

A plea for help to end racism at MIT

Dec. 19, 2006

Dear Colleagues:

I am writing to you to ask for your help with a very difficult problem that I have faced at MIT for more than 2 years now. Many of you are aware of my complaint regarding the decision of Douglas Lauffenburger, head of the Division of Biological Engineering (BE), not to advance my tenure case for review by Engineering Council in December 2004. Others among you may not know of this issue. Though I have shared this problem with many of you before, I have not directly asked for your help. Now, I do.

I brought my initial complaint to the attention of President Susan Hockfield, Provost Robert Brown, and Dean of the School of Engineering, Thomas Magnanti, by e-mail, in January 2004. None of them responded in any manner until after an article appeared in The Boston Globe that outlined some of the elements of my complaint, chief amongst these being racist attitudes among members of the BE faculty.

In response to the Globe article, Provost Robert Brown conducted an initial inquiry into events surrounding the evaluation of my tenure case by the BE faculty. He instructed that interviews be conducted with BE faculty members. However, he ignored the issue of a clear conflict of interest that existed between Professor Lauffenburger and his spouse, BE faculty member Professor Linda Griffith, that operated against me during the BE faculty's evaluation of my tenure case. He ignored the statement by Professor Lauffenburger to me that he had involved upper administration in the development of his decision not to advance my tenure case. He ignored Professor Lauffenburger's statement to me that he "knew that my race would be a factor in the review of my tenure case." He ignored the fact that I had heated exchanges involving both Professor Lauffenburger and Professor Griffith together over their delinquency in transferring designated funds to my Child accounts on joint projects for which they were the P.I.'s. He ignored the fact that Professor Lauffenburger never assembled a group of BE faculty to administer the development of my tenure case, despite his conflict of interest due to Professor Griffith's hostility towards me and my research program. Thus, Professor Lauffenburger, acting alone in this environment of conflict of interest, assembled my tenure case, presented it to the BE faculty, and made the decision not to advance it. Provost Brown's inquiry did confirm that the BE faculty spent less than 1 hour discussing my case for tenure in a hearing led by Professor Lauffenburger.

Based on his evaluation, Provost Brown concluded that there were no grounds for him to initiate a formal grievance proceeding for my complaint. When asked specifically about his decision to exclude conflict of interest and the involvement

of upper administration in a tenure decision made by a department head, Provost Brown stated that he did so because including them would have required that he initiate a grievance proceeding. The specific upper administrators that Professor Lauffenburger named were Dean Thomas Magnanti and Provost Brown himself. Dean Magnanti admitted his involvement, but Provost Brown denied his involvement as his opening statement when he first met with me. Provost Brown moved onto Boston University leaving my unresolved complaint for incoming Provost Rafael Reif to address.

Upon hearing my complaint, Provost Reif ruled that a full grievance proceeding, according to MIT Policies and Procedures, was in order. He assembled an investigating committee of three senior MIT faculty members. They met with me only once, and then months later in January 2006, I received a letter from Provost Reif indicating that he had decided that there were no grounds for reconsidering my case for tenure at MIT.

I appealed this decision to President Hockfield on several grounds. Among them, the committee did not conduct a diligent investigation. It never met with me again before developing its report to the Provost. Therefore, it never crosschecked its findings with me, nor did it meet again with me to hear additional information. The Provost's letter acknowledged many significant irregularities in the handling of my tenure case, but treated them as benign. For example, there was the fact that I was denied independent lab space by Professor Lauffenburger for my entire 7 years on the BE faculty. Moreover, the Provost continued the tradition of ignoring the significance of the conflict of interest created by Professor Lauffenburger's spousal relationship with Professor Linda Griffith.

The committee did discover some new and relevant information. Not only had upper administration been involved in Professor Lauffenburger's decision, but at least one other member of the MIT faculty had also been asked to sign off on Professor Lauffenburger's decision. That faculty member is an African American department head who is not in my field of research. Now, the squeamish will rationalize this action by Professor Lauffenburger as an attempt at fairness by a White faculty member. However, the honest will recognize it for what it is, another act of racism. Calling on someone to condone a wrongful act because they are of the same race as the injured party is a racist act.

President Hockfield agreed to consider my appeal, but asked me to allow that my appeal still fell within the province of the Provost. They both met with my advocate, Professor Kenneth Manning, and me in February 2006 to hear information that the investigating committee had not. I shared the following crucial information with them:

1. There were several damaging acts, motivated by my race, that I either encountered or learned of as a member of the BE faculty. For example, I learned that the reason I had never had full independent lab space was because future

Provost Robert Brown, who was the Dean of the School of Engineering at the time, said that he was not going to give lab space to a Black man. The faculty members handling my recruitment were forced to either give me their own lab space or retract my offer. I have shared lab space with them thereafter, and Professor Lauffenburger has done nothing to rectify the situation. Despite BE's receipt of significant new lab space and my timely requests, he has given it all to White faculty members.

2. At the time that Professor Lauffenburger was deciding my tenure case, I was contacted by a member of the MIT Corporation. This particular member of the Corporation served on the BE visiting committee and was also on the Presidential Search Committee that eventually recommended Susan Hockfield as the next MIT President. I now know that for a member of the Corporation to contact an untenured faculty member regarding such important Corporation business is improper. Moreover, the nature of the member's contact was relevant to my race and Professor Lauffenburger's decision. The call was an inquiry about my confidential outspoken criticism against Provost Robert Brown, also a MIT presidential candidate. I was critical of his publicly displayed lack of cultural competency and racial insensitivity in an MIT forum. The fact that this contact occurred at the time that my tenure case was being discussed with upper administration by Professor Lauffenburger is further complicated by the report of a personal relationship between Professor Lauffenburger and Provost Brown, the latter having been best man in the former's wedding.

These two acts alone are sufficient cause for overturn of Professor Lauffenburger's decision. However, there were also many other acts of discrimination related to my race that I related to President Hockfield and Provost Reif that revealed a troubling image of how my race has led to a difference in treatment, support, and regard by Professor Lauffenburger, Professor Griffith, and several other members of the BE faculty.

Based on the information that I shared with them, President Hockfield charged Provost Reif with re-doing the investigation of my complaint. Provost Reif charged the same investigation committee to investigate further, but he instructed them that the conflict of interest constituted by Professor Lauffenburger and Professor Griffith, the action by Provost Brown to withhold lab space from me because of my race, and the improper contact by a member of the MIT Corporation about Provost Brown's racial attitudes at the time of Professor Lauffenburger's decision regarding whether to advance my tenure case were all to be excluded from their investigation! This was unbelievable! I informed that Provost that these issues were crucial to my complaint, but he proceeded to charge the committee without making them a formal part of the investigation.

So, it was no surprise to me that when the Provost met with me yesterday, December 18, after my laboratory, my family, and I waited over 8 months for the

committee to complete its second investigation, that his resolution was not to overturn Professor Lauffenburger's decision. Although, at this time I have not received his official letter with a synopsis of the findings by the investigation committee, I do not need to see it to know the basis for the Provost's decision. The committee did not even interview all of the persons on the list that they asked me to provide to them!

This is the same Provost who insisted, since February 2006, that all of my grants carry a statement saying that I might no longer be a faculty member at MIT at the time a grant were awarded. Of course, this statement is true for all MIT faculty members, but they are not required to put such a statement into their grant applications. This is the same Provost who asked me to give members of my laboratory lay-off notices in November, before he provided any indication that the committee had completed its investigation. This is the same Provost who stated that the \$2.5M NIH Director's Pioneer Award that I received is not a significant award. This is the same Provost who has ignored many letters sent to him and President Hockfield from prominent national and international scientists acknowledging the international recognition of my research program at MIT.

The oddest thing in all that has occurred is that no one has stated exactly what is wrong with my tenure case. I have learned that Professor Lauffenburger purposely misrepresented my research progress in meetings with the heads of other engineering departments prior to his decision. I have learned that my external letters are excellent. It turns out that the tangible problem is only found in internal letters from Professor Lauffenburger's spouse and her supporters for whom my research poses an intellectually disruptive threat. They might tolerate and even celebrate such a challenge from a White faculty member, but never from one who is Black.

There is a glaring duplicity in Provost Reif's professed major aim to develop better mechanisms for advancing recruitment and retention of minority faculty at MIT. If he can overlook so blithely what has happened in my case for tenure at MIT, then he like Provost Robert Brown, who was prevented from bringing his racist attitudes to the presidency of MIT, should not be allowed to foster such attitudes as the Provost of MIT.

I am calling on you, my colleagues at MIT, to seek Provost Reif's immediate resignation for the manner in which he has handled my complaint. Imagine my humiliation yesterday, when, for his meeting with me, he asked another MIT senior faculty member "to sit in to listen." Someone, who I did not know and who played no official role in my tenure complaint, was invited to attend only a few hours before the meeting to watch the Provost deliver his "disappointing news" to me. MIT can do so much better than this!

I am also asking for your help in another way. My two young daughters and wife and my lab are now going through a third bleak holiday season of waiting for MIT

upper administration to figure out how to do the right thing. Courageously, they join me in my determination to never leave MIT without a just resolution and correction of what a few racist members of the MIT community have done. If their wrongful deeds are not corrected by February 5, 2007, I will go on hunger strike outside the MIT Provost's office. I hope that you will support me in this effort by joining me in my protest starting on February 5, 2007. Of course, I am not asking you to join me in my hunger strike, just to support me with your presence when you are able.

I will either see the Provost resign and my hard-earned tenure granted at MIT, or I will die defiantly right outside his office. This is the strength of my conviction that racism in American must end. What better place to kill a small part of it than at a great institution like MIT. It is time for leaders at MIT to stop sitting around in monthly faculty meetings wringing their hands about difficulty retaining minority faculty. Some, like Provost Reif are not fretting at all. Instead, they are trying to wipe the stain of their own racism from their hands before someone who cares sees it.

Yours sincerely,

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