

MIT Ombuds Office

This past year marked the 35th academic year that the MIT Ombuds Office has been in operation. The Ombuds Office continues to pursue its long-standing mission: to help improve MIT community members' ability to manage conflict constructively and to prevent or minimize conflict whenever possible; to provide support to the larger system of MIT conflict management resources; and to continue to effectively communicate the support the Ombuds Office provides to the entire MIT community.

The Ombuds Office offers a versatile set of tools to enable the Institute community to:

- Constructively manage individual concerns and/or conflicts as they arise;
- Identify broader systemic areas of concern and strategies for addressing them;
- Support Institute values and principles that foster an increasingly collaborative and supportive community.

Consistent with requisite International Ombudsman Association (IOA) Standards of Practice, the Ombuds Office serves as a confidential, independent, informal, and neutral resource for all cohorts of the MIT community (i.e., undergraduate students, graduate students, postdoctoral fellows and associates, support and operational staff, administrative staff, faculty, lecturers, research staff, alumni, affiliates, and MIT community members at large). The Ombudsperson is neither an advocate for the individual visitor, nor an advocate for management. The Ombuds Office is however an advocate for fair processes. The Ombuds Office operates within the ethical standards set forth by IOA. This means that the MIT Ombudspersons will act in accordance with the principles mandated by the IOA: independence, neutrality and impartiality, confidentiality, and informality.

IOA Ethical Principles

Independence

The Ombudsman is independent in structure, function, and appearance to the highest degree possible within the organization.

Neutrality and Impartiality

The Ombudsman, as a designated neutral, remains unaligned and impartial. The Ombudsman does not engage in any situation that could create a conflict of interest.

Confidentiality

The Ombudsman holds all communications with those seeking assistance in strict confidence and does not disclose confidential communications unless given permission to do so. The only exception to this practice is where there appears to be imminent risk of serious harm.

Informality

Following the [Ethical Principles of the International Ombudsman Association](#), the Ombudsman, as an informal resource, does not participate in any formal adjudicative or administrative procedure related to concerns brought to his/her attention.

Transition and Self-Study

AY2015 proved especially dynamic for both MIT at large and the Ombuds Office in particular. In September 2014, Mary Rowe, one of the founding MIT ombudspersons, retired from her position in the Ombuds Office after 41 years. Mary continues to serve as adjunct professor of negotiation and conflict management in the MIT Sloan School of Management. For over 40 years, Mary was greatly valued and respected as a resource of support for all members of the MIT community, as evidenced by the enormous outpouring of recognition at the community picnic honoring her on September 30, 2014. Mary's departure was immediately followed by the arrival of Judi Segall in September 2014. Judi is an experienced dispute resolution and ombuds professional, with 17 years of service as an ombudsperson and director of the Ombuds Office at Stony Brook University. In addition, Segall has held several leadership and teaching roles within the larger international dispute resolution professional community. Both Segall and longstanding MIT ombud Toni Robinson now comprise the practitioner team leading the MIT Ombuds Office.

In March 2015, Toni Robinson was awarded the Collier Medal, which is given to a recipient to honor the legacy of Officer Sean Collier, whose passionate curiosity, genuine kindness, and dedication to service strengthened the MIT community. This is an extraordinary honor, and marks the first occasion that the Collier Medal has been given to a single member of the MIT community. The presentation of the award by President Reif made clear that Toni's longstanding work as one of the MIT Ombudspersons has earned enormous respect and appreciation for her contributions to MIT.

Given the significant staffing transition in 2014, the Ombuds Office used this period of change as an opportunity for self-study. The initial stage of this review focused on examining the office's operating procedures, configuration of our physical space, and a review of our model of practice to ensure we remain consistent with current IOA best practices and standards of practice. This effort to date has resulted in several improvements: the entire office suite was refurbished, resulting in a revitalized and welcoming professional space. Archival material was reviewed and reorganized, resource material was revised, and outdated equipment was replaced.

As a part of the transition the Ombudspersons met with senior officers, managers, and others throughout the Institute. These meetings with departments, labs, centers, schools, student organizations, Employee Resource Groups (ERG's), and other cohorts allowed the Ombuds Office to advance awareness of our services and reintroduce the newly formed team of individual practitioners. While time intensive, these efforts were critical to maintain a requisite measure of engagement and awareness. The self-study remains a work in progress. Objectives for AY2016 include continuing assessment of the services

the Ombuds Office provides, and the development of a streamlined data management system.

AY2015 Casework Overview

In AY 2015 the Ombuds Office handled 496 cases. A “case” is defined as an issue or inquiry brought to the attention of the Ombuds Office that requires one of the following types of assistance: information clarification, exploration of options and strategies for management or resolution of concerns, coaching, referral to internal or external resources, facilitation or shuttle diplomacy, or informal mediation. Most cases require several points of contact with the visitor(s), including multiple meetings or telephone contacts, and/or numerous contacts with second or third parties involved in a particular concern. The majority of consultations with the Ombuds Office occur in private meetings, with a smaller percentage occurring over the telephone. While many cases are resolved or “closed” in a relatively brief time (one week or less), a significant percentage of cases require an extended period of time for the exploration of options and resolution strategies.

AY2015 Case Summary Data

Consistent with the IOA Standards of Practice to protect the confidentiality of visitors, the Ombuds Office does not retain any records that would identify a specific individual visitor. For each case, demographic statistics are captured in the aggregate in order to identify trends or systemic issues and to assess service utilization. The Ombuds Office uses this data to inform our practice in several ways. The data assists us in handling disputes and assessing where we need to focus outreach efforts. Data collection also enables the Ombuds Office to assess organizational trends and to provide aggregated systemic feedback when appropriate.

- Cases: 496
- Visitors: 520
- Faculty Visitors: 10%
- Administrative and Support Staff Visitors: 53%
- Graduate Student and Post-Doc Visitors: 33%
- Undergraduate Student Visitors: 5%

Issues by Type

Issues brought to the Ombuds Office involve all cohorts and all aspects of the Institute. The categorization of issues represents a clustering of a broader range of concerns that students, faculty, post-doctoral fellows and associates, administrative staff, operational staff, support staff, alumni, affiliates and MIT community members have raised. The following represents the largest “clusters” of concerns brought to the Ombuds Office during AY2015.

Career/Workplace Issues:

- Conflict with Supervisor
- Personnel Issues/Career Development
- Ethics/Conflict of Interest
- Bias/Harassment
- Discrimination
- Medical/Mental Health
- Departmental/Organizational Change

Academic/Course-Related Issues:

- Conflict with Advisor/PI
- Academic Integrity/Authorship
- Intellectual Property/Conflict of Interest
- Medical/Mental Health
- Faculty/Student Conflict

Outreach/Education/Training Activities

In addition to providing informal conflict management assistance, the Ombuds Office provided a range of outreach, education, and training activities for the MIT community. While these efforts help promote the services of the Ombuds Office, workshops and presentations also provided valuable learning opportunities for participants to gain conflict management skills, improve interpersonal and organizational relationships, enhance communication skills, and facilitate creative and innovative approaches to problem solving and organizational management.

Highlights of AY2015 outreach activities included:

Working Group on Support Staff Issues
Year-end Meeting on Conflict Management

Black Lives Matter Community Conversation with MIT Police

Office of the Dean for Graduate Education Advising Best Practices Initiative
Graduate School 102

Lincoln Laboratory Ombuds Mentoring

Human Resources' Dealing with Conflict Workshop

Graduate Women at MIT Resource Fair

Community Fair Orientation

Employee Resource Group Workshops

Women's Advisory Group Convener
School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences Faculty Meeting
Human Resources Officers Meeting
Office of the Dean for Graduate Education Welcome Reception
International Scholars Welcome Reception
Office of Student Citizenship Conflict Management Training
School of Architecture Staff Workshop
Health Sciences & Technology Orientation

Toni P. Robinson
Ombudsperson

Judi Segall
Ombudsperson