

Overview of Black MIT Visiting Committee Proposal

Summary

Black Alumni of MIT (BAMIT) has proposed the creation of a visiting committee that would be responsible for assessing all aspects of the black experience at M.I.T., offering recommendations for improving, and monitoring progress. This Visiting Committee would operate much like current Corporation Visiting Committees, which are chartered by the M.I.T. Corporation (board of trustees), involve senior corporate and academic leaders, and convene on campus every 18 months or so. However, rather than focusing on an academic department, the proposed committee would address issues regarding black students, faculty, and staff, across the Institute. We believe that this will significantly increase M.I.T.'s ability to identify and address these issues. The proposal has been presented to President Hockfield and Chancellor Clay and is currently under discussion. The rest of this document outlines key aspects of our proposal.

Objective

Create an institutional vehicle that is effective in assessing the black experience at M.I.T., offering recommendations for improvement, and monitoring progress.

Background

Corporation Visiting Committees have proven effective in obtaining external input to M.I.T.'s academic departments and other key academic "units"; for providing consistent, long-term guidance on performance; and, for providing a direct link between the Corporation and M.I.T.'s key performance units. Visiting Committees are effective for several reasons. They are composed of Corporation members and other respected experts from academia and industry. Membership is generally long-term, with 20+ year tenures not uncommon, and is determined by the key parties involved: the Corporation, the M.I.T. President, the Alumni Association, and the leadership of the affected unit. Visiting Committees are ably supported by senior Corporation and unit staff and report directly to M.I.T.'s top leadership and to the Corporation itself.

We believe that current Visiting Committees have insufficiently addressed issues of race and ethnicity – principally because these issues are not considered important enough to merit rating among the top 2-3 issues facing a given academic unit. However, by their nature, race and ethnicity issues tend to be complex and to cut across academic units. As a result, the true institutional importance of the issues is understated; 'lessons learned' in academic units are not easily accessed by other units; and, cross-unit initiatives that might provide higher impact are difficult to start.

In particular, members of Black Alumni of M.I.T. serving on Visiting Committees have observed, time and again, a failure to address race-related issues identified by visiting committees due to the factors described above. Partly as a result of this, M.I.T.'s performance in the recruitment, retention, and performance of Blacks falls far short of our expectations. For example, the number of Black undergraduates entering MIT peaked in the late 1970's and has hovered at 5-6% of the incoming class since then, a gap in graduation rates versus other students persists, and the number of Black faculty at MIT

has remained “stuck” between 20 and 30 (of a total faculty of close to 1000) for about the last 25 years.

Aspiration

M.I.T. is rightly proud of its early leadership in addressing the educational inequities stemming from our Nation’s troubled racial history. Unfortunately, our progress has slowed and we are no longer able to capitalize on the initiatives launched in the 1960s and 1970s. New thinking and new approaches are required for M.I.T. to seize its opportunity to create a global Black “community of laureates and leaders”. We believe that ongoing, cross-departmental oversight and assessment are key prerequisites for regaining our leadership and momentum. In line with M.I.T.’s pioneering spirit, we view this as a golden opportunity to provide innovative solutions that set the pace on the national stage.

Approach for proposed visiting committee

The proposed visiting committee would operate much like existing visiting committees. Members would be selected from the Corporation, senior alumni, and highly-respected civic and business leaders by the President, Corporation, Alumni Association, BAMIT, and key Black M.I.T. leaders. The committee would convene on campus for a day and a half of intensive interviews and discussions every 18 months or so, and report its findings and recommendations to M.I.T.’s leadership team, the Corporation, leaders of M.I.T.’s Black community, and, potentially, to the Academic Council. Unlike most visiting committees, the proposed committee’s scope would cut across individual units to assess critical, Institute-wide programs and issues related to Black students, faculty, and staff.

Existing models

Visiting committees exist for Student Life and Undergraduate Education, both of which cut across the Institute. However, neither of these committees nor CJAC – the former Corporation Joint Advisory Committee, which also focused on student life issues – have effectively addressed black issues at MIT

Status

A letter proposing a Visiting Committee was provided to President Hockfield and Chancellor Clay in January 2005. President Hockfield responded in February suggesting that the existing visiting committee structure was inappropriate to address black issues at MIT and inviting BAMIT to receive updates on MIT’s efforts to address these issues. We believe that a visiting committee can be usefully employed to address our issues, and we are currently working with MIT’s leadership to understand their efforts and to determine how best to move forward this initiative.

Sponsor

This initiative is sponsored by the Executive Committee of the BAMIT Board of Directors. This document has been prepared by the BAMIT Committee on Improving the Black Experience. Members of this committee include Dr. Austin Harton ‘78, Ms. Michelle Harton ‘83, Mr. Darian Hendricks ‘89, Mr. Vincent James ‘78, Dr. Bernard Loyd ‘83, Mr. Martin Mbaya ‘00, Dr. Robert Satcher ‘86, and Mr. Wayne Stewart ‘92.