What’s In a Name?

This isn’t a business-as-usual donor recognition story. The Department of Earth, Atmospheric and Planetary Sciences (EAPS) is of course delighted to acknowledge Shell for making a gift to support the renovation of MIT’s 54-100 lecture hall, which is housed in the Cecil and Ida Green Building (Building 54), our primary campus home. But perhaps even more, we’re delighted and proud to announce the name for this space – the Dixie Lee Bryant (1891) Lecture Hall – and to tell the remarkable story of the significance behind that name and how it came to be.

In 1891, Dixie Lee Bryant became the first student to receive a Bachelor of Science from the newly-established Course XII at MIT – a milestone that in and of itself warrants commemoration, and one which started the trail for generations of women in geosciences at MIT to follow. And yet, the decision to ultimately recognize Bryant as a pioneer didn’t follow a standard course. The story unfolded as MIT’s practices surrounding donations were being called into question. While Institute-level committees worked to define values, principles, and processes concerning gifts, EAPS, too, found itself reckoning with tough questions from the community around giving. This is a story about the importance of listening, engaging in inclusive dialogue between donors and departments about shared goals and values, and being willing to course-correct. It is also a success story (resulting in the first major MIT venue named after an alumna) which we hope will inspire colleagues at MIT (and other institutions) to engage with their communities as they consider naming gifts.

First, Some Context
Renovation of the 54-100 lecture hall is part of a larger Building 54 capital renewal project, which includes a prominent 12,000-square-foot addition right in the heart of campus. The vision for this “Earth and Environment Pavilion” is to create a vibrant center for Earth systems, climate science, and related topics, that will welcome students and scholars from across the Institute. Including the 54-100 renovation brought substantial advantages for the design and integration of these spaces and for realizing the project’s fundraising goals. To that end, Shell’s investment to renovate 54-100 helped EAPS to achieve both the pavilion’s mission for education and collaboration and get the overall green light from MIT.

New Space, New Name
This gift provided a naming opportunity, and in August 2019 a news story suggested that 54-100 be named the “Shell Auditorium.” Although no decisions or proposals to that effect had been made or presented to MIT’s Building Committee, the idea of having a prominent space in the Green Building named after a fossil fuel company triggered a strong reaction from students and other members of the EAPS community who felt that it was inconsistent with what the department stands for. What would it imply about us as a leader in climate science?

In response, Rob van der Hilst, EAPS department head, called a town hall to open a conversation about EAPS fundraising activities, including the decision to accept the Shell social investment grant. Recognizing that community input and values needed greater consideration in the decision process, Van der Hilst raised these concerns with the Shell team. This marked the start of a constructive, at times difficult, but always respectful dialogue about the symbolism and expectations of space naming and the values and visions of both organizations.

The Challenge
On the one hand, we recognize that past actions of many fossil fuel companies have had negative ramifications for Earth’s climate, local environments, and climate policy. On the other hand, we are encouraged by the promises that major energy companies are making to advance a green energy and a carbon neutral future, Shell chief among them with its recently announced goal to reach net-zero emissions by 2050. Meeting that goal and moving toward sustainable fuels and...
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...economies on a global scale, in view of a growing population, and doing it with the urgency that is required, is an enormous task. In our view — which is consistent with MIT’s position — finding realistic energy and climate solutions will require the capital, know-how, infrastructure, and global reach of forward-looking energy companies as well as the intellect and creativity of universities like MIT.

Energy companies have partnered with MIT for decades on research and support for students, helping to develop next-generation energy technologies while enhancing our understanding of Earth systems, and propelling the careers of future leaders in science and engineering. Shell and MIT are working on several energy and climate-related initiatives, focusing both on technology and potential scenarios for a future that meets the Paris Agreement goals. However, sponsoring research is different than naming a campus space, and Shell representatives agreed that including the company name would not achieve its intended goal, that is, inspiring new generations of students in STEM fields, especially those interested in working together to tackle climate change. Moreover, it risked distracting from the larger goal of constructive engagement between Shell and MIT on the ambitious agenda of creating pathways — in fact, speedways are needed — to low carbon economies. Ultimately, innovation and capital are required right alongside trust and collaboration between academia and industry — themes that came up frequently in conversations with Shell and the EAPS community.

A Community Solution
In September 2019, we began working with the Shell US External Relations team in Houston to find a solution for a naming that recognizes the company’s generous support and aligns with the missions of both organizations. Engagement with MIT leaders (including Vice President for Research Maria Zuber, MITEI Director Robert Armstrong, and ESI Director John Fernandez) and with EAPS faculty and a group representing students and postdocs (including organizers of a teach-in on “greenwashing”) yielded fruitful suggestions that all parties could feel good about.

In February 2020, it was jointly decided that Shell would retain the right to name the lecture hall but that the choice of the name would be determined by a transparent, department-wide process, reflecting current community values. Given our shared dedication to scientific research and education for a better world, Shell suggested a public “contest” to solicit names that reflect innovation and vision in the geosciences, energy technology, or STEM education. Names celebrating unsung heroes of EAPS, especially women or minorities who made important contributions but had not received the deserved historical recognition, were encouraged.

In consultation with Shell, an ad hoc committee consisting of EAPS faculty, postdocs, and students defined the guidelines for a three-phase naming contest:

Phase I: Nominations were solicited from the EAPS community, including alumni;

Phase II: The nominations were announced and discussed (online) by EAPS students, researchers, faculty, and staff, and the top seven were determined by ranked-choice-voting (RCV);

Phase III: Through discussion and RCV, a committee of five EAPS and two Shell representatives narrowed the list to three finalists, which were then submitted in order of preference to Shell and the MIT Building Committee for vetting and approval.

This process raised awareness of EAPS history and captured the input of more than half of its current community. Alumni, students, faculty, researchers, postdocs, and students defined the guidelines for a three-phase naming contest:

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This process raised awareness of EAPS history and captured the input of more than half of its current community. Alumni, students, faculty, researchers,
and staff alike were able to see their ideas reflected in the process and, in turn, became more invested in the outcome – that is, a lecture hall name of which everybody can be proud. As a student who originally voiced objections to the gift wrote, “Congratulations to the team who worked so hard and volunteered so much of their time to come to a decision that clearly demonstrates the values of the department.”

**Dixie Lee Bryant (1891), Trailblazer**

Dixie Lee Bryant came to MIT from Tennessee in 1887 as one of the first recipients of a Joy Scholarship, established in 1886 by Miss Nabby Joy (a Boston philanthropist) “for the benefit of one or more women studying natural science at the Institute.” After completing her degree in 1891 with honors (studying the fossil record of the Charles River Basin), she became a charter member of the faculty and head of the science department at the North Carolina Normal and Industrial School for Women (now UNC Greensboro), where she established what one would now call a STEM curriculum. In 1901 she took a leave to pursue doctoral studies, earning a PhD in geology in 1904 from Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen, Germany – the first PhD awarded to a woman by the school. (Notably, this occurred almost 20 years before MIT granted its first PhD to a woman.) Bryant returned to the Normal School as its first PhD-holder, but her status and salary remained less than her male colleagues. Soon after, she moved to Chicago, where she taught high school science until her 1931 retirement. Her drive to achieve and her contributions to education are all the more impressive in light of women’s status at that time.

MIT has been a pioneer in educating women in technical fields since the 19th century – starting in 1873 with Ellen Swallow Richards, its first female Bachelor of Science.

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was slow. It took almost 40 years after Bryant’s graduation for Frances Parker to become Course XII’s first woman to earn a master’s degree, in 1930. Katharine W. Carman followed in 1933 with the first doctoral degree awarded to a woman in Course XII, and it took over eight decades after Bryant for a woman (Dr. Eugenia Kalnay) to be appointed, in 1975, as a faculty member in the department now known as EAPS.

Although much work remains to be done to achieve the desired systemic change, at the contemporary end of this history, EAPS women continue to break glass ceilings. Former EAPS professor Marcia McNutt became the first woman to lead the US Geological Survey, in 2009, and the first woman to serve as President of the National Academy of Sciences, in 2015. MIT Vice President of Research and E. A. Griswold Professor of Geophysics Maria Zuber became the first woman to lead a NASA space mission, in 2011, and just this year she became the first woman to co-chair the Presidential Council of Advisors on Science and Technology. In 2018, Susan Solomon, the Lee and Geraldine Martin Professor of Environmental Studies, became the first woman to receive the Swedish Academy’s Crafoord Prize for Geosciences.

The Dixie Lee Bryant (1891) Lecture Hall is an overdue recognition of women in science at MIT; and we anticipate hers is just the first name among many who will be memorialized across campus in years to come – a fitting tribute to her status as trailblazer, and one which we hope will inspire future generations of MIT students.

**Acknowledgements**

In closing, we would like to thank Shell for their generous grant, and the Shell team (including Dirk Smit, Lauren Meadors, Akilah Leblanc, and Julie Ferland) for their openness and active participation in this inspiring example of donor engagement. In equal measure, we thank EAPS students Catherine Wilka, Mara Freilich, Julia Wilcots, Henri Drake, and Tristan Abbott for their voice on climate change and community values, and for their help in turning this opportunity from concern to success. We thank Angela Ellis for helping to reach the fundraising goals for this capital project, and MIT’s Resource Development Office for input to an earlier draft. Finally, we thank the larger EAPS community who participated in the naming process – students, staff, postdocs, research scientists, faculty, and alumni – for their thoughtful engagement and insightful feedback.

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