

INNISFREE



**THE NEGRO
AND MIT**

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by Robert Fleming

The black revolution which so preoccupies the minds of many American citizens has apparently not reached most of the MIT campus. Protected by the Institute-bred lack of social consciousness, too much of our student body plods along without the slightest curiosity about the small representation of American Negroes on campus. Apathy is not the sole cause of this complacency. There are far too few Negroes to remind us of the need to improve upon the status quo.

The present situation is indeed in great need of revision. In a nation whose population is 12 percent Negro, MIT has but a 3/5 percent representation. Considering that almost all of these are in the "affluent" middle class with only a small delegation from the overwhelmingly more populous lower classes, the problem becomes more apparent. It seems these "chosen 21" are just the lucky few compared to the large number of potentially capable but impoverished youngsters who, because of the accumulation of society's errors, will never rise from their enshrouding hopelessness.

MIT, however, is not the sole possessor of such statistics. The Negroes of this nation provide only about four-and-a-half percent of the college students, with predominately Negro colleges taking about half the total. The other half are schooled mainly in junior colleges or other colleges with little or no rejection of applicants. This leaves just dozens and half-dozens of Negroes attending selective universities. The New England area itself has only about twenty-two hundred Negro students, distributed so as to average about a one percent concentration in private senior colleges like MIT. This re-

cord of Negro enrollment is a direct function of the selectivity of such institutions; just as the West Coast's deceptively good record is a result of the availability of open-door junior colleges. The Institute, one of the most selective universities, must necessarily suffer in Negro enrollment due to this. MIT's record shows just how applicable this statement is.

The many causes of this lack are difficult to analyze and exponentially harder to eliminate. The reason for such a small representation is, for the most part, the small number applying. Two years ago



there were just forty applications received; last year's lot decreased to just thirty-two. Normally, over four thousand total applications are received by the Admissions Office. The number of Negro applicants is about twelve times smaller than population figures warrant.

One reason these applications are so sparse is most "lower class" people are not interested in the strictly technical education by which MIT is characterized. The view of science with which most impoverished Negroes identify is the "frosting on a rich society" which does very little to help the less fortunate in its midst. Most

see a lack of social importance in a technology concerned with space travel and more, deadlier weapons. Their views of the "affluent society" are enhanced time and again as their nation shows that it prefers foreign adventure to the responsibilities of caring for those at home. Careers in science and engineering often seem to bright young Negroes less relevant than careers in education, medicine, law, or athletics.

The infinitesimal exposure to "MIT—the College" most of the poor receive is another cause of disinterest. The poor often hear of MIT as a place where inventions take place and great discoveries are made, but few think of it as a possible place of future education. Low income neighborhoods possess few people informed enough to realize the potential of Tech. This unenlightened thinking is not corrected much by the small number of schools visited by MIT Educational Counselors and the small frequency of personal visits with scientifically oriented students. Knowledge of opportunity is a rare commodity in such a community. The slightly interested youngster, viewing such a large and important Eastern technological university as the home of "the nation's number one geniuses," faces many emotional difficulties in the expectation of tremendous competition for entrance. His high school counselor may be of little help, for he is often as uninformed as the student. Sometimes application is even discouraged by counselors because of the "pie-in-the-sky" inaccessibility of the Institute. Monetary misinformation also is an important restraint. Weighing their desperate need for financial assistance with their conception of the possibilities of scholarship help from MIT, many students become discouraged. Most of the poor are

still ignorant of the enormous possibilities of monetary aid and their apprehensions are fed by this ignorance. Sometimes the ten dollar application fee is enough to cause the precariously undecided student to try for safer grounds.

Important though these reasons of disinterest and ignorance are, lack of qualification stands as the biggest reason for not applying. This inadequate preparation is due to the inferior secondary school education prevalent in most predominantly Negro schools. The "capable" student, assuming he is motivated to learn, has very limited opportunities, especially in mathematics and science. He is frequently taught by the recent graduates of nearby all-Negro colleges, themselves the products of generally second-rate educations. Old and decaying schools, out-dated and often inferior books, and the lack of adequate educational equipment are the results of low school budgets. The learning atmosphere, or lack of it, caused by poverty and the hopelessness of ever escaping the ghetto, stocks the classrooms with underachievers waiting only to reach the drop-out age. This hindering influence permeates the "capable" student, leaving as a result an inferior level of achievement. For the most part, very few of those possessing the necessary innate talent ever are motivated enough to prepare themselves, and so suffer the failure of their lack of preparation.

Those few Negroes qualified for admission have little trouble at all. Publicized by a list of three thousand National Achievement Fund for Negro finalists, they find they are the targets of five hundred to a thousand Northern colleges alone. These students have to weigh the distance and financial advantages of nearby colleges against the academic advantages of schools like MIT; the decision is often to attend those close at hand. MIT has to offer special incentive to these students in order to get them to come.

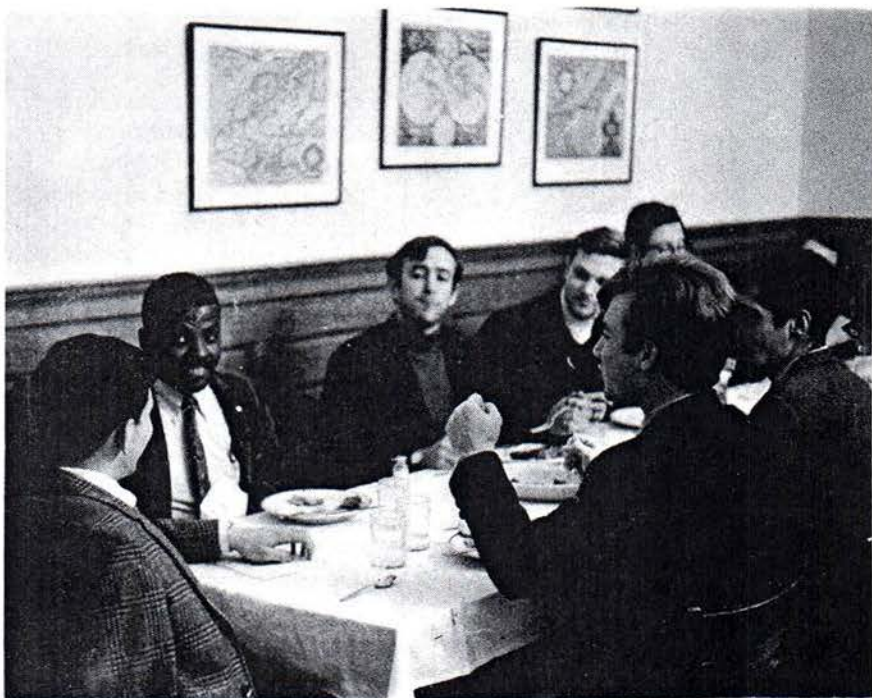
Interested in the possibilities of improvement, Professors Leon Trilling and George Valley wrote

a report about conditions at MIT with respect to Negroes and submitted it to CEP last summer. This report presented a rough plan for increasing the number of lower class Negroes. Its essence is to provide extra training to correct for the inferior education in underprivileged communities. The plan calls for fifty to one hundred students to be brought to the MIT campus for a year following high school. These "capable" but unprepared students would be chosen for their innate ability as determined by other methods than conventional (e.g. College Board) tests. The students would be housed in campus dorms under the supervision of an upperclassman in an effort to integrate them physically, socially, and emotionally into the Institute environment. During this year they would study both as a group and with MIT students. Special enrichment classes taught by seniors would be offered in mathematics, physics, and English in an effort to raise their level of achievement. These special students would also be encouraged to attend one or two Institute classes such as humanities, electives, or mathematics and science, if qualified. The idea is to make them feel totally at home at MIT—and to help them develop motivation through

association with hard-working students.

In conjunction with the studies portion of the program, each prospective student would participate with an MIT undergraduate in an urban renewal project in an area like Roxbury. This, hopefully, would create an awareness of the methods used in solving urban problems and would give the student a sense of purpose and accomplishment. Financial support would be supplied by the Institute. If substantial progress were made after a year of study, the Admissions Office would decide the advisability of offering admission to MIT. If admission were not offered, the Institute would take the responsibility for helping place the student in the best school possible. The original plan calls for half of the students to be taken from the Boston area and the other fifty invited from elsewhere.

According to Professor Valley, this plan would require the full-time work of one member of the faculty plus the part-time commitments of about twenty-five undergraduate students. He sees many problems in the planning and execution of such a plan, but feels that if enough care is taken before it is started, it will accomplish a great deal. Professor



Trilling sees a great need for the Institute to begin discussing methods of obtaining Federal funds, releasing faculty time for both planning and execution, and obtaining credit for students interested in helping such a program. He envisions the program as both a necessary help to the community and good experience for those involved.

A similar plan has been in effect at Yale for the past few years. As Professor Trilling sees it, Yale's plan differs from ours mainly in the housing and education of these special students off campus. It is believed this difference, as opposed to the MIT idea of assimilation, is causing the collapse of Yale's program. Building from Yale's mistakes, MIT is trying to learn the best methods for carrying on a program of this sort.

The subcommittee formed to discuss these plans has met several times to date, and is still in the process of gathering basic ideas and revising plans. The committee is interested in bringing in all types of impoverished people, with the main emphasis being on the Negro. Present at the first meeting, and those since, was senior Shirley Jackson, a representative of the Negro students. Interested in the other Negroes' opinions of the plan, Shirley helped organize a meeting of MIT's Negro population. At this meeting, attended by about a dozen students, they discussed problems with the plan, its feasibility, suggestions for improvement, and what they could do to help. Doubling as a social gathering, this meeting was the first time they had been together as a group. According to general consensus, the get-together accomplished much in the form of communication. More such discussions are planned for the future, as much remains to be done.

To get their reactions to the proposed plan, INNISFREE interviewed most of MIT's Negroes. The vast majority felt that the plan was a good idea, but most wanted more details. The big questions brought up were: How are these students going to be chosen? What are the possibilities

of building motivation so quickly? What about the social atmosphere at Tech? What can be done to help these students in their social and emotional problems? Why should anyone give up a year without any assurance of success? What happens to those who fail? How much are one hundred students going to matter? Why is MIT doing this?

At the present time most of these questions seem unanswerable. As the program accelerates its planning, however, they will have to be answered with greater precision or this whole dream will disappear as a wasted quiver of conscience. The Institute cannot act without a large probability of success, especially where human lives and aspirations are at stake.

The reasons many Negroes do not come reflect to a high degree the tremendous difficulties involved in improving present situations. In all but the field of publicity, it is not immediately apparent what MIT can do to help. The Institute may very well be a

large and rich community, but changing the whole nation's educational and economic systems is very far sighted. It is just this seemingly hopeless goal that has restrained MIT from taking any part at all in the continual process of boosting the poverty-stricken up inch by inch. Although the Admissions Office has for some time kept files of highly accurate "circumstantial evidence" identifying eighty to ninety percent of MIT's Negro students, no good use has ever been made of it. Only an occasional mention of the scarcity of Negroes at a Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) meeting has ever disturbed the tranquility. Nothing was done until the Federal Department of Health, Education, and Welfare requested a poll of colored students last summer. These confidential yellow forms brought into focus the neglected need for action. The CEP for the first time decided to use the accumulated Admissions Office data for a study of the problem.

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