

March 30, 2007

Statement of Facts in Regard to the James Sherley Tenure Case

To the MIT Community, Colleagues and Friends:

As senior members of the faculty in the Biological Engineering (BE) Division at MIT, we are writing now as a follow up to our public statement of 2/5/07 about the tenure case of Prof. James Sherley, to correct public misstatements of fact. Several other issues, such as research space, will be addressed in a separate statement by members of the BE Executive Committee. The objective of this letter is to correct misstatements of fact in the interest of openness, honesty and fairness that should exist in a healthy academic community.

Conflicts of interest and the fairness of the tenure decision. In an email dated 12/21/06, Prof. Sherley expressed concern that a conflict of interest adversely affected his tenure case as a result of the BE Director being married to Prof. Linda Griffith, with whom Prof. Sherley claims to have had a hostile relationship.

Prior to or at the time of the tenure decision, we had not witnessed or known of any unprofessional tensions or conflicts between Profs. Sherley and Griffith that would call into question either person's professional integrity. Further, Prof. Sherley did not avail himself of the opportunity to alert any of us about any conflicts prior to or during the assembly of his tenure case. While some have said that a tenure candidate should not bear that burden, only the candidate can raise issues that only the candidate sees.

It should be noted that Prof. Griffith, through several grants on which she was the Principal Investigator, was a collaborator of Prof. Sherley's, and a strong and longstanding financial supporter of his research program. Furthermore, Prof. Griffith is listed as a coauthor on one of Prof. Sherley's published peer-reviewed papers.

In an email dated 2/10/07, Prof. Sherley also alleged that the tenure decision was determined solely by Prof. Lauffenburger. This is not the truth. The process used in all promotion cases in BE is similar to that of Chemical Engineering, Civil and Environmental Engineering, and the Engineering Systems Division. The process starts with the candidate submitting a Faculty Personnel Record that accounts for all of his or her professional accomplishments and the Division Head soliciting names of referees from both the tenure candidate and from senior members of the faculty. Several senior members of the BE faculty recommended that Prof. Griffith provide a letter as an internal referee for Prof. Sherley's case, on the basis of her extensive knowledge of Prof. Sherley's research program from their research collaborations. It is a common practice to solicit letters from the candidate's collaborators. Prof. Sherley had the opportunity to provide the BE

Director with names of individuals that he preferred not to be included as referees on his case. To our knowledge, he did not exclude Prof. Griffith.

A package of information for Prof. Sherley's case, as in all promotion cases in BE, was made available to senior faculty for review more than one week before the meeting to discuss the case and vote. In addition, copies of the materials were made available to all senior faculty during this meeting. Prof. Sherley's case received a thorough, thoughtful and uncontentious discussion of the merits of his accomplishments in research and teaching, discussion of the many letters of evaluation received from experts in Prof. Sherley's research areas, and discussion of his service to MIT and to the broader science and engineering communities, as do all promotion cases in BE. The senior faculty voted not to recommend Prof. Sherley's tenure in BE and we believe that the outcome was fair.

As in all promotion cases in BE, the Division Head did not vote on Prof. Sherley's case and acted only as a moderator of discussion. Prof. Lauffenburger's decision not to carry Prof. Sherley's case forward reflected the vote of the faculty. All of us considered his case only on the basis of facts and merits, and we based our decisions solely on the candidate's professional accomplishments and letters of reference, as we stated in our previous public communication of February 5, 2007.

Research publications. In every tenure case in BE, the faculty assess the number, scientific quality and, in particular, the impacts of peer-reviewed articles published during the tenure probationary period at MIT. The issue of the number of Prof. Sherley's publications is a matter of public record readily accessible from public databases such as PubMed. During the pre-tenure period at MIT, Prof. Sherley had published only six peer-reviewed publications describing original research. Four of those publications were based upon work done at MIT, and the other two were based upon work from his previous independent position at Fox Chase Cancer Center. Only three of the six publications list Prof. Sherley as the first or corresponding author (or another member of his research group as lead or first author), the status most highly valued for promotion decisions. Prof. Sherley's publication record, while only one factor in our decision, did not meet the standards required for tenure cases in BE.

Research reputation. The issue of letters of reference was raised by Prof. Sherley in an email dated 12/21/06. As discussed earlier, all tenure cases in BE involve consideration of letters from a list of external and internal referees assembled from recommendations made by both the candidate and senior members of the faculty in BE. We state here (without violating rules of confidentiality) that the external letters from experts in the field of stem cell biology were not strong enough to support a positive tenure decision in BE. Further, the internal letters were solicited from members of the MIT faculty who

had detailed knowledge of Prof. Sherley's research, teaching and service activities, and not from anyone thought to be in conflict with the candidate.

Research funding. The BE faculty also considers the level of independent, competitive, peer-reviewed research funding that the candidate is able to attract. From an email dated 1/29/07: "My program was funded with \$747,000 per year in direct costs." This figure is accurate only for the year Prof. Sherley came up for tenure. On the basis of Prof. Sherley's Faculty Personnel Record and other official records, Prof. Sherley's research was supported by ~\$1.5 million over the entire six year and four month pre-tenure period (exclusive of startup funds; averaging <\$250,000 per year). It is noteworthy that a large portion of this funding (~\$1 million over the pre-tenure period; averaging ~\$158,000 per year) was obtained from several grants on which Prof. Linda Griffith was the Principal Investigator and that did not include Prof. Sherley in the original competing grant application.

Prof. Sherley received the NIH Pioneer Award more than a year and a half after the tenure decision was made.

In closing, we believe that Prof. Sherley's tenure case was handled by the BE faculty with the utmost fairness in a process with the greatest integrity, as free as humanly possible from bias and racism. The facts as we present them here support this conclusion.

Sincerely,

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Peter Dedon
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