The time is now

Charles Day

PHYSICS TODAY's September 1966 issue included an interview with Herman Branson, who was chair of Howard University's physics department at the time. Among the questions he fielded about the state of Black people in physics was, "Do you feel that the science community is biased to any degree?" He replied, "I don't think so. . . . Scientists (and especially physicists) are among the most liberal people to be found anywhere."

Branson's response evidently shocked his fellow African American physicist Tannie Stovall of the Linear Accelerator Laboratory in Orsay, France. He submitted a rebuttal, which appeared in PHYSICS TODAY's December 1966 issue. "Branson has painted a dangerously rosy picture of the black man in physics," Stovall wrote. "I would like strongly to take issue with this view."

How could Branson believe that racial bias was absent from science in 1966? I can't be sure. He might have harbored a belief that persists today: Physics is the objective, methodical study of matter and energy, which are devoid of life, let alone social and political actors. How can physics be biased?

But if you read Branson's interview, it's clear he was quite aware of the systemic obstacles faced half a century ago by Black students in science. Indeed, he campaigned to remove them. Black colleges and universities had—and still have—less funding than other universities. "We know how to make a first-rate school in America," Branson told his interviewer. "It's primarily a question of money."

When PHYSICS TODAY published its interview with Branson, the last of the five Civil Rights Acts of the 1950s and 1960s—the Fair Housing Act of 1968—was stalled in the Senate. Asked if his physics students were as active in civil rights as humanities students, Branson answered, "Perhaps embarrassingly so." Quite to his surprise, physics majors were among the student leaders in local civil rights movements. Some of them, he lamented, did not continue to pursue physics.

As members of a prominent Black university in the US, those "lost" students of Branson's who joined the struggle for civil rights were surely made welcome in the physics department. Sadly and reprehensibly, too many of today's Black physics majors and graduate students do not feel as though they belong. If you doubt that physics is unwelcoming to Black students, read the commentary by Charles D. Brown II, which was posted on PHYSICS TODAY's website on 20 July. Brown, who is a postdoc in atomic physics at the University of California, Berkeley, recounts a litany of racist slights and presumptions that he faced as a physics student.

Making physics more welcoming to Black people and other underrepresented groups will take effort, not least because a student's peers have a strong influence on whether a department is welcoming. Professors must lead by example. If you need advice on how to do that, read the report[1] from the TEAM-UP Task Force, which was organized by the American Institute of Physics (PHYSICS TODAY's publisher).

A recent briefing in the *Economist* identified three policy areas that, if addressed effectively, could improve the lives and opportunities of African Americans: segregation, education, and childhood poverty. Although tackling those and other systemic sources of disadvantage will be expensive and difficult, it needs to be done. And Branson recognized another challenge in his 1966 interview: "Suppose you take a 17-year-old from an indifferent intellectual and cultural background; what can you do to bring him into 20th-century science? It's not only a tough question for America but for the rest of the world as well."

Given the magnitude of the challenges, the individual physicist, including me, might be tempted to ask with exasperation, What can I do? We can listen to the personal experiences of Black physicists. We can work toward making our departments, labs, and teams more welcoming. And we can confront racism whenever we encounter or witness it. The killing of George Floyd on 25 May again brought into stark, painful view the anti-Black racism that endures in the US. The time is now to do what we can to eliminate it.

Reference

1. AIP National Task Force to Elevate African American Representation in Undergraduate Physics & Astronomy, *The Time Is Now: Systemic Changes to Increase African Americans with Bachelor's Degrees in Physics and Astronomy*, American Institute of Physics (2020). PT