

MIT Ombuds Office

Overview

This report covers the 41st academic year that the [MIT Ombuds Office](#) has been in operation, a year many consider the most challenging and unprecedented period in the Institute's history. In response to the pandemic, the Institute has been required to adapt, reconfigure, respond to emergency health and safety requirements, and reinvent the scope of its operations in all respects. In typical MIT fashion, the Institute and its extraordinary team of faculty and staff managed to meet these challenges utilizing collaboration, innovation, expertise, and a shared sense of humanity.

That said, it has been an extremely unstable year that led to widespread systemic and interpersonal challenges. The Ombuds Office continued its long-standing mission to improve MIT community members' ability to manage and resolve conflict and change constructively; provide support to the larger system of MIT conflict management resources; and identify systemic issues for the Institute. While always a constant part of our mission, this year proved how critical it is to provide holistic support for the values, principles, and strategic planning that foster a collaborative and supportive MIT community, especially in times of extreme challenge and uncertainty.

Conflict is an inherent and necessary part of human interaction and a critical element of cultural and organizational change. When handled well, conflict can be a catalyst for creativity and growth, strengthening both interpersonal and institutional bonds. The MIT Ombuds Office helps people find ways of engaging in constructive conflict management while maximizing the potential for growth and positive change. In academic year 2021, this mandate was central to the services we provided. Serving as a no-barriers point of contact for all members of the MIT community took on added importance and value as so many community members struggled through the challenges this pandemic year presented.

Concerns typically raised to the Ombuds Office relate to organizational change, interpersonal dynamics, intercultural differences, scientific disagreements, and Institute policies and procedures. This year, these concerns surfaced along with concerns related to individual safety and personal well-being. Providing that point of contact and support throughout this year heightened the value and impact of our work. 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.

In summary, it is equally important to recognize what we and many others have observed to be the silver lining this year has yielded. As the Institute was forced to grapple with change and uncertainty affecting every cohort and aspect of its functioning, it quickly learned how critical and beneficial expanded communication and collaboration was to successfully meet these challenges. Numerous working groups, committees, task forces, and other groups were formed in an effort to bring together members from all corners of the Institute that previously had little or no

experience working directly with one another. The positive outcomes of these newly formed collaborations was immediately evident. Operational and cultural silos have been diminished, and expanded modalities for innovation and problem-solving have been created. Overall, there appears to be a heightened appreciation for collaboration, inclusion, and change that has led to tangible adaptation and innovative solutions to the operational challenges we faced.

Ombuds Office Principles

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 following ethical standards set forth by the IOA in its document, *Ethical Principles of the International Ombudsman 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 Ombudsman does not engage in any situation, which 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

In AY2021, there were a number of unique factors that contributed to conflicts or made resolving conflicts more challenging. For example, the shift for many people to working or studying remotely had a number of related consequences, some positive and others more difficult. Technologies such as Zoom proved to be an effective way of connecting people, and this was certainly true for the operation of the Ombuds Office. In fact, online meetings were in some ways more efficient and accessible for many people who might have had barriers to attending an in-person meeting.

On the other hand, remote work also had some drawbacks, such as losing chance encounters with others, which can serve as opportunities to share information and build relationships in a way that is unlikely in more structured settings. The Ombuds Office heard from many people about the difficulties of living alone and facing long periods of isolation from others, which in some cases contributed to symptoms of anxiety and depression. Additionally, some international students had the added complication of not knowing when or whether they would be able to return to the United States.

Members of the MIT community also encountered challenges of balancing personal and professional responsibilities. Securing consistent childcare can be difficult at any point, but the pandemic made it nearly impossible for some families to access this important resource. At the same time, many people struggled with being sick with COVID-19, helping relatives who were sick, or dealing with the loss of loved ones.

The Ombuds Office also heard from people who remained on or returned to campus during this time. Some had questions about whether it was essential for them to be working on campus, while other concerns related to people not complying with the Institute's safety measures, such as mandatory use of facial coverings and social distancing. People noted that keeping abreast of different policies and process changes through the time period could be difficult. It should be noted that for the most part, people who used the Ombuds Office expressed support for MIT's response to COVID-19. There was recognition of the challenges and extraordinary efforts taken to support people and maintain a safe campus environment.

All of these experiences happened with the backdrop of larger social unrest in the United States. AY2021 was a time of increased awareness of structural racism, in part related to the killing of George Floyd and the inequities that became apparent in the way that people in the United States were impacted by the pandemic. The very contentious nature of the national elections and attack on the US Capitol in January were very destabilizing for many people.

Faculty, staff, and students who contacted the Ombuds Office during this time period shared their distress and the toll that all of these factors were taking on being able to function well in both work and studies at MIT. In some situations, there were also challenges around gauging how to set new, temporary expectations for productivity.

Finally, during this year the Institute went through countless of stages that have marked the progress of understanding the impacts of COVID-19 and ways to respond appropriately to protect the community and continue to function. Not surprisingly, a shared feeling among many by the end of AY2021 was of sheer exhaustion.

Casework

In AY2021, the Ombuds Office handled 404 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. It is important to note that all of our casework in this

past year was done remotely via Zoom with no barriers noted by any inquirer. In fact, our experience suggests that this modality for many provides greater access and ease and likely has resulted in greater use of our services than in previous years. The general consensus within the community of direct practice helping professionals is that remote practice modalities will be an ongoing component of our service portfolio.

Most cases require several points of contact with the visitor(s), with multiple meetings, conversations, 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. Nearly all of our work this year was done via Zoom. 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 (greater 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, and 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 provide aggregated systemic feedback when appropriate.

- Cases: 404
- Female Visitors: 65%
- Male Visitors: 35%
- Faculty (including Lecturers and Instructors): 12.5%
- Administrative, Research, and Support Staff: 41%
- Graduate Students and Postdocs: 34%
- Undergraduate Students: 4%
- Alumni: 1.5%
- Other (Affiliate, Contractor, Temp, Volunteer): 7%

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 AY2021.

Career/Workplace Issues:

- Conflict with Supervisor—Performance Review and Communication
- Conflict within DLC—Department or Organizational Change
- Conflict with Colleague—Harassment and Inappropriate Behavior
- Issues with Institute Policies or Supervisory Deficit
- COVID-related

Faculty Issues:

- Professional Conduct
- Conflict with Graduate Student or Mental Health
- Adjustment to COVID related operations/requirements

Academic/Course Related Issues:

- Conflict with Advisor or PI—Communication/Intellectual Property and Authorship
- Mentoring, Advisory, or Supervisory Deficit
- Conflict with Faculty—Harassment and Inappropriate Behavior
- Conflict with Peer or Colleague—Communication
- Issues with Institute COVID-related policies

Education, Training, Outreach Activities

In addition to the core work of individual consultations and facilitated conversations, the MIT Ombudspersons continued to provide a range of workshops, 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 while also providing a valued resource to support positive change, growth, and resiliency throughout the Institute. These efforts proved even more valuable during this incredibly challenging year. The training and educational activities listed below included over 850 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 (ECOG), a seminal professional development meeting of approximately 50 academic, corporate and government ombudsmen and other dispute resolution professionals from the greater Northeast region.

1. MIT Training and Consultation
 - Office of Minority Education Interphase Edge Program
 - Disability Employee Resource Group
 - Lincoln Lab Safe Workplace Workshop

- Division of Student Life MedLinks Workshop
- EECS Graduate Student Conflict Management Seminar
- Institute REFs Conflict Management Workshop
- Chemistry, Chemical Engineering, and EECS REFs Workshop
- Lincoln Lab Staff Circle Mentoring Workshop
- Mind, Hand, Heart Program for Department Support
- Lincoln Lab Ombuds Program
- Working Group for Support Staff resource
- Work-Life/EAP Advisory Committee
- Post Doc Resource Fair
- Meche DEI Task Force
- IMES Orientation
- Athletic Department Leadership Meeting
- IDHR Faculty Panel
- Media Lab Enrichment Serie
- Human Resource Leadership Meetings
- IAP Raising Concerns Session
- Graduate Student Council Leadership Meeting

2. 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
- DSL Wellness Fair
- SHASS AO Meeting
- Sloan Managers Meeting
- Campus Services Directors Meeting

3. External Activities

- American Bar Association Dispute Resolution Section Ombuds Committee
- East Coast Ombuds Group (conveners and participants)
- International Ombudsman Association Conference (presenter)

Judi Segall, Ombudsperson

Nicholas Diehl, Ombudsperson