New chairman Saxon recount.s recruitment

By John J. Ying

David S. Sax6n, former provost of the University of California, became chairman of the MIT Corporation July 1. He received a PhD in physics from the Institute in 1944.

Q: You left MIT and then returned. With hindsight, what do you remember the most?
A: The first time I really saw MIT when I came here as a freshman, I remember standing up in the Great Court and feeling totally overwhelmed by it; MIT's reputation was so overpowered. I came from a high school that had never sent a student here. I felt absolutely isolated, and I remember, coming back in these later years, a vivid recollection of those feelings of awe. I wondered whether I'd be home before Christmas, not in pride but having been unable to manage. And that came back with great vividness.

Then the second thing that came back was a recollection of the important -- truly important part in my development played by some of the -- some of my professors in freshman English.

And there are two I want to mention because it's related to this initial feeling I had, worrying about flunking out. One of them was ... Professor Fred Frank, physics, who was involved in teaching the freshman physics that I had which was one of the most demanding of the courses. The other was freshman calculus, which Professor W. Martin was teaching. And they both encouraged me.

They were the first people who in a way took an interest in me, and volunteered to me the notion that maybe I wasn't going to flunk out, maybe I really should go on and make some kind of a career. That came back with me with this vividness. I've seen Professor Frank recently and he was very pleased to see me. Professor Martin just had no chance to see him much.

I found this enormously attractive, it's a wonderful thing to do, a completely different job ...

Q: What happened after you left MIT?
A: Not quite a deserted island, but a brief interlude, not unimportant, but brief, I went to the University of California. I joined the faculty at [University of Califor- na] Los Angeles as an assistant professor of physics.

I've been associated with the University pretty much ever since then. We've been involved in a number of things, dealing with the ranks in the physics department, ending up serving as department chairman, and then the dean of physical sciences, then a vice chancellor, and ultimately president of the University of California...

I spent most of my career on the faculty and the last part in the administration of a single campus, but then the last eight years I spent with responsibility for the whole University of California, which is a national university spanning the whole state of California and beyond.

Q: At MIT, a reason cited for shortage of electrical engineering professors is that many professors and graduate students find job offers in industry much, much more attractive. Is that true?
A: Yes. It's a very important thing to note.

The MIT people didn't quite know that, but they at least knew it was a problem. It's been there for some time. I still recall, in fact, some years in which I could teach. I loved teaching, always loved teaching, and it was an absolute shock for me to think about physics for quite a few years and I knew that would present problems for me. As I say, in the summer, I had been seeing this coming, and I decided to step down and in fact on my vacation in July, I composed a letter to the Board of Regents announcing that.

We are a national resource in a number of senses...

The MIT people didn't quite know that, but they at least knew that it was a problem. Later on, it very much came to my decision. I had, you know, a kind of police inquiry about whether I might be interested in returning to MIT. It was done in a rather a casual, unobtrusive way. I told you, once I began thinking about it, I found this was really a totally different kind of a job, and it's a change, it builds on all of my experience as a physicist, as a teacher, as a university president...

The University of California is an institution absolutely full of excellence, so is MIT, and you know, just what could be nicer. What a wonderful opportunity to be associated with institutions of that sort. I decided that was the right thing to do.

Q: Do you have any major goals that you want to accom- plish as Chairman of the MIT Corporation?
A: Well, I've been back a couple of months. MIT is an extraordinarily impressive institution, and I must sometimes -- un- certainty to excellence. And they're doing extremely well. I find among the faculty and staff great ex- citation, a very powerful excitement about MIT and what I'd like to do is contribute to these feelings. ... It's important to me, I think, being in a very serious way ever since I was a student and I was aware that the deep question of what kind of education should it be here at MIT. Where are we, as MIT and the other universities, all the other courses, what kind of education should they have, rather than just the content of their education? That was true when I was a student. We had to take courses in aeronautics, we had to take economics, we had to do all of those things. The goal of the MIT education is that people are still as serious as that component of education was when I was a student, but they're doing much better at it now.

When I was here the offerings I think were quite Smit- thian, it's not like they are now. They are, however, it's still an untried problem. It's a very difficult thing to manage, and they are struggling. I'm very interested in that, I believe very strongly, I've been talking about it, that it's extremely important in a world which is becoming more and more dependent on technological people that we can't be in a situation in which we're going to be more and more dependent on technologically-trained people.

Q: At MIT, a reason cited for shortage of electrical engineering professors is that many professors and graduate students find job offers in industry much, much more attractive. Is that true?
A: Yes. It's a very important thing to note.

The MIT people didn't quite know that, but they at least knew it was a problem. It's been there for some time. I still recall, in fact, some years in which I could teach. I loved teaching, always loved teaching, and it was an absolute shock for me to think about physics for quite a few years and I knew that would present problems for me. As I say, in the summer, I had been seeing this coming, and I decided to step down and in fact on my vacation in July, I composed a letter to the Board of Regents announcing that.

We are a national resource in a number of senses...

The MIT people didn't quite know that, but they at least knew that it was a problem. Later on, it very much came to my decision. I had, you know, a kind of police inquiry about whether I might be interested in returning to MIT. It was done in a rather a casual, unobtrusive way. I told you, once I began thinking about it, I found this was really a totally different kind of a job, and it's a change, it builds on all of my experience as a physicist, as a teacher, as a university president...

The University of California is an institution absolutely full of excellence, so is MIT, and you know, just what could be nicer. What a wonderful opportunity to be associated with institutions of that sort. I decided that was the right thing to do.

Q: Do you have any major goals that you want to accom- plish as Chairman of the MIT Corporation?
A: Well, the short answer is that I was asked but (laughs) but there's a little more. It's a little longer answer than that. I had decided about a year and a few months ago, in the summer, July or August of 1982, that as I was just finishing my seventh year as president, I decided I before-}