

MIT Ombuds Office

This report covers the 39th academic year that the [MIT Ombuds Office](#) has been in operation. The Ombuds Office continues its long-standing mission to help improve MIT community members' ability to manage and resolve conflict constructively, provide support to the larger system of MIT conflict management resources, and identify systemic issues for the Institute. These efforts support the values and principles that foster a collaborative and supportive MIT community.

Although conflict may be seen as negative, it is an inherent, and many would suggest necessary, part of human interaction and dynamic organizations. When handled well, conflict can be a catalyst for creativity and growth, but conflict can also inhibit collaboration when issues are not resolved appropriately.

Concerns typically raised to the Ombuds Office relate to organizational change, interpersonal dynamics, intercultural differences, scientific disagreements, and Institute policies and procedures. An ombudsperson can help clarify an issue, explore options, and assess where the most constructive outcomes might lie. In this process, the office often offers coaching, facilitation, shuttle diplomacy, or consultation with others to help reach mutually acceptable outcomes.

Consistent with 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 (e.g., undergraduate students, graduate students, postdoctoral fellows and associates, support and operational staff, administrative staff, faculty, lecturers, research staff, alumni, affiliates, and community members at large). The ombudsperson is neither an advocate for the individual 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](#). These include:

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 which 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/her attention.

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

Emerging Issues

Certain issues will arise when people work together, such as tensions between supervisors and supervisees or advisors and students. In addition, there are issues that are symptomatic of the environment in which the Ombuds Office works. In AY2019, the office noted significant anxiety related to structural and programmatic changes within the Institute and on a national sociopolitical level. Another significant issue that has affected the Institute is the increasing emphasis on entrepreneurial engagement within the research and academic community. The pace of this engagement has often surpassed the Institute's ability to modify relevant oversight processes to ensure that academic integrity and mentorship principles are effectively understood and utilized.

Casework

In AY2019 the Ombuds Office handled 360 cases. A case is defined as an issue or inquiry brought to the attention of the Ombuds Office that requires 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 a number of points of contact with the visitor(s)—several meetings or telephone contacts and 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. Although many cases were resolved in a relatively brief time (three weeks or less), others, possibly with greater complexity or multiple parties, required an extended period of time (approximately a month) for options and resolution strategies to be explored.

Case Summary Data

Consistent with the IOA Standards of Practice on confidentiality, the Ombuds Office does not retain any records that would identify a 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 its practice in several ways. The data helps in handling disputes and assessing where to focus outreach efforts. Data collection also enables the Ombuds Office to assess organizational trends and to provide aggregated systemic feedback when appropriate.

- **Cases:** 360
- Female visitors: 62%
- Male visitors: 38%
- Faculty (including lecturers and instructors): 17%
- Administrative and support staff: 38%
- Graduate students, postdocs and research staff: 36%
- Operations and Facilities staff: 2%
- Undergraduate students: 5%
- Alumni: 2%

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:

- Career and Workplace Issues: 70%
 - Conflict with supervisor
 - Personnel issues or career development
 - Salary or compensation
 - Ethics or conflict of interest
 - Conflict with colleague
 - Departmental or organizational change
 - Performance review
- Academic and Course-Related Issues: 30%
 - Conflict with advisor or principal investigator
 - Academic integrity or authorship
 - Intellectual property and conflict of interest
 - Administrative services
 - Faculty or student conflict
 - Peer conflict
 - Student conduct

Education, Training, and Outreach Activities

In addition to the core work of individual consultations and facilitated conversations, the MIT Ombudspersons participated in a number of other activities. They give presentations on conflict resolution, facilitate group meetings, and may participate as a non-voting member of a task force. Although these efforts are time intensive, they are critical to maintaining a requisite measure of engagement and awareness. In AY2019, the Ombuds Office also 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 IOA 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 greater Northeast region.

Objectives for AY2020 include continuing to focus on coaching managers to help resolve issues before escalation and to share observations on systemic issues that might be addressed to support the Institute.

MIT Training and Consultation

- Office of Minority Education Interphase Edge Program—trainer
- Disability Employee Resource Group Committee—consultant
- Lincoln Laboratory Safe Workplace Workshop—presenter
- Division of Student Life MedLinks Workshop—presenter
- Electrical Engineering and Computer Sciences Graduate Student Conflict Management Seminar—presenter
- Postdoctoral Association Conflict Management Training Workshop—presenter
- Institute for Data, Systems, and Society Staff Development Workshop—presenter
- Institute Resources for Easing Friction and Stress Conflict Management Workshop—presenter
- Chemistry, Chemical Engineering, and Electrical Engineering and Computer Sciences Resources for Easing Friction and Stress Workshop—trainer
- Lincoln Laboratory Staff Circle Mentoring Workshop—trainer
- Graduate Student Council Management Seminar—facilitator
- Mind, Hand, Heart Pilot Program for Department Support—consultant
- Lincoln Laboratory—Ombuds Program Mentors
- Working Group for Support Staff—consultant
- Work–Life Employee Assistance Program Advisory Committee—member
- Human Resource officers—quarterly meetings
- Mathematics Department administrative staff communication training—presenter

MIT Community Outreach

- Women’s Advisory Group Convener (quarterly meetings)
- Office of Graduate Education diversity orientation
- Graduate Student Council orientation fair
- MIT Community Fair participants
- Health Sciences and Technology doctoral student orientation
- Graduate Women at MIT orientation
- Office of Minority Education orientation
- International Scholars Office orientation
- Faculty Committee on Student Life
- Random Acts of Kindness Week
- Division of Student Life Wellness Fair
- Chemistry Department Resource Fair
- Neurobiological Engineering Department retreat

External Activities

- American Bar Association, Dispute Resolution Section—Ombuds Committee
- American Bar Association podcast, “Just Resolutions: Interview about Ombuds Role” — presenter
- American Bar Association webinar, “Reducing Barriers and Raising Effectiveness: Assessing ADR (alternative dispute resolution) Programs” — presenter
- Boston Law Collaborative Institute, Implicit Bias Workshop—participant
- East Coast Ombuds Group—conveners and participants
- Harvard Law School: Alternative Dispute Resolution Career Panel
- IOA Professional Development Committee
- IOA Foundations Course—lead faculty
- IOA Conference—presenter
- The Ethics and Compliance Initiative: Managing Ethics in Organizations—participant
- Tufts Gordon Institute—presenter

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