



*The place where our community
comes together to celebrate
and promote the successes
of people of African descent.*

Developing a Community of Leaders and Laureates

Transforming expectations for minority performance at M.I.T.

Over thirty years ago, the Office of Minority Education at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was a bold experiment. Midwifed by thoughtful and vocal students, parented by forceful and dedicated faculty, OME was both a lifeline – almost familial in strength – and a vehicle of success at the Institute for at least a generation of minority students. It is therefore with some concern that we alumni learned the new millennium finds OME weaker in certain ways even while the national climate becomes increasingly less supportive of excellence in diversity.

Fortunately, a new millennium brings not only retrospection but also an almost visceral desire to seek out new opportunities. In this spirit, we offer our views on how the strengths developed by OME and M.I.T. over the years can be brought to bear in support of a new and exciting concept – explicitly developing a cohesive, connected and self-sustaining minority *community* of technological leaders and laureates.

OME was founded in the earliest days of affirmative action. The original dream was to increase the Black presence in science and technology. As it became apparent that our nation's high schools were doing an insufficient job of preparation, associated programs such as Minority Introduction to Engineering, Entrepreneurship, and Science (MITE²S) were initiated to help fill the pipeline by providing exposure and motivation to promising high school students throughout the country. This multifaceted effort has been a guarded success. Certainly the number of Blacks in science and technology has risen from trace levels in the late '60s and early '70s to a larger contingent – with a few outliers from these early days recently attaining some level of national prominence.

However, the numbers of Black students graduating from M.I.T. have remained small over the past twenty years, at no point has the Black presence in the graduate school exceeded five percent, and the number of Blacks on a faculty numbering about one thousand has hovered near twenty or so. Thus, the term outliers used to describe high level Black achievement is accurate – these few operate in the rarified atmosphere of "firsts." Even more telling is the lack of a sufficiently large and cohesive Black presence at middle and upper level positions. Without action, these laudable firsts could be "onlys" as well.

Against a backdrop of decreasing national support for excellence in diversity, stasis or loss at the undergraduate level coupled to under-representation at higher levels is profoundly troubling for the future of minorities in technology and the sciences. One could say the dream has stagnated and is in danger of dying without an infusion of will and vision, especially at schools of M.I.T.'s stature.

Simply put, the dream needs bold articulation and explicit implementation of a mission aimed at increasing the numbers of minorities on the faculty of leading institutions, in positions of national leadership, and among the internationally recognized and lauded creme of the science and technology community. As Black alumni we feel that through OME, M.I.T. has a unique set of core competencies – even if under-exercised in recent years – which can develop a large community of minority leaders to help change the face of science and technology in a sustainable way.

We note that historically, OME has already experienced a degree of success with some of the most intractable issues – developing and attracting talented minority youth against a backdrop of national educational inequality, and molding them into a cohesive and lifelong community. Programs such as Project Interphase brought incoming minority freshman aboard, and the original Black Student Union Tutorial Program offered both peer help and exactly the sort of easy social environment which fostered excellence among Black students – analogous in many ways to the support enjoyed by majority students in the fraternity system. It is this feel of supportive family that is most fondly remembered by Black alumni and was essential in building the cross-generational community whose support launched the Wesley Harris Scholarship Fund for MITE²S.

We suggest that only a subtle shift in emphasis is needed while maintaining the core competencies which helped a generation of minority students. That is,

*tilt OME's historical role as mediator toward facilitator of excellence
at M.I.T. and beyond*

Certainly this “subtle shift” requires great institutional support and will, but the returns could be nothing short of spectacular.

To be specific, note that in spite of negative expectations experienced by early Black cohorts at M.I.T., some have become astronauts, business leaders, professors and college presidents. Given their achievement against the odds, consider the possibilities if these same people had been immersed in an extended community of minority alumni and dedicated faculty whose culture both helped and *expected* them to become the next generation of leaders at the top institutions – starting at M.I.T. What if these same people had thus *expected* their numbers to lead international businesses, national laboratories, and to win MacArthur "Genius" awards, Nobel Prizes, Fields Medals? In short, what if the community ethos were changed from one of survival to one of collective and mutually supported *overachievement*?

Articulating and fostering this dream is an unprecedented opportunity. OME's past success has for the first time in M.I.T.'s history built a sufficiently large and cohesive group of savvy minority M.I.T. alumni to offer an existence proof of achievement against the odds – not only for minority students but for M.I.T. as an institution. Likewise, these same alumni comprise an influential network which can effectively help mold and support any “leaders and laureates” effort.

Furthermore, building a self-sustaining community of minorities in science and technology is arguably a model for M.I.T. leadership development efforts in general – strongly in resonance with recent thinking about the role of M.I.T. graduates in twenty first century society. Consider that the minority-led Black Student Union Tutorial Program has evolved into an essential part of the M.I.T. undergraduate experience through the OME Tutorial Services Program. An analogously evolved minority leadership program should have an equal if not greater impact.

Of course, the details of making the dream a reality are daunting. However, as all members of the M.I.T. community past and present know, a challenge excites something deep within us – an almost preternatural belief and joy in our ability to solve difficult problems. Thus, as might be expected of M.I.T. alumni, we have many ideas about how to implement a successful program with measurable goals in finite time, and we look forward to working with M.I.T. in making the reinvigorated dream a reality.

Black Alumni of M.I.T.*
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*Endorsed by the Executive Committee of the BAMIT Board. Prepared by BAMIT Committee on OME: Mr. James E. Clark '74, Dr. Austin Harton '78, Ms. Michelle Harton '83 (convener), Dr. Sylvester James Gates Jr. '73, Dr. Bernard Loyd '83, Mr. Samuel Nixon '80, Mr. Darcy Prather '91, Dr. Christopher Rose '79 (lead author)