Our Attempt to Move Forward: A Joint Statement

In March of 1993, four members of MIT's African American community filed a claim alleging that an individual or group of individuals yelled racial epithets from one of the windows of the Phi Beta Epsilon fraternity. While MIT's formal mechanisms worked to sort through the allegations, the Dean's Office was forced to turn to students for advice. We, the members of the Black Students' Union (BSU), knew this would give us the possibility of venting our anger and frustration without the need for a formal hearing. While the administration finally revealed each group's intentions, we felt that it was possible that both groups could continue an active campaign of discussion. While this would not settle any of the legal issues in this matter, we felt that it was most important that both parties continue an active campaign of discussion. Throughout the summer, each organization would give us the possibility of venting our anger and frustration and, at the same time, seeking positive resolutions to this problem. Like all such crises, there have been many layers to this issue. The BSU has initiated a series of protests, the Committee on Discipline (COD) held a hearing, and Phi Beta Epsilon responded to the accusations in a number of ways. Last fall, members of the BSU and Phi Beta Epsilon agreed to work in a series of meetings toward a common understanding, the results of which would be published in a joint statement to the MIT community. Below are the results of those meetings.

From the Members of the Black Students' Union:

We, the members of the Black Students' Union (BSU), are very firm in our position on what happened the night of March 13, 1993. We are definitely sure that a person or group of people stood in the window of Phi Beta Epsilon (PBE) and yelled racial epithets that are demeaning to black people on this campus and throughout the world. After this incident, we worked hard not only to expose this ghastly deed but, also, to keep the lines of communication open. Yet, the doors of Phi Beta Epsilon looked closed to discussion. And, the ambiguous findings of the Committee On Discipline (COD) resolved nothing. Actually, the findings of COD heightened tensions on campus. Members of the black community here at MIT took COD's decision to be an insult. This is because COD found that a racial incident occurred but conveniently decided that there was insufficient evidence to pursue the matter.

For our organization, the statements made that night demanded more attention. Such racially motivated actions cut deep in our minds. And for many black people, words that degrade our race are painful and totally unacceptable. However, we would like for it to be known that as members of this campus we shall not sit idly by and allow statements, like those of March 13, 1993, to go without a response on our part.

In addition, our organization also felt that the apparent silence of Phi Beta Epsilon had to be addressed. In our opinion, a racial incident of any kind, as well as any other form of harassment, demands that all groups involved be attentive. And we intend on using every legitimate resource at our disposal to realize an environment where incidents like this, inflicted upon black students on this campus, are actively discussed.

Now, after being put through much turmoil, we are encouraged by the visible willingness of PBE to participate in dialogue with our group as well as with the entire MIT student body, so that, as a community, we can move forth and begin respecting each other.

From the Members of Phi Beta Epsilon:

Since the beginning of this ordeal, our house has been perceived as "not willing to talk" or "silent." From our perspective, this perception was far from the truth of the matter. The first time the members of Phi Beta Epsilon heard about this alleged incident was Monday morning, when members of Chocolate City began distributing flyers in front of our house and in Lobby 7. This attack, as we perceived it, angered us. Since it was apparent to us that Chocolate City was the organizing body behind this protest, we felt it appropriate to establish a dialogue with them. However, a request for such communication was regrettably denied. We immediately contacted several members of the administration, but their inexpertise in handling this type of situation was evident in their conflicting statements and advice. Our only sure course of action came in the form of the Open Letter to the MIT Community which was posted around campus the following day. Formal charges were eventually filed against several individuals. After several attempts at communication and one actual meeting with Chocolate City, we were informed that the Black Students' Union (BSU) was really the proper body to address. After consulting with our alumni corporation, we decided to wait for the results of the ongoing Committee on Discipline hearing before making any more public statements. The media had already branded our house as guilty and misconstrued earlier statements; we felt that any further statements made on our part would not be taken in a fair light. Our hope was that our innocence would be evidenced through the COD proceedings. As it turns out, the individuals accused were never able to present their side of the story because the COD dismissed the case based on conflicting testimonies from the prosecution. Shortly after the COD hearings we attempted to begin a dialogue with the BSU. We were pleased to have finally had the opportunity to communicate directly with the BSU during R/O week and we now look forward to working together towards positive goals.

For both of us, the abrupt end to the COD proceedings during the last week of classes quelled any chances for meaningful discussion between our organizations. Throughout the summer, each organization expressed the hope of contacting the other with the help of the administration. At the time, though, the administration felt that this may not have been the best possible way to facilitate the differences between each side, and as a result, neither party knew of the other's intentions. However, the impending protest during R/O week created an environment in which both groups actively sought through the administration a means for discussion. Under pressure from both sides, the administration finally revealed each group's intentions to the other.

From the very first meeting, we agreed that it was most important that both groups continue an active campaign of discussion. While this would not settle any of the legal issues in this matter, we felt that it would give us the possibility of venting our anger and frustrations and, at the same time, seeking positive resolutions to this crisis. In addition, we felt that the MIT community should become involved in this process, thereby giving the administration the mandate needed to adopt its harassment policies and procedures. It was our experience that MIT's implementation of its harassment policy was inadequate in dealing with such issues as ours.

During the course of our negotiations, we found that the process of reconciling our differences was a difficult one. At one point, our negotiations stalled as a result of an unfortunate breakdown in communication. This delayed our progress for several months. Through diligent efforts on all sides, however, our two groups returned to the negotiations table this spring and have steadily moved towards solid goals which are presented below.

1) Over the course of the year, the situation had grown to the point where the concerns of the four students were lost in the midst of the complex negotiations. Both groups felt that the feelings of the four students needed to be addressed. In this vain, Phi Beta Epsilon sent letters to each student expressing sympathy to the individuals and attempting to clarify the fraternity's position.

2) We felt that a joint statement to the MIT community would demonstrate that two opposing organizations can work together and reach a level of understanding from which they can move to help bring about positive change. We hope that this may serve as an example and perhaps set a precedent for communication between groups on campus.

3) Our objective for the future include:
   a. Both groups participating in a Race-Relations workshop open to the MIT community.
   b. A joint community service project.
   c. A jointly-sponsored MIT community event to promote racial awareness.

We believe that the long negotiation process and this resulting letter have been major steps towards bridging the gap between our two organizations. Hopefully, this will encourage groups in the future to work towards resolving conflicts in order to improve relations on campus.

Respectfully,

The Members of the Black Students' Union

The Brothers of Phi Beta Epsilon