

TO: MIT Academic Council
FROM: Black Graduate Students Association at MIT, Executive Board
DATE: December 1, 2015
SUBJECT: Recommendations for Addressing Racial Bias at MIT

The recent national wave of campus protests that began, most notably, at the University of Missouri and Yale College in early November 2015, have inspired students of color at MIT to speak out against traces of systemic racial bias at the Institute.

Few would disagree that the Institute has nobly stated its commitment to fostering a diverse and inclusive community, and that it has taken many steps to make that commitment real. Yet, the practical experiences of MIT students of color indicate that the values of diversity and inclusion have not yet reached all corners of Institute life.

The Black Graduate Students Association at MIT presents these pragmatic, graduate-focused recommendations for reform to challenge the Institute to rededicate itself to the grand mission of becoming a university that provides students of every background the tools necessary *for them* to pursue excellence in technical learning, industry, and service. These recommendations are offered in supplement to the recommendations made by the undergraduate Black Students Union. They are presented according to the three major phases of a student's relationship with MIT: admissions and enrollment, education, and graduation.

Admissions and Enrollment Phase

1. Develop and implement a ten-year plan to increase the number of under-represented minority graduate students, in particular Black graduate students.

- MIT's dedication to diversity is evident in the MIT community, which contains representatives from all 50 States of America and the District of Columbia, three territories, and 116 countries.¹ Although it is very ethnically diverse, the Institute still has a lot of to work do to create *racially* diverse MIT community. Measures taken by the Institute have lead to a rise in the number of under-represented minority students (URM) in the undergraduate population. With the decentralized nature of the graduate department admissions, such upward trends were not reflected in the graduate admissions. The Institute's commitment to increasing the number of URM faculty and graduate student² was accompanied by a marginal rise in the graduate student URM population from 7% in 2004 to 12% in 2012.³ Upon further analysis, this percentage increase can be attributed to increasing numbers of graduate students identifying as Hispanic or Latino, American Indian or Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific islanders. The number of the Black graduate students has remained fix at about

¹ 2015 MIT Facts, "Enrollment". Available at: <http://web.mit.edu/facts/enrollment.html>

² Faculty Policy Committee statement of representation of minorities on the faculty and graduate student body, May 4, 2004. Available at: <http://web.mit.edu/facts/enrollment.html>

³ ODGE strategic theme four: Diversity and Climate. Available at: <http://odge.mit.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Diversity-Climate.pdf>

3.5%. Therefore, to increase the number of URM students, in particular the number of Black students at MIT, **we recommend the Institute develop and implement a new action plan with measurable goals continuing the Institute's focus on increasing admission and enrollment of URM graduate students, particularly those of Black students, through targeted recruitment for the next 10 years.** Increasing the number of URM graduate students is an important catalyst for creating a culture at MIT that lives up to its values of diversity and inclusion.

- Academic departments are at the front-lines of the implementation of academic policies related to graduate student education. The success of any academic policy initiative related to graduate students, such as enhancing diversity and inclusion, depends on effective departmental implementation. To address some of the challenges associated with implementation of centralized policies on increasing diversity and inclusion in a decentralized graduate student admissions system, we propose:
 - **Each department be required to submit to the Institute Community and Equity Office a five-year plan for increasing URM graduate student enrollment and retention.**
 - **The appointment of a Diversity Representative** in each department whose task is to carry out the targeted recruitment of competitive URM students as outlined in the new action plan. (See BSU-PAC Recommendations, Section 11)
 - **Each departmental admission committee should contain at least one minority representative** to help identify and advocate for competitive minority applicants.

2. Introduce greater accountability for departmental performance related to the matriculation and graduation of URM graduate students.

- In addition to concerns about the relatively low level of matriculation at MIT by URM graduate students, there are related concerns about the graduation rates of URM graduate students once enrolled. While many in the Institute are working to address these issues – including faculty, staff, and students– they are stymied by the lack of access to department-level information on URM graduate student applications, matriculation, and graduation. Moreover, MIT's decentralized graduate admissions system means that academic departments have almost total responsibility for the outcomes of their graduate admissions processes. Greater transparency and accountability for MIT's academic departments could make an important contribution to improving URM graduate student matriculation and graduation. **We recommend that the Institute introduce a centralized process of data collection from MIT's academic departments for information about URM graduate student matriculation and graduation.** This step will allow the Institute's senior academic leaders, as well as other members of the community, to identify where problems lie, and to constructively engage with departments about possible solutions.

3. Require diversity training for incoming graduate students.

- Bringing together students from disparate backgrounds and circumstances in a cooperative and respectful way within a single institution is a formidable challenge. One

key to reducing sources of inter-cultural friction and division is to educate students that diversity and inclusion are core MIT values and that they have responsibilities to comply with those values. Guidance on how they can develop affirmative skills for competently navigating multicultural social spaces can provide students with a real marketable asset. Therefore, to reinforce the importance of diversity and inclusion as core values for new graduate members of the MIT community, **we recommend that they be required, as a condition of enrollment, to complete an in-person diversity awareness training module.** Admitted students might complete this requirement during the period of graduate orientation, or during the first month of the Fall semester. As an alternate option, the Institute could also offer graduate students the opportunity to take during the prior summer an online module, perhaps in the form of an MITx course, which would be more in-depth, but would also confer a credential on successful completion.

4. **Offer a special, university-wide orientation session for incoming graduate students of under-represented minority racial and ethnic backgrounds.**
 - One element of creating an inclusive environment for under-represented minority (URM) graduate students lies in welcoming them to the Institute in a way that respectfully and informatively acknowledges the ways in which their experiences at MIT may differ from the experiences of others, and which introduces them to the support resources available to them. **We recommend that the Institute host a session during orientation, before the start of classes, during which URM graduate students are introduced to senior academic leaders at MIT, key personnel in the Office of the Dean of Graduate Education, and representatives from other offices that provide relevant student services.** This session could also aid incoming URM graduate students in forming a supportive, informal social network by allowing them to connect with other URM graduate students or graduate student organizations.

Education Phase

5. **Enhance services to assist students coping with race-based traumatic stress.**
 - There is a growing recognition in the field of psychology of a phenomenon called “race-based traumatic stress.” Race-based traumatic stress is thought to be an emotional condition experienced by victims of racial and ethnic bias. In such cases, the victim bears measurable evidence of abnormal traumatic stress levels and experiences a cluster of negative psychological reactions in response to an experience of perceived racial bias or discrimination. URM students may arrive at MIT already experiencing race-based traumatic stress due to their prior life experiences. While at MIT, URM students may have direct experiences that could trigger traumatic stress. In addition, race-based traumatic stress can be triggered vicariously through highly-publicized events that feature allegations of racial bias. **We recommend that the Institute take steps to expand the capacity of MIT Medical’s Counseling and Mental Health Services division to assist URM students who may be experiencing race-based traumatic stress.** This could include adding personnel trained specially to provide counseling for students coping with mental conditions related to experiences of racial bias. **We also recommend that Office**

of the Dean of Graduate Education identify race-based traumatic stress as a legitimate basis for writing “excuse notes” on behalf of graduate students seeking special academic accommodations, when those students are confirmed by an authorized professional to be showing symptoms of race-based traumatic stress.

Additionally, we recommend that senior leaders at the Institute conduct a listening tour to begin a process of documenting and understanding current students’ encounters with racial bias at MIT, and of raising community-wide awareness of such bias.

- 6. Require implicit bias training for research laboratory personnel – including faculty, staff, and students.**
 - MIT’s research laboratories are vital training grounds for graduate students to learn important disciplinary subject matter and research skills. One’s ability to thrive within a given lab environment often depends on one’s ability to form relationships of trust and respect within the lab, and particularly with senior lab personnel. URM graduate students may encounter greater difficulty in forming such relationships due to the effects of implicit bias. **Therefore, to help ensure that each laboratory environment is inclusive, we recommend that all lab personnel be required to complete an implicit bias training once every three years, similar to the validity period for successful human subjects research training.** We note that leading innovation-driven corporations, like Google, have recently introduced mandatory implicit bias training workshops to improve the management, operation, and creativity of its project teams.⁴

Graduation Phase

- 7. Provide tailored resources to help URM graduate student to compete successfully on academic and professional job markets.**
 - Students of color encounter unique obstacles on the academic and professional job markets due to the effects of implicit and explicit bias. Well-meaning but generic career development advice sessions often do not touch on how to overcome these obstacles. **We recommend the hiring of a career development officer specializing in counseling academic and professional job-seekers of color.** Such an officer could provide dedicated assistance to URM graduate students in developing job search plans and interview strategies specific to their needs. They could also add an important layer of knowledge about the effects of bias on corporate human resources decision-making to the career development community-of-practice at MIT, and help to organize targeted recruitment events.

⁴ Guynn, Jessica, “Google's 'bias-busting' workshops target hidden prejudices,” UsaToday.com, May 12, 2015. Available at: <http://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2015/05/12/google-unconscious-bias-diversity/27055485/>