

Sharp declines presidency

Nominee says research, teaching are too important to leave behind

By Niraj S. Desai and Neil J. Ross

Just six days after his nomination was announced, Phillip A. Sharp yesterday withdrew from consideration for MIT's presidency.

Sharp, professor of biology and director of the Center for Cancer Research, said that he was not willing to give up his research program and teaching duties in order to assume the position.

Before yesterday's announcement, Sharp's nomination had been expected to receive easy approval from the MIT Corporation at its March 2 meeting. It is unlikely that the name of any new nominee to succeed President Paul E. Gray '54 will be presented at the meeting. Instead the Corporation will discuss how to resume the presidential search process, which was suspended a week ago after Sharp had been chosen.

The Executive Committee of the MIT Corporation, which had voted to nominate Sharp for president, will also soon discuss how to find a replacement for Gray, who is scheduled to step down on July 1. Gray had planned to succeed David S. Saxon '41 as chairman of the Corporation on that date. Saxon had planned to retire.

Late yesterday, Gray said in a statement that if a new president is not selected in the next four months, the Corporation could extend his term beyond July 1. Gray also suggested that the trustees could make an exception to the rule that the chairman retires upon reaching age 70 in order to have Saxon stay on as well.

Giving up research, teaching

The 45-year-old Sharp began calling members of the administration and those involved in the search process last night to inform them of his decision to withdraw and to express his regrets.

He issued a statement yesterday expressing gratitude to the executive committee for the nomination, but saying that "As I anticipated dissolving my research program and teaching duties, I came reluctantly to the realization that I could not fill that void in my life with anything else."

"I know the presidency of MIT is an office of extraordinary importance, challenge and opportunity," the statement continued. "But in the end, I discovered that it is not for me. I apologize for my indecisiveness and for not fully understanding this personal need."

Sharp refused further public comment.

Faculty and administration members contacted by *The Tech* yesterday afternoon took Sharp's explanation of his withdrawal at face value, rejecting the possibility of other motives.

"My understanding is that when the concrete idea of closing his laboratory and essentially turning his back on science came to him, he couldn't do it," said Faculty Chair Henry D. Jacoby, who informed faculty members of Sharp's decision in a letter distributed at noon.

Professor Eugene B. Skolnikoff '49, a member of the faculty's presidential search committee, said that Sharp impressed him as "someone for whom the sciences are very important." When Sharp began to confront what he would need to do to assume the presidency — suspend his research projects, dismantle his laboratory — he found he was not able to go through with it, Skolnikoff said.

Search committees may restart

The Corporation's executive committee had nominated Sharp upon the recommendation of the Corporation and faculty presidential search committees, which had been working together since April 1989 to find a successor for Gray.

The two committees, which met jointly, did discuss with Sharp the need for him to give up his research and teaching if selected, according to Professor Lawrence M. Lidsky PhD '62, who was on the faculty committee.

Several search committee members suggested that, before he was actually chosen, Sharp did not appreciate the full import of what he would be required to give up.

"It wouldn't have gotten this far" if there had been concern that Sharp would pull out of the presidential race, Skolnikoff said.



Professor Phillip A. Sharp

photo courtesy Donna Coveney/MIT News Office

It is possible that the executive committee and the full Corporation will ask the two search committees to resume their review of presidential candidates.

"We only recently stopped meeting [so] we can continue without too much of a break," said search committee member Claude R. Canizares, a professor of physics.

Jacoby said the search committees had identified a number of highly qualified candidates — each of whom would be an excellent candidate. But he added that the committees will need authorization from the executive committee before they can restart their work.

Second nominee second best?

One faculty member believed the search process should start all over again with new search committees now that Sharp has re-

fused the nomination, even if that means that the new president will not be named before July. "You've just got to think about it . . . anyone who is picked out now" will be publicly labeled as second best, he said.

"It would be a real insult . . . to go to number two on the list," the faculty member said.

Several search committee members also felt that a nominee chosen soon after Sharp's withdrawal would be seen as the second choice, but they argued that such a characterization would be unfair.

"Surely there is a danger of that, but I think it would be a real shame if that were the way most people perceive it," Canizares said. "We are not dealing with a linear ranking," he asserted, saying that Sharp's selection was not an indication that he was better than all the other candidates, but only that he had the combination of strengths and perspectives the committees were looking for.

The search process is about "identifying a small group of individuals . . . each of whom would do an excellent job," Canizares added.

Lidsky said that some potential candidates might shy away from a renewed presidential search for fear of being tagged as second best, but he also believed that "a simple numerical order is oversimplifying the process."

What route MIT takes is in the domain of the Corporation executive committee, pointed out Walter L. Milne, assistant to the chairman and to the president. Because so little time has passed since Sharp's withdrawal, the committee has not had time to consider options, he said.

Milne said that the only time in recent decades that the Institute has had an acting president was in the late 1950s when MIT President James R. Killian Jr. '26 went to Washington as President Dwight D. Eisenhower's science advisor. Julius A. Stratton '23 served in Killian's stead for more than a year, until he was elected 11th president.

Sharp hailed for scientific work

Sharp's decision is a "shame for MIT [but] good for the cancer center," said Associate Professor of Biology David H. Raullet. Sharp has headed the center since 1985.

Sharp has received almost universal acclaim as a molecular biologist, particularly for his groundbreaking 1977 discovery of surplus DNA and RNA splicing.

"RNA splicing is one of the great discoveries of our time," said Professor of Biology Har Gobin Khorana, a Nobel laureate in medicine.

Biology Professor Robert A. Weinberg '64 described Sharp as a "spectacularly successful scientist" and RNA splicing as a "landmark" achievement.

Sharp shared the Albert Lasker Basic Medical Research Award in 1988, and many scientists feel he will receive the Nobel Prize soon.

Other finalists may be reconsidered

By Reuven M. Lerner

Professor Phillip A. Sharp's sudden withdrawal from the presidential search means that previous candidates on the "short list," including Stanford University Dean of Engineering James F. Gibbons and MIT Professor of Economics Paul L. Joskow, may still be under consideration.

Gibbons declined a presidential offer from Carnegie Mellon University last fall, according to *The Tartan*, CMU's student newspaper. "I don't have any intense desire to be president of any institution," he told *The Tartan* last month. Gibbons reportedly remains a candidate on CMU's new short list.

Despite his comment in *The Tartan*, he remained a strong candidate at MIT until the nomination of Sharp was announced last week. A member of the faculty saw Gibbons two weeks ago, only days before Sharp was nominated. And a source close to Gibbons said the dean might have accepted an offer from MIT, but that now he would probably stay at Stanford.

Gibbons was unavailable for comment.

In an telephone interview last month, Gibbons said he had spoken with the Corporation and faculty search committees, but he refused to say whether he was a candidate. He simply said that "there are a few perspectives that people from Stanford might have that might be of interest" to the search committees.

An article in *The Stanford Daily* last month reported that Gibbons would neither confirm nor deny his candidacy, and quoted him as saying, "I am not looking for another job."

Gibbons would be the fourth electrical engineer to head the Institute were he elected president.

Economics professor a possible candidate

An anonymous source told *The Tech* earlier this week that Joskow, who was appointed full professor in 1978, had also been a strong presidential candidate. The source,

who described Joskow as a "dark horse," said that Joskow had spoken with the committees as late as Friday, Feb. 9, the day the committees agreed to recommend Sharp to the Corporation's executive committee.

Joskow, who had not previously been mentioned as a candidate, was unavailable for comment.

If elected, Joskow would be the second economist to lead the Institute. Francis Amasa Walker, the third president, was a professor of political economy and history at Yale before coming to MIT in 1881.

Joskow received a BA in economics from Cornell University and a PhD in economics from Yale University. He worked for one year as a fellow at Stanford's Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences and



photo courtesy Stanford News Service
Stanford Engineering Dean James F. Gibbons

was a visiting professor at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

In addition, he has served on the National Science Foundation's Regulation Sub-Panel, the National Academy of Sciences Committee on Electricity and Economic Growth, and the Economic Task Force of the National Commission for Review of the Antitrust Laws. Joskow has also written over 60 articles, notes, and comments, as well as three books.

Other candidates mentioned shortly before the Sharp nomination included Dean of Engineering Gerald L. Wilson '61, Chemistry Department Chair Mark S. Wrighton, and Jack L. Kerrebrock, acting dean of engineering and a professor of aeronautics and astronautics.



photo courtesy MIT News Office
Economics Professor Paul L. Joskow