

MIT Ombuds Office

Overview

This past year marked the 37th academic year that the [MIT Ombuds Office](#) has been in operation. The Ombuds Office continues to pursue its longstanding 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 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, conflicts, or both, 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 our environment at every level—and with change often comes uncertainty and instability. These dynamics can lead to breakdowns in communication and differences of opinion, perception, or both. Individuals contact the Ombuds Office for a variety of reasons: to request information about a policy or procedure; to examine a concern(s) and explore options for resolution; and to speak with an unaligned, objective party confidentially. The ombudsperson can help clarify an issue, explore options and assess where the most constructive outcomes might lie. In this process we often offer 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). 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 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

The ombudsman, as an informal resource, does not participate in any formal adjudicative or administrative procedure related to concerns brought to his or her attention.

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

Overview

AY2017 continued the trend of organizational change and realignment for MIT at large. This yielded considerable demand for Ombuds Office services from all cohorts of the Institute.

As a part of the Ombuds Office ongoing activities the ombudspersons met with academic council, faculty officers, other 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. While time intensive, these efforts are critical to maintain a requisite measure of engagement and awareness. In addition the ombudspersons facilitated group workshops and trainings for faculty, department heads, ERGs, student leadership, and postdoctoral fellows in conflict management, constructive communication, mediation, and negotiation.

Externally, 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, a seminal professional development meeting of approximately 50 academic, corporate, and government ombudspersons and other dispute resolution professionals from the greater Northeast region. Objectives for AY2018 include continuing assessment of the services the Ombuds Office, development of a streamlined data management system and managing the transition and integration of a new ombudsperson in the MIT Ombuds Office.

AY2017 Casework Overview

In AY2017 the Ombuds Office handled 400 cases. A case is defined as an issue or inquiry brought to the attention of the Ombuds Office requiring 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); multiple meetings or telephone contacts, numerous 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. While many cases were resolved or closed in a relatively brief time (three weeks or less), over 40% of cases required an extended period of time (more than a month) for options and resolution strategies to be explored.

AY2017 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	400
• Visitors	420
• Female Visitors	65%
• Male Visitors	35%
• Faculty (including Lecturers)	14%
• Administrative and Support Staff	49%
• Graduate Students, Postdocs, and Research Staff	31%
• Undergraduate Students	5%
• Non-MIT Community	1%

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 AY2017.

Career/workplace issues: (56%)

- Conflict with Supervisor
- Personnel Issues/Career Development

- Salary/Compensation
- Ethics/Conflict of Interest
- Medical/Mental Health
- Departmental/Organizational Change
- Equity/Harassment/Discrimination
- Immigration/Visa Status

Academic/course related issues: (44%)

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

Outreach and 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. 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 AY2017 activities include the following:

- Working Group on Support Staff Issues Meetings
- International Students Forum
- Staff Alignment Group
- Facilitated ICEO Sponsored Projects/Workshops
- Chemistry Department Resource Fair
- Employee Advisory Program Advisory Committee
- Bias Response Team
- Lincoln Laboratory Ombuds Program Mentoring

Human Resources Dealing with Conflict Workshop
Graduate Women at MIT Resource Fair
ABAC ERG 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
GWAMIT Workshop
Med-Links Conflict Management Training
Postdoctoral Scholars Association Conflict Management Workshop

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