

## MIT Ombuds Office

This report covers the 40th academic year that the [MIT Ombuds Office](#) has been in operation. The Ombuds Office continues its longstanding 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.

Conflict is an inherent, and many would suggest necessary, part of human interaction and an important element in cultural and organizational change. When handled well, conflict can be a catalyst for creativity and growth, and strengthen both interpersonal and institutional bonds. The MIT Ombuds Office helps people find ways to engage constructively to harness the potential growth from conflict.

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, we often offer coaching, facilitation, shuttle diplomacy, or consultation with others to help foster mutually acceptable outcomes.

### Ombuds Office Principles

Consistent with requisite International Ombuds 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 in its document, *Ethical Principles of the International Ombuds Association*.

#### Independence

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

#### Neutrality and Impartiality

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

#### Confidentiality

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

## **Emerging Issues**

The 2019–2020 academic year was an extraordinarily challenging period for the entire Institute, and as a result, a crucial time for the Ombuds Office to meet the needs of many members of the MIT Community. As a unique resource, the Ombuds Office serves as a confidential thought partner during times of crisis.

In fall 2019, as information emerged regarding MIT’s ties to Jeffrey Epstein, the Ombuds Office engaged in a number of different ways to support individuals and the Institute. For example, we provided consultation to people who were directly impacted by or had knowledge of the connection to Jeffrey Epstein and were seeking the most constructive way to share concerns. Many who were less directly impacted, but had more general concerns, also contacted the Office to discuss the relevance to their work and association with MIT.

The office was also called on by groups and departments, labs, and centers (DLCs) to help identify processes to have constructive discussions in a way that would set the stage for positive change. This was very significant in light of the associated concerns about diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice that emerged as central to the interests of community members during this period.

A shift in focus came abruptly for the MIT community in early 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit. People were shaken by sudden concerns about the virus and MIT’s pivot to online learning and remote work for staff. Many international students wondered how their status might change or where they could find helpful guidance for making important decisions. This came at a time when there was already significant anxiety on a national level for international students. The ongoing uncertainty and instability associated with the pandemic has presented myriad challenges for every cohort. An enormous challenge was made even more so given the remote status in which everyone was working. There were many questions from people throughout MIT as to what the coming months, or longer, might hold. This included health concerns, issues of working in a virtual environment, benefits, what a return to campus might look like, and more.

In addition to fielding concerns, the Ombudspersons actively reached out to a broad range of members of the MIT community to keep a finger on the pulse of the Institute and to convey concerns anonymously to people in leadership positions on an ongoing basis. Currently, the path forward remains in question beyond plans for the fall 2020 semester. The Ombuds Office will continue to engage with members of the community to help resolve emerging problems and support collaboration.

## **2019–2020 Casework**

In 2019–2020, the Ombuds Office handled 362 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, 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 were resolved or “closed” in a relatively brief time (three weeks or less), others, possibly with greater complexity or multiple parties, required 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 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: 362
- Female visitors: 62%
- Male visitors: 38%
- Faculty (including lecturers/instructors): 13%
- Administrative and support staff: 46%
- Graduate students, postdoctoral fellows and associates, and research staff: 33%
- Undergraduate students: 2%
- Alumni: 2%
- Other: 4%

### **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 AY2019.

#### Top Career/Workplace Issues:

- Conflict with supervisor—Performance review and communication
- Conflict within DLC—Department/organizational change
- Conflict with colleague—Harassment and inappropriate behavior

### Top Academic/Course Related Issues:

- Conflict with advisor/principal investigator – Communication/intellectual property and authorship
- Conflict with faculty – Harassment and inappropriate behavior
- Conflict with peer or colleague – Communication

### **Education, Training, and Outreach Activities**

In addition to the core work of individual consultations and facilitated conversations, the MIT Ombudspersons presented a range of workshops and trainings, and facilitated discussions on constructive conflict management, organizational development, group dynamics and effective communication. These efforts allow the Ombuds Office to maintain a requisite measure of engagement with the community at large as well as providing a valued resource to support positive change, growth, and resiliency throughout the Institute. The training and educational activities listed below include more than 900 staff, faculty, and student participants.

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.

### **MIT Training and Consultation**

Office of Minority Education Interphase Edge Program  
 Disability Employee Resource Group Committee  
 Lincoln Lab Safe Workplace Workshop  
 Division of Student Life MedLinks Workshop  
 EECS Graduate Student Conflict Management Seminar  
 Post-Doc Association Conflict Management Training Workshop  
 Institute for Data, Systems, and Society Staff Development Workshop  
 Institute REFs Conflict Management Workshop  
 Chemistry, Chemical Engineering, and EECS REFs Workshop  
 Lincoln Lab Staff Circle Mentoring Workshop  
 Graduate Student Council Management Seminar  
 Mind, Hand, Heart Program for Department Support  
 Lincoln Lab Ombuds Program  
 Working Group for Support Staff Resources  
 Work-Life/EAP Advisory Committee  
 Human Resource Officers Quarterly Meetings  
 Independent Activity Period Raising Concerns Session  
 Graduate Student Council Officers

## MIT Community Engagement

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 PhD 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 Retreat  
 Nuclear Science Orientation  
 School of Science AO/FO Meeting  
 Aeronautics and Astronautics Department Staff Meeting  
 School of Engineering AO/FO Meeting  
 School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences AO Meeting  
 Sloan Managers Meeting  
 Campus Services Directors Meeting

## External Activities

American Bar Association Dispute Resolution Section Ombuds Committee  
 Boston Law Collaborative Institute: implicit bias workshop (participant)  
 East Coast Ombuds Group (conveners/participants)  
 International Ombuds Association professional development course faculty  
 International Ombuds Association conference (presenter)  
 United States Ombudsman Association conference (presenter)  
 Tufts Gordon Institute (presenter)

**Judi Segall**  
**Ombudsperson**

**Nicholas Diehl**  
**Ombudsperson**