Institute seeks more blacks

By Donald Yee

The Admissions Office has taken a step to reverse the decline in black student enrollment through a letter urging black students at MIT to contact black applicants, according to Michael C. Behnke, director of admissions. Last year four percent of the entering class was black, a significant drop from previous years when black students averaged about six percent of the freshman class.

Nationally, five percent of all college undergraduates are black, according to a 1984 Carnegie Foundation survey cited in the Feb. 5 Chronicle of Higher Education.

The number of Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans and American Indians enrolled at MIT has increased or remained constant over the past several years, Behnke said. The number of black students admitted to MIT dropped over a period of several years, according to Behnke. In 1984, the number of black applicants fell to about one-fifth from previous years. "However, the quality of the applicant pool was high," Behnke noted. The number of blacks admitted that year was black, a significant drop from past years most hurt low-income families, many of which are minorities, he noted. Moreover, economic recovery has not touched these families. Attending an expensive private university costs some impractical for students from low-income families.

Black high school students also lack information on the availability of financial aid, Behnke said. He blamed the news media for emphasizing government cuts in financial aid instead of reporting on the continued availability of aid.

Behnke also described conditions peculiar to technical schools such as MIT. Technical institutions lack black role models for those students to follow, Behnke said. The teaching of math and science in inner-city neighborhoods is generally poorer than in other areas, he added.

In order to offset these conditions, the Admissions Office has stepped up its efforts to recruit minorities, Behnke said. These steps include an attempt to get students involved in the effort through "Student Search," an attempt to recruit at schools near their homes.

The Admissions Office is also trying to bolster minority enrollment by using the Student Search Service to locate more potential applicants, Behnke said. By following up on the initial mailings, the office hopes to induce responses from students who had not indicated any interest or who have difficulty completing the application, he added.

The Admissions Office encourages all applicants to apply for financial aid. Behnke continued. MIT can then simultaneously offer an aid package and an offer for admission, which may have a significant impact on the student's decision, he said.

The Admissions Office has formed an informal advisory group composed of students, faculty, and administrators to discuss options for increasing the number of minority applications. Behnke said from this group, Behnke hopes to get ideas on how the Admissions Office and other administrative offices can make MIT more attractive to prospective minority students.

"Although we do not yet have a final count on applications this year...it looks much better," said Behnke. The number of black applications for the Class of 1990 decreased by about five percent from last year, but applications increased from other underrepresented minorities. The Admissions Office will accept applications from minority students.

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