Openness or secrecy: whose decision

By Lee Gipson

Optimistic and enthusiastic, the new Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences, Harold Hanum, appears to be the sort of man who will be loved by both students and faculty. However, it is much too early to say that Hanum will succeed, or fail at MIT; it is not too early, though, to discuss the process through which he was selected for the job.

According to Dean Robert Bishop, whose decision to return to research and teaching in his chosen field of economics was something of an open secret last year, the search for a new dean was quickly turned over to a search committee headed by Professor of Foreign Literatures Morris Halle. Halle, along with Professor of Philosophy James Thompson, Professor of History Richard Douglas, Professor of Economics Robert Salow and Assistant Professor of Political Science Suzanne Berger, apparently conducted the search in a very informal manner.

No formal announcement was ever made that the School was seeking a new dean. Instead, a note was put through the School’s faculty, at least a year ago, as indicated in an interview with The Tech.

The committee received “suggestions” from a variety of sources, not the least of which was the grapevine. The search committee, Halle implied that the committee was simply looking for someone it felt would be best for the job. (It is not uncommon for names that appear to have been formulated by the grapevine to surface in the department to which a person who would feel comfortable appointing a professor.)

When pressed to comment on the thoroughness of the search, Halle responded that he felt the committee had done a reasonable job. He further implied that, at any rate, a truly thoroughgoing search would have been time-consuming. He likened the search to the process of accepting graduate students: Of a given number of applicants, some proportion may be rejected outright — they simply lack the qualifications for admission. For the remainder, however, the task of weeding is not so simple; they may all be qualified for acceptance. Choosing among those people is a difficult task, Halle implied, and in fact, it may involve differences in personal or professional qualifications — some good candidates must be rejected.

The most striking fact about the search, though, was that it was conducted on a very small scale. Despite the fact that the committee was formed, it appears that some people who would feel comfortable appointing a professor were not even aware of the committee.

This is not to say that the names of every candidate should have been announced to the Institute community for public discussion, or that every candidate should have been subjected to a public grilling before the community.

The selection of an academic dean certainly should be, in the nature of things, much more private and confidential than the majority of the MIT faculty and administration decisions take place today. But there are other factors which suggest that the Winner-Grey administration’s public announcements of candidates, as much an indication of the administrative style and process as it was of the candidates, may be difficult for the MIT community to interpret.

While the first and most obvious example of the administration’s secretive nature was the selection and appointment of Dr. Carola Elizabeth Macpherson as Associate Dean, the grapevines were buzzing for weeks.

The first rumblings were in the fall, when the grapevine spread the word that Macpherson had been appointed. This was the first time that any member of the MIT community, including the students, had been given any indication that the administration was about to make a new appointment.

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