Steven Solnick

A new DNA riddle

There's a question nagging at an increasing number of people on the MIT and Harvard campuses: Why does Boston, the Swiss genetic engineering firm, want to open a plant in Cambridge?

At a City Council meeting last week, representatives of the firm, which along with the three other largest genetics firms, Genentech and Genex, comprise a $500 million biotechnology, cited four reasons for moving the firm. The Boston people cited the case of transportation to Cambridge through Logan, the availability of skilled workers, proximity to MIT and Harvard, and the strictness of Cambridge's genetic engineering code.

The last two reasons are a worthy closer look.

The interest of the Cambridge City Council in regulating genetic research in Cambridge has long been viewed as a nuisance by many researchers in the field of MIT and Harvard. The reason is solely to allow the efforts of their friends at Caltech to continue unhindered in their local biotechnology building.

When some faculty objected and suggested that the new, controversial and possibly unclear research conducted on the old ecologist building less than 100 yards away, the DNA researchers complained such a configuration would be "inconvenient." The resulting uproar at Harvard was, according to the House Reports Committee, the only incident of its kind in the original Cambridge City Council money.

Several other reasons do not seem to be MIT and Harvard, though, and they are motives that the two institutions must be aware of.

It is, naturally, beneficial to be in an academically stimulating environment. The research should be in touch with the old lab building.

Many students, develop working relationships with lots of MIT faculty and have gained greater understanding of DNA research, and this perception of the lab as a lab, not a lab — both in its reputation and the thinking of the students. In time, the distinction between what is Biogen activity is, and what may be a Biogen venture — both in reality and in the perception of the public.

The name of the late biotechnology, who has written about the media manipulation by the DNA lobby, observed, "Remarkably, the extent to which this lobby tended to trick the distinction between industry and the scientific community, it has pointedly tended to separate women from the lab, underestimating its importance. The university connection tends to improve the stature of the small DNA companies, which are still struggling to compete against giants as they have yet, of them, to commercially market a product.

In California, University of California researchers formed groups, many of whom are women, to discuss and work on the implication of women in the lab. The work of the group was attended to by the small companies financially.

Perhaps MIT should consider this carefully before it allows Biogen's desire to be "close" to merely flutter it.

Stephanie Pollack

How to 'support' 1700 women

One of the perennial complaints of the MIT male population is that there are not enough women students here. The frequent occurrence of this time-honored lament, combined with a quick glance around any lecture taking place in 10-200, could easily convince someone that women are badly underrepresented at MIT.

Put a gradient of ten years, male or female, into the same lecture and the reaction would be completely different. They'd undoubtedly be amazed at the large number of women scattered throughout the hall. One of the problems of living in rapidly-changing times is a short memory and the difficulty of seeing when progress really has made it.

There are a lot of women students at MIT — close to 1700, with about 900 undergraduate. The percentages are nowhere near the approximately 50-50 split of the real world, but the absolute figures are astounding when compared to those of a decade or so ago. As many women have graduated from MIT in the last half dozen years as in the whole history of the school up until then.

This is not to say that the time has come when MIT can sit back and put itself on the back. The new-found proportion of women at the undergraduate level has not had time to filter up to the faculty level, and academic models for women are still sorely lacking. And there's no reason to believe that 30 or 25 percent is the best that can be accomplished.

The Committee on Undergraduate Admissions and Financial Aid is addressing this problem, and has proposed a series of recommendations on ways to increase the enrollment of underrepresented women to a subgroup of the Academic Council. The group, as part of their review, has been accused of being overly exclusive, and the potential to increase support services for women students once they get here.

It is obvious that larger numbers of women require more of certain services — dormitory space and athletic teams and facilities, for example. It is assumed that they will also need, and want, more of other types of support services such as counseling, women's groups, and specialized planned activities. It is an assumption that has generally gone unquestioned.

The time has come to take a closer look at the way women interact at MIT. Relationships have changed just as surely as numbers have. At a recent meeting of the Association of Women Alumnae, one fairly recent graduate noted that when she was an undergraduate, she was often treated as if she were a man. She is simply amazed that she is now affiliated with a man. Women are badly underrepresented at MIT, and the strictness of Cambridge's academic community must be aware of this.

There is still a tendency to treat the community of women here as though they are a single homogeneous group. MIT recently established a Co-ordinator for Women Students. Which women students? Faculty they cannot expect one woman and a telephone answering machine to deal with all 1700 women.

This is just one of the dilemmas that Emily Weidman, who currently holds this position, is confronned with. Due to the lack of time and the inability to clearly identify the interests of women, Weidman spends most of her time on co-ordination, rather than programming. Most frustrating of all, however, is the lack of certainty over how much a job is needed.

Weidman believe's that there is a strong informal support network for women at MIT. She finds that it is important to get MIT thinking about issues that will affect them when they leave and join the real world, and has organized a series of Thursday afternoon get-togethers in the Cheney Room to promote discussion on these topics. However, Weidman concedes that many of the women cannot afford to become involved if they don't want to.

Most importantly, Weidman notes that in any increase of the number of women, you may be able to increase or decrease, rather than use, the special services available to them. Networks form more easily. Additionally, women may no longer feel the pressure to do well in activities which single them out. Some, although no one knows how many, see structures such as the Cheney Room as serving too many women and not the rest of the community.

Such views are legitimate and should be considered seriously by the administration. The Academic Council's investigation of availability of support services explicitly assumes that more will be needed. The discussion should be extended to consider that more women may actually want fewer special support services. Few would complain about efforts to increase admissions of women students. With respect to special services, however, bigger may not be better.