

Ombuds Office

The MIT Ombuds Office serves as a neutral, confidential, independent, and informal resource for the diverse MIT community. Ombuds help people to understand, 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 toward this goal.

During AY2014, the Ombuds Office continued its mission: to help improve MIT community members' abilities to prevent and deal with conflict, to provide support to the MIT conflict management system in collaboration with all the other elements of the system, and to improve the office's effectiveness by communicating its roles and responsibilities more widely. The office continued internal and external professional work: writing new materials, writing articles, conducting workshops, and making many presentations.

During the past year, the office received a significant number of anonymous concerns from individuals and groups. It handled many multicohort, multigeneration, and multiethnic concerns. The office handled very complex concerns that involved various different issues, cases involving more than one department, laboratory, center, or organization, and concerns involving non-MIT individuals. Some people raised concerns about what they believed to be deliberate interference with the integrity of the work of others. Some spoke of intentional bullying. Many people discussed what appeared to them to be inadequate or unfair responses to concerns that they or others had raised.

The Ombuds Office received approximately 800 visitors. We describe these individuals as "visitors" to emphasize the neutrality of the office. These visitors included members of the faculty; support, service, administrative, and research staff; graduate and undergraduate students; postdocs; alumni; and non-MIT individuals. Visitors discussed issues involving a total of nearly 500 people. Many visitors simply explored their own concerns.

Collectively our visitors discussed almost 4,000 different issues, an increase from last academic year. These included academic and research concerns, work and study conditions, performance and supervisory practices, personal and interpersonal problems, concerns about various perceived transgressions, fear of layoffs and terminations from MIT, requests for referrals, and discussion of policies and procedures. There were many consultations with faculty and staff about ways to handle specific situations. A few cases involved dozens of contacts and meetings over many months.

The MIT Ombuds Office, like ombuds offices in other organizations, listened to a wide variety of concerns about values and ethics, including academic and research integrity; perceptions of bullying, harassment, discrimination; conflicts of interest; defamation; destruction of personal or research-related property; intellectual property; lying; mentoring; poor service; privacy issues; retaliation and fear of retaliation; safety; theft; threats; and violence and fear of violence. We heard many concerns about stress, many of which were related to reorganizations, economic cutbacks, new opportunities,

diversity and “disparities in inclusion.” As in the past, we handled many queries about policies and heard suggestions for changes to the system. Ombuds also heard commendations about the services of many MIT faculty and staff members, postdocs, and students. The year brought continued grief and stress about the Boston Marathon bombings, the murder of MIT Police Officer Sean Collier, and deep sadness about other deaths.

Ombuds staff continued to collaborate with members of the Graduate Student Council (including Graduate School Orientation), the Undergraduate Association, and the officers of the Faculty. We worked closely with the institute community and equity officer; and with colleagues in departmental diversity committees; the Environment, Health, and Safety Headquarters Office (and other MIT compliance offices); Haystack Observatory; the Human Resources Department (including Employee Resource Groups and their events); the International Scholars Office; the Libraries; Lincoln Laboratory (including Circle Mentoring programs); MIT Medical (including Mental Health and Counseling); MIT Police; the Office of the Dean for Graduate Education, the Office of Risk Management; the Office of the Dean for Student Life (including the Office of Student Citizenship; Student Leadership and Engagement, the Title IX investigator and coordinator, LBGTQ@MIT, and Religious Life); the Office of the Dean for Undergraduate Education (including the Office of Minority Education, and the Office of Undergraduate Advising and Academic Programming, and S³); the Office of the Vice President and General Counsel; the Working Group on Support Staff Issues. Ombuds staff attended several courses sponsored by the Human Resources Department.

Ombuds staff met regularly with MIT senior officers, administrative and academic department heads, and student groups. We attended Administrative Council, Administrative Officer/Financial Officer presentations, MIT Faculty and Information Group meetings. We collaborated with department and Institute groups on many topics, including “active bystanders;” advisor/advisee relationships; conflict resolution and conflict management systems; entrepreneurship; harassment; leadership skills; mentoring and inclusion; micro-affirmations, “positivity,” and micro-inequities; research ethics; start-up companies; and violence against women and other groups in our community. We worked with ad hoc postdoc, graduate student, and support staff groups; ConflictResolution@MIT; Graduate Women at MIT; and Resources for Easing Friction and Stress. We helped with specific initiatives, including those related to the MIT Black History Project, the Diversity Summit, the MIT Skoltech Initiative, Title IX, and the development of Room 8-219 as the MIT One Community Room. We joined a number of meetings to discuss faculty recruitment.

Ombuds facilitated group sessions and provided training in conflict management, diversity and inclusion, negotiation, and mediation for faculty, department heads, student leaders, affinity groups, and administrators. The sessions provided information on MIT’s many resources, and focused on helping managers, supervisors, and peers to improve specific conflict management skills. Ombuds staff participated as instructors, panelists, facilitators, and internal consultants at MIT orientations, activity midways, departmental support staff groups, tutor training sessions, freshman seminars, Independent Activities Period courses, retreats, affinity groups, and living group

discussions, as well as at department, lab, and center meetings. Sessions dealt with the roles and responsibilities of members of the MIT community, including the roles of mentors and of active bystanders. Discussions focused on policies and procedures, issues that may evolve into complaints, micro-inequities and micro-affirmations, and resources both inside and outside of MIT that may assist in addressing concerns.

Externally, Ombuds staff designed and delivered training and participated in panels and teleconferences addressing the role of ombudspersons around the world, sponsored by the International Ombudsman Association and various universities. The office hosted the East Coast Ombuds Group biannual meetings. Ombuds staff continued to help survey ombuds worldwide, to make reports to the profession on new issues, to mentor new ombuds, to serve on the *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association* editorial board, to provide guidance to organizations that may wish to establish an ombuds program, and to make occasional presentations at other organizations. Together with colleagues, we write about organizational ombudsmanry and conflict management systems, and continue research about “dealing with and reporting unacceptable behavior,” and on bystander behavior.

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