they told me no. On the way back, sitting in the back of the bus, I overheard some people talking about the SAT exam. I had never heard about SAT's. Because neither one of my parents went to college, nor anyone in my neighborhood that I knew of, they didn't really know anything about it. And at the school they were just concerned about us graduating. But I was nosy enough to listen in on their conversation and say, "What is that?" They said, "Well, if you want to go to college, you have to take an SAT exam."

So I did. Somehow—I don't really know how, I don't remember the process—I kind of stumbled



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into taking the test, applying to two schools, and getting admitted to one. I applied to Boston University because I saw a commercial on television. I was in Boston, Boston University—that's about as sophisticated as it was. I applied to Howard University. I had heard of Howard because it was a black college. BU admitted me and Howard didn't, so I went to Boston University. And once again, to go to Boston University, I had to work. By that time, I had my own apartment. I worked full-time—four to midnight, five nights a week, twelve months a year—for four years. And I graduated from BU.

*Boy, you really worked.*

Yes. I was telling my mother yesterday that I don't remember sleeping when I was in college. I remember things. I remember working, I remember going to school, I remember having fun, but I just have no recollection of sleeping. I know I did, but I just don't have any recollection of it.

*You would plan your classes so you could go to work at 4 p.m. every day. And you would get off work at what time?*

Midnight, at which time I'd have to prepare for class the next day. I'd do that at least till 2 A.M., and then I guess I slept. Sometimes it was 4 A.M. if I had exams. I remember being up at 3 and 4 in the morning, preparing for exams or papers the next day. I kept this up for four years.

*You were talented in a couple of areas that you didn't mention. You became interested in music, and you became a good pianist.*

That was my mother's doing. She knew very little about my natural mother, because during the '50s they would seal the records. But one of the things they did tell her was that my mother had gone to the Conservatory of Music, for piano. So my mother thinks, "Oh well, she must have talent, since her mother was a pianist." So I took classical piano from the time I was seven to seventeen. In fact, I just recently bought a piano. I need a creative outlet.

*Because you already have the talent.*

Yes, right. I guess so.

*People would be shocked to see you playing classical music, you know what I mean?*

Although it was very oppressive, I learned from the nuns. If you played the wrong key, they would hit

you on the hand with a ruler. So it wasn't a fun experience. It was fairly oppressive, but that's probably where I developed my tolerance for pain and discomfort—going to Catholic school and taking piano lessons from the Catholics.

*Working from 4 to 12 midnight and then going to school, in a way you had been taught well that you had to work hard.*

Yes. I'm very disciplined, and I'm very compulsive about doing things right. That translates into me working. I have a high tolerance for working, and working hard.

*I have noticed that.*

Which is a plus and a minus, depending on how you look at it. But I do work hard.

*So you went to Boston University, and I guess you had to be really excited. Particularly, your parents were very excited about your finishing Boston University. Do you remember that period when you were finishing and thinking about what you were going to do next?*

I know that my parents were proud of me, because I was the first and I'm still the only one in my family to graduate from college. My daughter will be the second. But none of my sisters or brothers had completed college. So I suspect they were excited. I don't get excited. I don't really know how to explain this. It's like I decide what it is I need to do, and I do it. I expect to finish it and I do, but I don't remember feeling any jubilation, necessarily.

*But you did recognize that that was a major accomplishment.*

Yes, I think so—well, I know so. I was probably excited, but mostly I was tired and I was glad it was over with. But I don't remember feeling any personal jubilation. I was like, "Okay." I had to get a job and pay off all these loans.

*So you actually paid your way through college.*

I never asked my parents for anything since I was fourteen. Part of that is because I was adopted. I never wanted them to regret having adopted me. Everybody deals with adoption differently. They would give me gifts at my birthday and Christmas and that sort of thing. But for me to say, "Ma, can I have this, can I have that?" I never did—never have, still haven't.

*You're very independent.*

Yes. Again, there are pluses and minuses—but yes, very independent.

*So what did you decide to do when you finished?*

Because I was always so busy working while attending school, I never had time to go see an advisor. I never went to workshops on what to do when you finish school or anything like that. So again—I remember it was November, December, or January of my senior year—I was talking to a friend. She mentioned she was going to law school. I had no perception of anything happening after undergraduate school. Really, I just had no inkling about anything that happened after that—none. I know it sounds ignorant now, but none. So when she mentioned law school, I said, “What’s that?” I planned to return to my neighborhood to teach. That had always been my focus. I had been influenced by two books I read early on in my college career. One of them was *The Miseducation of the Negro*, by Carter G. Woodson, and the other one was *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*. Both of them had a very profound effect on me, which resulted in my being focused on going back to Roxbury—the black community—and teaching. I had no perception of anything, graduate school or medical school. That just wasn’t part of my consciousness.

I did have a chance conversation with one of my professors, when I was registering to get my teaching certificate. I guess he lived out in Weston, and at that point they were trying to desegregate. They had no black teachers. He said, “Why don’t you apply to teach in Weston?” It was very interesting in the sense that they had a panel with maybe twenty or twenty-five parents and teachers and administrators. They fired questions. The whole preface was, “Our kids are going to be going to Harvard and to Yale, and we want teachers who are going to be evaluated by how many of them get in.” There was this big formal program, with them telling me what the expectations were of me and of their children and such. That was fine, but I had already determined in my head that I wanted to teach in the inner city.

A week later, I went over to Roxbury High School and went to the principal’s office. He said, “Oh, you want to teach here?” I said yes. He said, “Great! There’s a classroom free right down the hall.” There was no interview. I could have been crazy for all they cared. It was like they were so happy that anybody would even walk through the door and say they wanted to teach that it did not matter. I was struck by the lack of expectations and

standards that they had for our children. This was reinforced by the attitudes of some of the teachers I worked with, who were just basically collecting a paycheck. I remember one of them sitting in the classroom, telling me in a voice loud enough for the children to hear, “Oh, these kids, it’s fine as long as they can keep a roof over their heads. They’re not going to be going to Harvard and Yale.” It was just the opposite of what I was told in Weston.

If there’s anything that has been a commitment for me, it’s that I always wanted to be in a position to share with others who were as ignorant and blind as I was about educational opportunities. I wanted to be in a position to give them insight into how to negotiate the system. Fundamentally, it’s a game. If you know what the rules are and you have a few cards to play, you can play. If you don’t know what the rules are and you don’t have any cards, you can’t play. It’s basically that simple.

*That’s a very good analogy.*

To me, that’s what it boils down to. That’s been a lifelong commitment for me—my *modus operandi*. I’ve never been really motivated by money or prestige or position. The question always is, “Am I in a position to serve as a nexus between young kids who were in my position, those who have opportunities and have the talent to take it to another level?” These values were formulated by my upbringing, my college experience, and those two books that I mentioned earlier.

*Almost all the jobs you’ve had have sort of been in that arena. It’s like what you have always had as your calling, so to speak.*

Yes, I recognize it as such.

*I didn’t meet you until you came to MIT, but I’ve looked at your resumé a number of times. All those jobs you’ve had in between, before you got here, were focused in that arena you’re talking about.*

*Is there anything that stands out in your mind as very significant in your work experiences that enabled you to come to this MIT environment better off than a lot of people? I remember you came as an assistant. You were not assistant director.*

I was assistant to the director.

*You were assistant to the director, but you quickly handled that whole situation very well. You had to have had a lot of experiences before you got here to be a little bit more prepared than a lot of black administrators I’ve seen*

*come to a place like this. Is there anything that was significant, in any of the work you've done before you came here, that stands out?*

I'm bilingual. I'm street smart. I'm tough, both physiologically and psychologically. Growing up in an environment that had a lot of harshness was good training. I grew up in an environment where there were a lot of street folks and you were subject to harassment. It was a harsh environment. And then actually being in Catholic school, I really think was a harsh environment. The nuns were very demanding, very critical, very exacting, very stern, very precise. I think it made me tough intellectually. But then I was also able to operate in an environment like Boston University. My major study was economics, which was predominantly rich Jews and males at that time.

So I learned early on how to deal in both environments. All of my schoolteachers were white, the whole psychology was white. Then having to go home to a black environment, I had to negotiate that environment too. Very early on, I was able to go back and forth. I learned—sometimes the hard way—how to deal in both environments.

For me, I think that I have an ability to see things from a lot of different vantage points, but none of it defines me. I think a lot of people come into a place like MIT, and then that defines them—“Oh, I work at MIT and I'm so-and-so.” That's their whole definition of themselves. Then, when racism hits—as it will—or when people look at them as being black, being different, they can't deal with it. But I've never let my environment define me, and I've never looked for it to give me an identity. I know this sounds trite, but I've just never taken it seriously. I never take myself too seriously, and I don't take being at MIT or Harvard or any of that too seriously. That's not me. It's what I do and it's the environment that I operate in, but it's never been a label that I affix to myself.

*How did you happen to come to MIT?*

The same way I've gotten every other job. I'm not a long-range planner—never want to be, never will be. I'm a woman of intuition and opportunity. I take on a job, a particular challenge, and then I deal with it until I think I've mastered it and the learning curve flattens. Then I look for a new opportunity. Every job except the one I have now, I've opened up the *Bay State Banner*—because I

knew they were looking for black folks—and I read the paper until I found something that might be interesting, decided I wanted it, and got it.

I was working for the city of Boston as director of a community school in Roxbury. I had done it for long enough and decided that there were political constraints that were keeping me from being effective at the job. I found out after I took the job that the primary agenda never was the community; serving the community was peripheral. Ultimately, I pushed a little too hard about what the community needed and what the people should get. The ward boss at that time was not happy with me. I said, “Okay, I can't accomplish my mission in this position anymore. It's time to do something different.”

So I was looking through the paper and I saw the job at MIT. I thought, “Yeah, that might be good.” I remember distinctly having a flashback from when I was first in college and the admissions counselor asked me what I wanted to do. I had absolutely no idea. I said, “Well, maybe this will put me in a position to help people figure it out.” So I came to MIT my usual way—no agenda, no ten-year plan, just looking for a way to accomplish my mission.

*What year did you come?*

1981. It's been seventeen years, so it was '81.

*Reflecting on your overall experience at MIT, identify what you would consider of special significance in your academic, professional, and social life here, relative to your collegiate relationships and all the other things. What comes to your mind?*

Overall, I think it is an amazing adventure. With adventure comes peril, excitement, challenge, stress, and all of that. So I think “adventure” is a good way to describe it. In each of my positions, I was the first black female. I like being first. There are no precedents, so you get to set them. How do black women act? Well, they don't know, so they don't really know what to expect. I also like the element of surprise. I know some people find being first only traumatizing. I find it exciting, because I like upsetting the milk cart.

I think that at least for the first ten years, the collegial support of black administrators, particularly when we were organized, was of tremendous impact and always will be. In particular, you and also John Turner made me feel that my contributions were valuable. You and he made many of us

feel so, I think. There was a sense of the possibilities, strength, the coalition of black folks here—a sense that we could make a difference collectively. In that regard, both yourself and John Turner will always be my ace No. 1 mentors—particularly you, because it's been a longer period of time with you, a more sustained relationship. That relationship has been very critical for my development. I think you've tempered me, because I'm pretty much straight, no chaser. That's the ghetto side of me, ready to rock and roll. You would say, "Wait a minute, maybe you should think about this." That tempering has been most important in my professional development, and I thank you for that.

But that group was important. The two conferences we coordinated were fantastic. People still talk about them. My current position now is the result of a relationship I found with a woman at the first conference we had. She spoke at the first conference. Since I was in charge of logistics, I got to meet most of the speakers.

*You cannot mention those two conferences without putting in place that you were a major force in terms of making them a success.*

Well, if you say so.

*There's no question, and I think John would say the same thing. We know that.*

But that whole experience—the working together, the planning that went into it, the visionary aspects of it, the accomplishment, the way it was designed to make a statement to our colleagues here—all of it was tremendous and valuable.

*There were three kinds of positions you held as first that you ought to say a little bit about for the record. They were very significant.*

I was the first black female in the Admissions Office. There had been black males, but no black females. Then when I went to the Sloan School of Management as coordinator of admissions, I was the first black administrator—male or female. As director of admissions, I was probably one of the first in the country at an Ivy League school. What I'm most proud of is that I've been able to kind of maintain my identity. I've just never assumed the identity of the job. I wore my braids and my African garb when I was so inclined. I was told I would never get a position as director of admissions at Sloan School with braids in my head. But I did, and kept the braids too.

Worst experiences? It's hard for me to answer that because I always look at potentially negative experiences as opportunities to challenge the status quo or to make a difference, so I don't get dragged down by them. That's probably one of the other reasons why I've been able to survive in these kinds of environments. You'd be overwhelmed and probably half crazy if you just looked at the negatives. They come at you all day every day, one way or another. I either look at it as a chess game and decide what move I should make, or I look at it as a battle and fight it strategically.

But there have been a series of challenges and opportunities, as I call them, as a result of a larger environment—both MIT and in the larger world—that has preconceived notions about black people, most of which are negative. There is fear, and preconceived notions that are the result of racism. I could list daily affronts to my intellectual and professional sensibilities, but I just don't factor them in that way. I look at them as the other side's problems, and to the extent that they're going to hinder what I want to do, then I have to deal with them. If it takes a fight, it takes a fight. If it takes a strategic move, then I'll do that. But I deal with most of life like that. Some might call them blinders, but I can't allow that psychological weight to hold me down or take me under.

*It makes a lot of sense. Talk a little bit about this game. I say this mainly because I think it's important that young Margos who come after you have some sense about the different kind of options they can perhaps develop for themselves, based on the kind of input they get from people like yourself.*

Perception is ninety-nine percent of reality. It's how you perceive things that becomes your reality. If someone makes a racist comment or makes a decision that results in a scenario that is going to be difficult for you, you can perceive it in one of two ways. You can perceive it as, "Well, they don't want me, I don't belong here, so let me get out." Or, you can perceive it as, "Oh, really? Well, I belong here, and this is how we're going to deal with it."

For example, through my daughter's experience, I talk to a lot of young people who are pursuing engineering careers. As we know, a lot of schools—particularly large state schools—try to weed black people out, because they know that knowledge is power and that technology is going

to be central to the next century. Many really don't see us in that way. Some don't think we have the talent, couldn't care less if we make it or not, and, in fact, if we do make it, that may result in one less spot for their Johnny or Susie. So whether maliciously or subconsciously, they'll say things, do things, and make decisions that will have the result of keeping us out.

In my daughter's case, chemistry was very difficult for her. She didn't make the cut and she had to take it again. Now when you fail at something, whether it's your job or a math class or whatever, the perception kicks in, "Oh, I failed, so therefore I'm not good at it." If your perception is that you fail and you don't have the talent, you're not going to be able to do it. But if your perception is—"Okay, I failed, but what do I need to do to pass? Do I need to change my strategy? Do I need to study differently? Do I need to study longer? Are there people who can help me?"—then you'll come through. It's all in your perception. If you perceive you can't, then you can't. It's not a function of your not having the brain power to do it. If you look historically and genetically, black people have always been able to think at a higher level: They still can't explain the pyramids. Based on our history, there's every reason to understand that we have both the fortitude and the ability to do whatever we decide to do.

But one of the ways racism has been the most insidious is that the educational system does not teach us our history. It has been replaced with a sense of inferiority. If you continue to perceive life from that vantage point—which is basically ingrained in the educational system, ingrained in the media and television—you continually just reinforce that we can't, and that we don't belong in those environments. As long as we're shucking and jiving and playing basketball, it's cool. But as long as you perceive yourself in that way, you'll never be able to do more and you'll never be able to accomplish more. As long as you perceive racism as your disability, as opposed to someone else's problem, then you're never going to be able to confront it. As long as you perceive that places like MIT are hostile environments—"I'll never be able to make it" versus "It's a hostile environment, but I belong here and I'm going to find a way to make it"—then you'll never make it.

I guess what I'm saying is that you have to change your mindset. You have to alter your mind-

set to perceive whatever environment you're in—however harsh and hostile—as one in which you can be successful. You have to read books about our ancestors who pursued doctoral degrees when they were spat at, and who had to live in cold, heatless basements and study by candlelight. You can go further back, when at the risk of even being killed, they would—by candlelight, in the bushes, in the dark, in the back—take the risk of learning to read, and then grew up to start businesses and raise families. Say to yourself, "Can't I survive at MIT? Is it any harsher than the threat of being killed if I learn how to read? Is it any harsher than being whipped when you're bound? Is it any harsher than what young blacks had to do to go to college in Arkansas in 1955, to take those first steps and get rocks thrown at you?" How harsh is it? It's not likely anybody's going to call you a name or throw any rocks at you at MIT or Harvard or Boston University. And I'm willing to take the risk. What's the worst thing that can happen?

The problem is that a lot of our children—a lot of us—come into these environments not knowing the game. If you want to play football and you run out without a helmet and you don't know which side the goal post is on for your team—you can be strong, you can be fast, you can be smart, but you can still fail. That's what happens to a lot of us. We walk into environments not knowing what the game plan is. That's where my street sense comes in. My antenna goes up immediately in trying to figure out who's who and what's what. You have to figure out the game plan. As long as you figure out the game plan, you're in a better position. You can be smart and fail in a lot of environments.

I think, unfortunately, a lot of younger kids who have had the opportunity to go to the best schools have assumed that as their identity. They don't understand that even though they've gone to the best schools, that won't protect them from the racism, because of the fact that their skin is black. They misread the cue cards. They come in and when they get bashed, they don't really know what happened and they take it as a personal affront—"Well, something must be wrong with me." No, nothing's wrong with you. You're just getting treated that way because you're black.

I think it is the same with the professionals as well. When it does hit them, they're thrown off kilter and they take it all personally. Racism is going

to affect you sooner or later, so you just have to be ready for it.

*When you talk about personal support from the senior administration and faculty whom you've worked with, how do you see that at the moment? You've spent a long time here.*

"Power concedes nothing without a demand," said Frederick Douglass. It's as true today as it was then. The cast of characters can come and go. It almost doesn't matter. No demand, no power—period.

*You couldn't say it any better. I want to come back to something that's related to that comment you just made. But before I forget it, there's another area that would be very important to have in this interview. You have a wonderful daughter. What would you like to say to her as regards your appreciation for her at this point in her career?*

I have a tremendous amount of respect and admiration for my daughter. My greatest wish as a parent is to provide my daughter with whatever it takes for her to be stronger, wiser, faster, swifter, happier, and more fulfilled. I think she's just tremendously strong, much stronger than I am in many ways. She has a strength in terms of her identity—her self-identity, her confidence—that I may have now but I didn't have when I was twenty. She has it at twenty. So I have a tremendous amount of respect and admiration for her, and my greatest wish is that she be happy. I don't have any control over that, but she's a tremendous woman and I thank God that He has so blessed me.

*Related to that, you have had a lot of experience in working with a lot of our young black men and women whom you have chosen—working in the Admissions Office, for example, and in the Sloan School—to come to this institution. You had a major input in terms of a number of young people coming here who happen to be black. Of course, there are other minorities and other folks who are non-minorities. But when you look at the people who come here, based on your own experiences, what kind of black students do you think would be best to come to a place like MIT? Secondly, what advice would you give those whom you would recommend to come to a place like MIT?*

Well, it's definitely not for everyone. I think it takes a young person who has a pretty clear idea of what they want and what they're willing to sacrifice to get it. Not everybody at sixteen or seventeen or eighteen has that insight. If you're not strong and

clear about who you are, and if you're not strong and clear about what it is you want to accomplish, it's not the place for you. But if you are smart, strong, and clear about what you're willing to sacrifice to get it, then I think MIT is a good place for you. If you are searching or unclear and unstable, then even if you have 4.0 and perfect board scores, this is not a good place for you. There is no time to try to figure out who you are. There's not an extra moment to wonder, "Who am I?" or "What does my blackness mean?" MIT just doesn't allow that kind of luxury.

Those who do come in with the ambiguity may get out, but will pay a tremendous price. Those who are clear and who come in with their agenda can conquer worlds, and they do. But it will either make you strong or break you. I always looked for that inner strength and clarity of purpose—more than anything else—with the black students whom I encouraged to come here.

For me, that was the litmus test. Most of the people who had the heart to apply to MIT were qualified, particularly black students. Many of their guidance counselors would discourage them, for reasons not altogether positive, if they did try to apply. Most of them who applied were academically qualified, but not all of them had the inner strength and clarity of purpose to make it work for them.

*If you were making some suggestions on ways to improve or enhance the experience of blacks at MIT, what would you recommend?*

I guess I've wasted enough time trying to convince folks that we can make a positive contribution, so I wouldn't waste a lot of energy with that. I would, though, spend tremendous amounts of energy trying to get our people and our children to develop the clarity of purpose and the strength of character and the confidence to make it work for us. If you have a black man or woman with a purpose and a mission, provide them with encouragement that they'll need along the way, prop them up if that's necessary from time to time, or run interference if that's important. I think it's our responsibility to make it happen. Teaching and cajoling others to do something for us is a waste of energy. Once we have that clarity of purpose, both individually and collectively, then we can create that reality for ourselves. We don't have to wait for others to be merciful and beneficent enough to do it.

*I couldn't agree with you more. Could you give a brief summary and analysis of your perspective on the MIT experience, especially as it relates to the area you've worked a lot in—trying to increase the number of minority graduate students at MIT?*

It's an experience that I would encourage. In fact, I'd probably encourage it more on the graduate level than undergraduate level for black students. I think that important clarity of purpose that I spoke about earlier tends to be more highly developed when you're going into graduate school than it is for an undergraduate. Therefore, you're in a position to really benefit from what I think are tremendous opportunities at MIT, both in terms of what you're exposed to and whom you're exposed to.

I happen to have a great deal of respect for education at MIT. I also think that I'm prepared to say, after my experience at Harvard, that MIT is a better, potentially richer environment for black people, primarily because on a very fundamental level MIT is very utilitarian. The idea is, "We have a problem to solve, can you help us? If you can help us, I don't care what color you are or what language you speak. If you've got something to contribute to the problem, let's get it done." At Harvard, on the other hand, you have to go through these whole layers of social acceptance and posturing and such before people really listen to you. I think being different is more highly valued at MIT. That is why you have so-called "geeks" and others stereotypically associated with MIT. MIT has a high tolerance for difference. Therefore, if you're a person who can contribute and has something to offer, your color becomes less of an impediment. It doesn't go away, but it becomes less of an impediment once you get in.

Now, getting in, of course, is the big problem. For the most part, black students who get admitted to MIT on a graduate level—once they get admitted, with the usual pain and lashing and hazing that happens in graduate education—tend to get out and then do well. But getting in, of course, is the primary challenge, because fundamentally it's an old-boys' network. That's how it works. When you look at the kind of money that goes into it, if I had a million dollars in my pocket and I had to fund students with it, I'd be very concerned and careful about who I selected.

When you look at a graduate education, four or five years, it can cost two or three hundred

thousand dollars. If I'm going to invest three hundred thousand dollars in somebody, what am I going to look for? They look for what they know. What do they know? People who are like them. They call up their buddies who run in the same circles, who are members of the same learned societies and who attend prestigious conferences. Most of the students who apply to the graduate school are qualified and could probably come in and do the work. So out of that large group of qualified people, who are we going to admit? Who are we going to make the investment in?

They go with what they know, and what they know are people like them. Anybody from outside of that box—who might come from a historically black college whose professors teach and don't circulate as much in the learned societies and the conference circuit—is an unknown commodity. They look at their grades, but they don't know the school. They see it's a black school, so they make certain assumptions. They perceive it as a higher risk, which it could be. They see lots of money on the line, and they don't know whether that person will be able to come in and contribute in ways that they think are important.

So we get left out, often. They make decisions like this because they're afraid, because they're racist, because it's the path of least resistance—any number of reasons. And because so much money is involved and people are inclined to play it safe, we tend to get left out of that scenario. Then, of course, we don't always know how to play the game, or we don't put the right cards on the table when we apply. Our application is not processed the way it should be and we tend not to brag about ourselves. We tend to be very modest culturally. Both in terms of African and Hispanic traditions, and most definitely Native American traditions, it's almost gauche to talk about yourself and to brag, whereas in the larger society that is the expectation. So if we are modest and we don't brag, the application—which is all that represents us—doesn't appear to be as competitive. And quite frankly it's not, because we didn't know what cards to play.

My positions allowed me to work with students to help them decide which cards they need to play. The summer research program allowed us to bring young scholars in prior to graduation, so that the faculty could see first-hand that they can perform successfully. When that risk factor on



paper became an issue, they could say, as they did with many students, “Let’s take a chance with this one.” But fundamentally, we have not had the growth in the graduate population that we’ve had in the undergraduate population, because it was not administratively structured to do so, as it was on the undergraduate level. The administration can beg and cajole and conduct studies, but if the faculty who are making the decisions and who control those decisions and fund the students are not interested in taking those kinds of risks, they won’t—and they didn’t, they haven’t, they don’t.

So I think the summer research program has been instrumental in addressing this issue, but it would have to be expanded probably four-fold for it to have a significant effect. Fundamentally, I also feel there hasn’t been an increase because the faculty have not been committed that there needs to be a change in that environment. Until or unless they’re so motivated, there won’t be an increase.

*Is there anything that you think about, in terms of your work in the graduate school office as a dean, that you would highlight as very significant in terms of your experience there?*

It puts you in a position to get more information to help students. There are people you meet and conversations you hear that you might not hear otherwise, that can be useful in helping to prepare graduate students to be both admitted and successful in the graduate program. So in that regard, in many ways, I felt like the spook who sat by the door.

Having a voice and providing a diversity of opinion is important. Many faculty have often seen things the same way, and continue to do things in the same way until or unless someone’s in a position to say, “Have you thought about doing it differently? Have you looked at other variables?” The position allowed me on occasion to be a voice that contributed ideas and ways of interpreting information differently. Having that voice—and being in a position to hear and to see how things really, truly function—was important.

*One thing I think about in terms of your career here associated with the graduate school office, is the fact that you really have been very consistent with what you believed in, from early in your education all the way up to the present time. You have made it your business to make sure that you attempted to leave behind or to help put in place people who could carry on your legacy. I’m*

*thinking primarily of your latest position; you had a tremendous amount to do with bringing Dean Blanche Staton back to the Institute.*

*Your leave at Norfolk State has given you a wonderful opportunity to look at a totally different environment, versus one where you’ve spent a considerable amount of time. You did your undergraduate work at Boston University, then you spent a large chunk of your time professionally here at MIT, then you spent time at Harvard. You’ve had a chance to look at all of those schools, all of them with exceedingly good reputations, and you’ve seen it from that perspective. But then, you now have spent almost a year and a half at a historically black institution, Norfolk State University. What can you say about the two different types of environments you’ve now experienced?*

They’re dramatically different. First of all, Norfolk State is a state institution, which puts it into a totally different universe. There’s a whole political agenda associated with everything, everything from the curriculum to the policies that have to be monitored to the Freedom of Information Act. Joe Blow can come in with a written letter saying he wants information about anything, how much money was spent last month on anything, whatever. And we have to give it to him within five days. It’s a totally open process, and very political. It leaves the institution very vulnerable to a host of attacks, from people who have legitimate concerns to fanatics with personal agendas. It’s a very vulnerable situation to be in. Your livelihood depends directly on the political winds and the numbers of students you can physically attract to your campus. You get funding from the state based on how many students you have, head count.

*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?*

There are a number of black people I’ve met and worked with and encountered at MIT whom I have a great deal of respect for, either because of their intellect or their personality or their level of commitment to education and/or because of their kind of selfless giving to each other. In that regard, I truly believe that I’m blessed to have crossed the path of what has to be a collection of some of the most impressive black people I have met.

Some of the things that disturb me about the experience are not exclusive to MIT—that is, assimilation to the values of the majority that might

lead us to leave others behind or to puff ourselves up and feel that somehow we've made it here on our own and don't owe anything to anybody. The fact is, none of us made it here on our own. The number of us who would be able to stay here, no matter how wonderful we think we are, have been helped by legions of people who have paid with a high price—and some of them with their lives. Those lives made it possible for us to even walk through the front door. If we forget that, both in our action and in our words, that is a tragedy beyond comprehension.

That's not exclusive to MIT, but it is exclusive to us as African people in America. Our strength lies in our commitment to maintaining those values that have gotten us to this point, which are based on a collective consciousness—"If I succeed, then it is my responsibility and my duty to help as many of those as possible around me to succeed." My fear is that many of us have lost, are losing, or will lose that understanding. If we do, I believe the results will be tragic.