

MIT Ombuds Office

This past year marked the 36th 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 communicate effectively the role and resources the Ombuds Office brings to the entire MIT community.

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

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

Conflict is an inherent, and many would suggest necessary, part of human interaction and dynamic organizations. Change is an inevitable part of the human environment at every level—and with change often comes uncertainty and instability. These dynamics can lead to breakdowns in communication and differences of opinion or perception. Individuals contact the Ombuds Office for a variety of reasons: to request information about a policy or procedure; to examine a concern or concerns and explore options for resolution; to speak with an unaligned, objective party confidentially. An ombudsperson can help clarify an issue, explore options, and assess where the most constructive outcomes might lie. In this process, the Ombuds Office staff offers coaching, facilitation, shuttle diplomacy, or consultation with others to help foster mutually acceptable outcomes.

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). An 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 an MIT ombudspersons will act in accordance with the principles mandated by IOA: independence, neutrality, impartiality, confidentiality, and informality.

IOA Ethical Principles

The [ethical principles of the International Ombudsman Association](#) include independence, neutrality and impartiality, confidentiality, and informality:

- **Independence:** An ombudsman is independent in structure, function, and appearance to the highest degree possible within the organization.

- **Neutrality and Impartiality:** An ombudsman, as a designated neutral, remains unaligned and impartial. An ombudsman does not engage in any situation that could create a conflict of interest.
- **Confidentiality:** An 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:** An ombudsman is an informal resource and does not participate in any formal adjudicative or administrative procedure related to the concerns brought to his or her attention.

Source: [Ethical Principles of the International Ombudsman Association](#)

Overview of Academic Year 2016

Academic year 2016 continued the trend of organizational change and realignment for MIT at large. This yielded considerable demand for Ombuds Office services from across the Institute.

As a part of the Ombuds Office's ongoing activities, the ombudspersons met with the Academic Council, faculty officers, other senior officers, managers, and others throughout the Institute. These meetings with departments, laboratories, centers, schools, student organizations, employee resource groups, and others allowed the Ombuds Office to advance awareness of its services. Although these efforts are time intensive, they are critical to maintaining a requisite measure of engagement and awareness. In addition, the ombudspersons facilitated group workshops and trainings for faculty, department heads, employee resource groups, student leadership, and postdoctoral fellows in conflict management, constructive communication, mediation, and negotiation.

Outside MIT, both ombudspersons delivered trainings and participated in professional workshops and initiatives sponsored by the International Ombudsman Association and other universities and international organizations. The MIT Ombuds Office continued to host the biannual East Coast Ombuds Group meeting, a professional development meeting of approximately 50 academic, corporate, and government ombudsmen and other dispute resolution professionals from the northeast region of the US. Objectives for AY2017 include continuing assessment of the services offered by the Ombuds Office and the development of a streamlined data management system.

Casework Overview

In AY2016, the Ombuds Office handled 605 cases. A case is defined as an issue or inquiry that is brought to the attention of the Ombuds Office and requires one or more 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 or visitors; there may be a number of meetings or telephone contacts, many contacts with second or third parties involved in a

particular concern, or both. The majority of consultations with the Ombuds Office occur in private meetings, with a smaller percentage occurring over the telephone. Although many cases are resolved or closed in a relatively brief time (two weeks or less), more than 25% of cases require an extended period of time (more than a month) for options and resolution strategies to be explored.

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 visitor. For each case, demographic statistics are captured in the aggregate to identify trends or systemic issues and to assess service utilization. The Ombuds Office uses this data to inform its practice in several ways. The data assists the staff in handling disputes and in assessing where the office should focus its outreach efforts. Data collection also enables the Ombuds Office to assess organizational trends and to provide aggregated systemic feedback when appropriate. Table 1 summarizes the data from AY2015 and AY2016.

Table 1. Service Utilization Data

	AY2015	AY2016
Cases	496	605
Visitors	520	673
Female visitors*	...	62%
Male visitors*	...	37%
Faculty visitors (including lecturers)	10%	11%
Administrative and support staff	53%	52%
Graduate students, postdoctoral associates, and research staff	30%	33%
Undergraduate students	5%	6%
Non-MIT community*	...	1%

*Data not collected in 2015.

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, postdoctoral fellows and associates, administrative staff, operational staff, support staff, alumni, affiliates, and MIT community members have raised. The following list represents the largest clusters of concerns brought to the Ombuds Office during AY2016. About 54% of these concerns were career or workplace issues; 46% were academic or course-related issues.

Career or Workplace Issues

- Conflict with supervisor
- Personnel issues/career development
- Salary/compensation
- Ethics/conflict of interest
- Medical/mental health
- Departmental/organizational change
- Equity/harassment/discrimination

Academic or Course-Related Issues

- Conflict with advisor or principal investigator
- Academic integrity/authorship
- Intellectual property/conflict of interest
- Medical/mental health
- Faculty/student conflict
- Peer (student/student) conflict

Outreach, Education, and 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. These efforts help to promote the services of the Ombuds Office, workshops, and presentations, and provide 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 AY2016 activities included:

- Working Group on Support Staff Issues meetings
- Black History@MIT Project
- Staff Alignment Group
- Facilitated projects sponsored by the Institute Community and Equity Office
- Women in IT Employee Resource Group Workshop
- Lincoln Laboratory Circle Mentoring Workshop
- Employee Advisory Program Advisory Committee
- Graduate School 102

- Lincoln Laboratory Ombuds Program mentoring
- Human Resources Dealing with Conflict Workshop
- Graduate Women at MIT Resource Fair
- Lincoln Laboratory LGBT Employee Resource Group Workshop
- Community Fair orientation
- Women's Advisory Group convener
- Human Resources Officers meetings
- Office of the Dean for Graduate Education Resource Fair
- International scholars orientation
- Office of Student Citizenship conflict management training
- Health Sciences and Technology orientation
- Office of Minority Education Interphase Edge Workshop
- Graduate Women at MIT Workshop
- MedLinks conflict management training
- Postdoctoral Scholars Association Conflict Management Workshop

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