

Ombuds Office

The MIT Ombuds Office serves as a neutral, confidential, independent, and informal resource to the diverse MIT community. Ombuds help resolve and manage conflict and encourage productive ways of communicating. The Office advocates for a fair and effective conflict management system, recommending and supporting systemic changes to achieve this goal.

During AY2008, the Office continued to hear more anonymous concerns; more multi-cohort, multi-generation, multi-ethnic, multi-issue concerns; issues involving more than one department, laboratory or center; and more concerns from people away from the Institute.

The Ombuds Office continued with longstanding goals: working to improve its effectiveness by communicating its roles and responsibilities more widely, providing support to the MIT conflict management system in collaboration with other elements of the system, and helping to improve members of the MIT community's abilities to prevent and to deal with conflict. We have continued internal and external professional work, with website materials, articles, and presentations.

The Office received about 900 visitors, including faculty; support, service, administrative, and research staff; graduate and undergraduate students; postdocs; alumni; and other non-MIT individuals. Visitors presented concerns about 500 people and groups, and raised nearly 4,000 different issues. 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 specific concerns.

The MIT Ombuds Office, like similar offices in other organizations, received concerns about values and ethics, such as bullying, harassment, and discrimination; academic integrity; mentoring; conflicts of interest; fear of retaliation and retaliation; threats of violence; intrusions on privacy; lying; defamation; theft; and misuse of alcohol. We heard more concerns about stress in this time of internal reorganization and economic concerns nationwide, and more concerns about diversity in staff and faculty ranks. We handled nearly 400 queries about policies.

Ombuds staff continued to work with Graduate Student Council and Undergraduate Association members, colleagues in Human Resources, the Office of the Vice President and General Counsel, MIT Medical, MIT Police, the Working Group on Support Staff Issues, the Dean for Graduate Education, the Dean for Student Life, the Dean for Undergraduate Education, the Office of Minority Education, and Lincoln Laboratory. We collaborated with department and Institute groups on harassment, advisor/advisee relationships, research ethics, leadership skills, violence against women, Resources for Easing Friction and Stress programs, and with networks including the Black Women's Alliance and Conexión.

Ombuds facilitated group sessions, and provided training in conflict management, negotiation, diversity, and mediation for faculty, department heads, student leaders, and administrators. The sessions provided information on MIT's resources, and focused on helping managers and supervisors improve complaint-handling skills. Ombuds staff participated as instructors, panelists, facilitators, and internal consultants at MIT orientations, activity midways, tutor training sessions, freshman seminars, Independent Activities Period courses, retreats, affinity groups, dormitories, and department, lab, and center meetings. Sessions dealt with the roles and responsibilities of members of the MIT community, including the roles of bystanders; discussion of policies and procedures; issues that may become a complaint; resources inside and outside MIT; and improving conflict management skills.

Externally, Ombuds staff designed and delivered training and participated on panels about the role of ombudspersons around the world with the International Ombudsman Association, the Program on Negotiation, YearUp, and other forums. We continue to host the East Coast Ombuds Group. Ombuds staff continued to survey ombuds worldwide, to make reports to the profession on new issues, to mentor new ombuds, and to provide guidance to organizations contemplating establishing ombuds programs. We continue writing, with colleagues, about organizational ombudsmanship and about conflict management systems. We continue research on 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 at <http://web.mit.edu/ombud/>.