

Ombuds Office

The MIT Ombuds Office serves as a neutral, confidential, independent, and informal resource for the diverse MIT community. Ombuds help resolve and manage conflict and encourage productive ways of communicating. The office advocates for a fair and effective conflict management system, recommending and supporting systemic changes to achieve this goal.

During academic year 2010, the office received, yet again, an increasing number of anonymous concerns; more groups; more multi-cohort, multi-generation, multi-ethnic, multi-issue concerns; issues involving more than one department, laboratory or center, or organization; and many concerns involving people who are not at MIT.

The Ombuds Office continued to pursue our longstanding goals: working to improve our effectiveness by communicating our roles and responsibilities more widely, providing support to the MIT conflict management system in collaboration with other parts of the system, and helping to improve MIT community members' abilities to prevent and deal with conflict. We have continued internal and external professional work with various new website materials, several articles, and many workshops and presentations.

The office received about 1,000 visitors, including faculty; support, service, administrative, and research staff; graduate and undergraduate students; postdocs; alumni; and non-MIT individuals. These visitors presented various concerns relating to nearly 600 people, and raised well over 5,000 different issues. Issues commonly raised included academic concerns, work and study conditions, performance and supervision, policies and procedures, personal and interpersonal concerns, concerns about various perceived transgressions, layoffs and terminations from MIT, requests for referrals, and consultations about how to deal with specific concerns.

The MIT Ombuds Office, like similar offices in other organizations, listened to concerns about values and ethics, such as bullying, harassment, and discrimination; academic integrity; mentoring; conflicts of interest; fear of retaliation and retaliation; fear of violence; intrusions on privacy; lying; defamation; theft; and stalking. We heard more concerns about stress in this time of internal reorganization and economic cutbacks, and more concerns about diversity and inclusion in staff and faculty ranks. We handled hundreds of queries about policies.

Ombuds staff continued to work with Graduate Student Council and Undergraduate Association members, colleagues in Human Resources, the Office of the Vice President and General Counsel, MIT Medical (including Mental Health), MIT Police, the Working Group on Support Staff Issues, the Office of the Dean for Graduate Education, the Office of the Dean for Student Life, the Office of the Dean for Undergraduate Education, the Office of Minority Education, and Lincoln Laboratory. We collaborated with other department and institute groups on mentoring, the role of "active bystanders," harassment, advisor/advisee relationships, research ethics, leadership skills, violence against women, Resources for Easing Friction and Stress programs, and networks such as Conexión.

Ombuds facilitated group sessions and provided training in conflict management, negotiation, diversity, and mediation for faculty, department heads, student leaders, affinity groups, and administrators. The sessions provided information on MIT's resources and focused on helping managers and supervisors improve conflict management skills. Ombuds staff participated as instructors, panelists, facilitators, and internal consultants at MIT orientations, activity midways, tutor training sessions, freshman seminars, Independent Activities Period courses, retreats, affinity groups, and dormitories, as well as at department, lab, and center meetings. Sessions dealt with the roles and responsibilities of members of the MIT community, including the roles of mentors and of active bystanders, discussion of policies and procedures, issues that may become a complaint, resources inside and outside MIT, and micro-inequities and micro-affirmations.

Externally, Ombuds staff designed and delivered training and participated in panels addressing the role of ombudspersons around the world sponsored by the International Ombudsman Association, the Association for Conflict Resolution, and the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources. The office continues to host the East Coast Ombuds Group bi-annual meetings. Ombuds staff continued to survey ombuds worldwide, to make reports to the profession on new issues, to mentor new ombuds, and to provide guidance to organizations contemplating the establishment of an ombuds program. With colleagues, we continue writing about organizational ombudsmanry and conflict management systems while continuing to do research on dealing with and reporting unacceptable behavior.

Toni P. Robinson, Ombudsperson

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More information about the Ombuds Office can be found at <http://web.mit.edu/ombud/>.