

APPENDIX A: PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The objectives of the Blacks at MIT History Project are: 1) to assemble a body of data on the role and experience of blacks at MIT; 2) to compile, analyze, interpret, and synthesize the data; and 3) to prepare and publish the results. A long-term objective is to encourage further scholarly and policy studies in this area by establishing within an appropriate archival repository, probably the MIT Archives, a collection of historical data on the black experience at MIT. This collection could serve as the core of a permanent reserve for general reference and research on blacks not only at MIT but also elsewhere in higher education, for future scholarly work, for administrative policy studies, and for coursework and other educational projects.

Project materials have three primary origins—oral history transcripts, an alumni survey, and records in the Institute Archives and MIT Museum. In the oral history portion of the project my focus was on black students, although black faculty, administrators, and staff also participated. A number of non-black faculty and administrators were included as well, especially those whose role at the Institute has had an impact on the presence and retention of blacks at MIT. Transcripts of selected interviews make up the main body of this book, and others are included in the CD-ROM version.

Black alumni/ae were also surveyed by mail. Their responses to questions on their biographical background, experience at MIT, and post-MIT experience have been recorded and analyzed to provide a collective portrayal of the perspectives of individuals of African descent who have passed through the Institute. My goal was to learn about the lives and careers of black MIT alumni/ae, as a complement to the oral histories. Because it was possible to do taped interviews with only a relatively small selection of them, I hoped that the survey would provide a means for those whom I could not interview to reflect on their experiences and to provide first-hand testimony that could not otherwise be acquired or included in the project results. In order to encourage frank and open responses to questions across a broad spectrum of biographical information—from early childhood through the MIT experience, subsequent career development, and social and political perspectives—I felt that the survey should be confidential, and respondents were asked not to identify themselves by name. Survey results will be presented with a narrative history to follow this book.

Because of the wealth of information gathered during this project, I decided to put together two books. The present one conveys the personal perspectives of key players—both black and non-black, but with a focus on black students and faculty—on racial issues at MIT during the last half of the twentieth century. Essentially, it is a compilation of oral histories conducted during the course of the project.

The forthcoming book, a narrative history tentatively entitled *Search for Identity: A History of the Black Experience at MIT, 1865–1999*, relies substantially on materials preserved in the Institute Archives and the MIT Museum. While few archival collections relate solely or even primarily to blacks, a number supply ample material for an account of the black experience at MIT. That story begins in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when only a few black students were able to take advantage of educational opportunities here; it proceeds through the period between World War II and the mid-1960s, when the national emergency and growing civil rights activism created an environment in which blacks could participate more fully not only as students but also as faculty and researchers; and concludes with the period since the late 1960s, which saw the formalization of minority recruitment programs and other incentives to enhance the participation of blacks and, more recently, a growing climate of uncertainty nationwide about the value and utility of affirmative action.

As far as the oral histories are concerned, my original plan was to interview around thirty individuals, a representative sample divided roughly among students, faculty, and administrators. As I began, however, it became clear that “representative” would be hard to achieve and that the experiences involved were too rich, varied, and complex not to try to capture more for the record. The number of interviewees eventually grew to 223. To fully process that amount of material within a reasonable time frame has been difficult, but, I believe, well worth the effort.

The interview population broke down into three categories—students, staff and administrators, and faculty—each of which was further subdivided by race, “black” and “non-black.” (As it turned out, however, I interviewed only one non-black student—Eldon H. Reiley, ’55—who was active in organizing a pioneering anti-discrimination conference at MIT in the mid-1950s.)

Students were identified primarily, but not exclusively, on the basis of a list of living black alumni/ae supplied by the MIT Alumni/Alumnae Association, which constructs and maintains data on black alumni/ae largely from information generated by another group, Black Alumni/ae at MIT (BAMIT). Because there were relatively few black students at MIT prior to 1969, I decided to approach as many as could be identified from that period and to conduct oral history interviews with all who were willing. I had to be more selective, however, with the much larger post-1969 student group. For that period, I attempted to interview at least one alumnus/a from each class, although for some classes two or more were interviewed.

For black staff and administrators, I approached those—both past and present—whose stories seemed likely to be the most compelling and whose role at the Institute was either particularly illustrative of the experience of blacks here or linked to larger developments within the black community. Also, I focused on those whose roles were historically significant, pioneers who paved the way in shaping policies and practices of special consequence to blacks at MIT. In general, I did not include black staff and administrators who had not been at MIT for at least five years. Non-black administrators were selected from among a small group who have been particularly active in matters affecting blacks at the Institute, those who in my judgment have been among the most supportive of minority and diversity issues over the years. The individuals selected cover nearly a half century of activity in this area, and deserve special acknowledgment and recognition for their contributions.

I tried to interview as many black faculty as possible, past and present, as well as non-black faculty whose interests and activities had an impact on the lives of blacks here, whether in the classroom, the laboratory, or the work of departments and Institute committees. The black faculty recount inspirational narratives of effort, struggle, conflict, achievement, and contribution in an environment that has not always been nurturing, supportive, or even comfortable. They also bring a level of critical insight into important policy issues, such as the status and evolution of efforts in minority faculty and student recruitment.

The non-black faculty members represented here are by no means the only ones who could have been chosen, but they are part of a relatively small group. They are among what I call MIT's "bridge leaders," men and women who work hard to create a more dynamic, diverse environment at MIT, reducing racial and cultural divisions by encouraging and facilitating opportunities for those who have been traditionally excluded.

The oral history process began with a letter requesting an interview and including background information on the Blacks at MIT History Project, an outline of project goals, and an explanation of how the process would proceed if the recipient agreed to be interviewed. Interview appointments were arranged with those who responded affirmatively. A "reflection sheet," including topics that might be covered in the interview, was sent to each interviewee prior to our appointment, with slight variations depending on whether the interviewee was black or non-black. Topics

included childhood experience, career choice, role models and mentors, decision to come to MIT, MIT experience (including adjustments, influences, relationships, and services), racial issues, advice or suggestions for improvement of the MIT experience, post-MIT career, and others. The "reflection sheets" were intended to help the interviewees put their thoughts together and focus on certain areas that they might wish to pursue. They were not intended to be prescriptive or restrictive; the interviews had to be flexible enough so that people could tell their stories in their own way, at their own pace, and with their own accents and emphases.

The response to interview requests was overwhelmingly positive, with many respondents citing the importance of documenting the black historical legacy at MIT as well as the opportunity to reflect on racial problems and experiences. Interviews were audiotaped—usually in one session, although in a few cases two sessions were needed to cover the ground adequately. Most were face-to-face interviews, but some—fewer than ten—were conducted by telephone. All except two were conducted by me alone. Patricia Garrison-Corbin's interview (which appears in the CD) was conducted jointly by me and Margaret (Margo) Daniels Tyler, as part of a so far unrealized plan that Margo and I conceived, to carry out a related project focusing on black women in the academy. Kenneth Manning interviewed me, when it came my turn to be interviewee rather than interviewer. One interview is not on tape because the interviewee and his family requested that it not be recorded. This was the session with Kenneth Clark, the eminent black psychologist who served as a visiting Institute lecturer in the early to mid-1970s at a time when MIT was seeking to boost its minority contingent in the student body and among the faculty as well. On other occasions, technical difficulties arose with audio reproduction, but I was able to reschedule tapings with all but three of the affected interviewees—Deborá Barnes-Josiah, Gene Brown, and Christ Richmond.

The interviews range in length from about 35 minutes to three hours, with the average falling somewhere in the one-hour range. Tapes were transcribed by project staff, along with minor editing for grammar and clarity and a certain amount of name- and fact-checking. The transcripts were then returned to the interviewees with a request for edits and clarifications. Interviewees were asked to keep their edits to a minimum in order that the transcripts would closely reflect audiotape content. While a few interviewees abided by that request and either returned transcripts with minimal edits or approved them with no edits, many used the process as an opportunity to reflect further and to modify or enhance their accounts with additional details and insights. As a result, some final transcripts assumed more the character of a memoir constructed around an oral history than an "oral history" in the narrowest sense of that term. In addition to new material, certain interviewees deleted portions of their transcripts that they did not wish included—either because they felt they had misspoken, had gone too far in discussing or characterizing an issue, event, or personality, or because certain statements seemed irrelevant or tan-

gential to the discussion. A relatively small group, less than a fifth of the interviewees, did not pursue the process past the preliminary transcript stage.

As each corrected transcript was returned, edits were incorporated by project staff and the final transcript was sent back to the interviewee along with a “permission letter,” which the interviewee was asked to sign and return as a release for use of the transcript in publication. About three-quarters of the interviewees returned signed permission letters, often with one last round of edits that were incorporated into the final transcript.

The largest number of interviewees—nearly half of the total—fell into the student category, including both undergraduate and graduate students. Within that category, most (114) attended MIT during the period since 1969; smaller numbers attended during the periods 1941–1954 and 1955–1968—eight and twelve, respectively. Dates here denote point of entry, not point of graduation. The periods reflect certain milestones in the history of black students at MIT: 1941 is the date that the earliest graduate interviewed, Victor Ransom, came to MIT as a freshman; 1955 is the year that MIT hosted a pioneering conference on issues of discrimination in higher education, the National Conference on Selectivity and Discrimination in American Universities (March 1955); and 1969 is the year that the first substantial number of blacks—53 in all—were admitted to the freshman class.

In the other categories, 23 black faculty were interviewed, 38 black staff and administrators, 16 non-black faculty, and 10 non-black staff and administrators. Because the emphasis of this project was on the experience of blacks, particularly students and faculty, in the academic life of the Institute, I interviewed only two black members of the support and service staffs, of which the vast majority of blacks connected to the Institute have been a part since the earliest days. These interviews—with Beverly Sheets and Anthony Clarke, both to be found on the CD—provide a basis, I hope, for future studies on the significant role of blacks in these staff categories at MIT. Appendix B, List of Interviewees, presents a complete list of people interviewed during the course of the project.

Keith Bevans ('96) undertook a UROP project under my direction in 1995–1996 to interview selected members of the senior and sophomore classes ('96 and '98, respectively), as a frame of reference for comparison with earlier graduates whom I interviewed. These interviews have not yet been transcribed or processed, but a list of Keith's interviewees is presented in Appendix C, List of Interviewees—Keith Bevans's UROP Project.

While one is always at risk of omitting someone important, and undoubtedly there are important people omitted here, I believe the interviews and transcripts convey a reasonably comprehensive picture of central issues encountered by blacks—especially students, faculty, and administrators—at MIT in the last half of the twentieth century.