

Ombuds Office

The MIT Ombuds Office serves as a neutral, confidential, independent, and informal resource to the diverse MIT community for resolving disputes, managing conflict, and for educating individuals in more productive ways of communicating. The Office advocates for a fair and effective conflict management system, and recommends and supports systemic changes to achieve this goal. The Office continues to play a special role in helping members of the community come forward anonymously about problems they perceive as very serious.

During academic year 2003–2004, the Ombuds Office updated its Operations Plan. Plan goals include: (1) continuing to improve the effectiveness of the Ombuds Office in delivering services to the MIT community; (2) clearly communicating the roles and responsibilities of the Ombuds Office to the MIT community; (3) providing support to the Institute's coordinated conflict management system in collaboration with the other elements of the system; and (4) helping to improve the skills and abilities of the MIT community to prevent and manage conflict. In March 2004, as part of MIT's budget restructuring, ombudsperson Kelvin Chin left the Institute.

The Ombuds Office received more than 1,000 callers and visitors in this academic year including faculty; support, service, administrative, and research staff; graduate and undergraduate students; postdocs; and alums. Common issues included academic concerns, conditions of work and study, performance and supervision, policies and procedures, personal and interpersonal concerns, concerns about various perceived transgressions, separations and terminations from MIT, requests for referrals, and consultations about how to deal with a specific concern. The MIT Ombuds Office, like those in many other organizations, received a steadily increasing number of concerns about issues of values and ethics.

Ombuds staff participated in further planning of the conflict management system. We worked with Human Resources managers and the Senior Counsel's Office to design a workshop for managers, supervisors, and high-level administrators who handle complaints of harassment. We are working with the Medical Department to design a multicultural and communications workshop for all MIT Medical employees.

In addition to facilitating several large group sessions, Ombuds staff provided two dozen trainings in conflict management, negotiation, diversity, and mediation to groups of faculty, department heads, student leaders and/or administrators. The sessions provided up-to-date information on MIT's complaint handling processes and focused on helping participants who have supervisory and leadership duties improve their complaint handling skills. Ombuds staff participated as instructors, panelists, facilitators, and internal consultants at several dozen MIT orientations, midways, tutor training sessions, freshman seminars, IAP courses, retreats, and affinity group and DLC meetings. Sessions included review of the roles and responsibilities of members of the MIT community, issues that may rise to the level of a complaint, discussion of policies and procedures, resources available inside and outside the Institute, and conflict

management skills. We wrote articles for *Counterpoint*, the *GSC Newsletter*, and the *MIT Faculty Newsletter*.

Externally, Ombuds staff designed and delivered training, and participated in panel discussions about the role of an organizational ombudsperson in North America—through The Ombudsman Association, the University and College Ombuds Association, and as invited speakers in several other forums. Some of these sessions focused on ways that an ombuds program may enhance the effectiveness of an organization—i.e., by providing a means for individuals to raise and resolve issues early on. Others were training courses or workshops on mediation and negotiation. Ombuds staff continued to survey ombudspersons worldwide, collaborated with other ombuds in understanding the effectiveness of the function, and drafted an article about “dealing with—and reporting—unacceptable behavior.”

Toni P. Robinson, Ombudsperson

Mary P. Rowe, Ombudsperson and Special Assistant to the President

More information about the Ombuds Office can be found on the web at <http://web.mit.edu/ombud/>.