

5 November 1997

Marc,

Thank you for asking me to meet with you today about my statement to the Physics Today advisory committee that the magazine has failed to live up fully to its claim that it is an affirmative-action employer.

I am taking this opportunity to outline the history of the issue at the magazine and to discuss the important difference between equal opportunity and affirmative action.

At a November 1996 Physics Today meeting, some of us on the staff raised the issue of affirmative action and the lack of diversity at the magazine. Several weeks earlier, one of the Physics Today editors had submitted his resignation, thus presenting us with an immediate opportunity to work toward correcting the problem. At the meeting, I said I would help monitor the situation in the future, as did Jean Kumagai, who is the only minority among the 18 individuals who work at Physics Today.

On 14 April 1997 the Physics Today staff learned that out of the 85 applicants for the editorial opening at the magazine, three had been selected to come in for interviews -- all white males. Among the 85 applicants were a number of potentially qualified minorities and women. Jean and I argued that if Physics Today were truly committed to affirmative action, it would also bring in some of these applicants. That could have been done easily, but Charles Harris and Steve Benka refused, saying that it was not worth the delay of a week or so that it would cause. We felt that this revealed Physics Today's priorities (and AIP's, too, because Charles had told us that he had discussed the institute's affirmative action policy with Terri Braun after the November 1996 staff meeting), and that affirmative action clearly was low on the list.

The decisive factor turned out to be that while Charles believes in equal opportunity, he does not believe fully in affirmative action. He told me, for example, that he would not hire a minority who is qualified to do the job unless that individual was more qualified than all 84 of the other candidates. Such a policy can lead to an all-white staff even though many minorities are qualified to do the work. For reasons outside of our immediate control, qualified minorities are less likely to have credentials beyond those needed to do the work. Thus, the qualified minorities are passed over in favor of white applicants who have such superfluous credentials. The result is a staff that doesn't look like the population of people who are qualified to do the work. Thus the Physics Today staff does not look like the physics community, the journalism community, the Washington community or the nation as a whole. As long as Physics Today fails to embrace affirmative action, minorities will continue to be in the subset of applicants

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deemed qualified to do the job, but rarely among those actually hired. Thus "equal opportunity" amounts to a de facto "whites only" hiring policy at Physics Today. Historically, affirmative action was instituted to overcome this shortcoming of equal opportunity.

Charles also told me that staff diversity is of no value to the magazine -- except to make the office a more interesting place to work. Therefore the fact that a particular job candidate would contribute to the diversity of the staff counts for nothing, he said.

My own concern about affirmative action at Physics Today was heightened when AIP and the magazine relocated from New York City to College Park four years ago. To fill the editorial openings created by the move, the magazine hired three individuals, all white males -- Ray Ladbury, Denis Cioffi and Steve Benka. None of the three had any journalism experience, but the magazine was willing to train them. (One could view this as an affirmative action program for white males.) If the magazine is willing to hire and train potentially qualified whites, then why not do that for minorities, too?

The managers at Physics Today made two token gestures in response to the pressure that we applied: They told a few organizations of minority scientists about the job opening, and, after they filled the position with a white male, they phoned a few of the minorities whom they had judged to be "promising candidates."

Ever since my disagreement with Charles over affirmative action at Physics Today, he has treated me a little bit like an unwelcome troublemaker. You should be able to verify any point that I have made in this note without attributing it; by doing it that way, you can avoid exacerbating this problem.

Jeff