Sharp's Reversal Shocks MIT Campus

On 19 February, 10 days after he was declared the unanimous choice of two search committees to be the next president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Phillip A. Sharp sent a shock wave across the campus. He informed an aide to MIT Corporation chairman David Saxon that he did not want the job.

Only a few days earlier, on 15 February, Sharp had announced to his staff that he would be leaving his post as director of MIT's Cancer Research Center to take the president's job. Indeed, as late as Saturday night he is reported to have acknowledged in a private conversation at a social gathering that he would be moving up. But sometime that weekend he changed his mind.

The reason, Sharp said in a statement issued through MIT's press office, is that he felt he could not give up his research. "As I anticipated dissolving my research program and teaching duties, I came reluctantly to the realization that I could not fill that void in my life with anything else."

Sharp could not be reached for comment, but he told one member of the faculty search committee that he was concerned that after a few years on the job, he would not find the work very interesting and exciting. He said as much in the limited statement he released to the press. "I know the presidency of MIT is an office of extraordinary importance, challenge, and opportunity—but in the end, I discovered that it is not me."

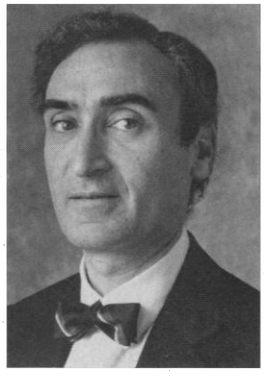
Many of the faculty and members of the presidential search committee seem to understand Sharp's action and are not critical of him. But his decision nonetheless has caused dismay on campus. "The real disaster is that it is going to be much more difficult to find another candidate of the same scholarly and scientific stature," comments MIT biology professor Jonathan King.

For the moment, the MIT faculty and corporation search committees are trying to recover from the setback before they resume what has been a 5-month search for a successor to president Paul Gray, who is to succeed Saxon as the chairman of the MIT Corporation. The search for a new nominee is expected to begin again this month. At press time, Gray was stating that it was still possible that a new president would be installed by 1 July. ■ MARK CRAWFORD

Yeast Researcher Rises to Top at Whitehead

Gerald R. Fink, a geneticist by profession and a basketball player by avocation, has been named director of the Whitehead Institute, succeeding David Baltimore who will become president of Rockefeller University in July.

Fink, 49, thus becomes the top man at one of the country's youngest and most prominent private institutions for biomedical research. Founded in 1982 with a gift of $135 million from its namesake, Edwin (Jack) C. Whitehead, who made a fortune inventing scientific equipment such as the autoanalyzer for blood, the Whitehead Institute's focus is on developmental biology.



Gerald R. Fink

Baltimore calls his successor "the perfect choice—a broad scientist with a real appreciation for what makes this place collegial and special. Beyond that," he said, "Jerry's a nice guy and people here really like him."

Fink, who has been a member of the Whitehead since it opened, made his scientific reputation using ordinary baker's yeast to study gene function. According to a Whitehead spokesman, "Fink was the first to develop a method to introduce foreign genes into yeast and the first to find retrovirus-like particles in yeast."

But it never would have happened, Fink told *Science*, were it not for the generosity of John Carbon of the University of California at Santa Barbara. "We really needed one reagent and John had it. He sent it to us before he published, and then we beat him to it on the yeast work," Fink recalls. "That is the way science is 90% of the time," he believes, adding that all the attention that has been focused on competition and conflict distorts the "story of comradery and mutual support that characterizes research." Fink says he hopes to perpetuate that sense of comradery while managing the institute as a "benevolent dictatorship." ■ BARBARA J. CULLITON

Lasker Foundation Suspends 1990 Awards

For 46 years, the Lasker Awards have been among the most coveted in biomedical research, their status enhanced by the claim that a Lasker is "America's equivalent of the Nobel Prize." Indeed, a Lasker often presaged the real thing. But not this year. Last week, the Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation made a surprise announcement that there will be no Lasker awards in 1990.

Alice Fordyce, executive vice president of the foundation and Mary Lasker's sister, told *Science* the awards are not necessarily being canceled; rather, they will be on "sabbatical" while the foundation reviews its programs. (These include an informal patient referral service and a grant mechanism that has provided seed money for research projects attracting Mary Lasker's personal interest, along with the annual awards ceremony, which has always been the foundation's most visible activity.)

Established in 1942 with money Albert Lasker made as a pioneer in the Madison Avenue world of advertising, the foundation had assets of about $4.5 million in 1980; today, its resources are down to some $2.4 million. The awards program, which includes six $15,000 prizes and an elegant luncheon in New York for some 300 notables, costs the foundation about $750,000 a year to run—a sum that cannot easily be recovered from interest alone.

Nevertheless, Lasker board member Deeda Blair of Washington, D.C., says that money is not the reason the awards have been suspended. Rather, she says, "Every once in a while you need to step back and assess what you're doing. When the Lasker awards began, there were not many prizes being given. Now there are dozens. I can't imagine that we'll really change our formula very much but it does make sense to look at it. When you are as small a foundation as we are, you want to be very sharp in choosing what you do."

So far, the foundation has been supremely successful in choosing what it does. It has parlayed its awards into a sophisticated advertisement for biomedical research. Achieving renown as a philanthropist and friend of presidents, Mary Lasker has used her foundation as a base for promoting research—especially in cancer and heart disease. And at her urging, Lasker award winners have, for years, been called to testify before Congress on the need for research funds. As one former winner opined, suspending the awards is like "shutting down the Metropolitan Museum." ■ BARBARA J. CULLITON