

Ombuds Office

The [MIT Ombuds Office](#) serves as a neutral, confidential, independent, and informal resource for the diverse MIT community. Ombuds help people to understand, 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 toward this goal.

During AY2013, the Ombuds Office continued with its mission to help improve MIT community members' abilities to prevent and deal with conflict, to provide support to the MIT conflict management system in collaboration with all the other elements of the system, and to improve the office's effectiveness by communicating its roles and responsibilities more widely. The office continued internal and external professional work: writing new material, writing articles, conducting workshops, and making many presentations.

During the past year, the office received a significant number of anonymous concerns from a variety of individuals and groups. It handled many multicohort, multigeneration, and multiethnic concerns. The office handled very complex concerns that involved many different issues; cases involving more than one department, laboratory, center, or organization; and concerns involving non-MIT individuals. Some people raised concerns about what they believed to be malicious harm by others. Some people discussed what appeared to them to be inadequate or unfair responses to concerns that they or others had raised.

The Ombuds Office received approximately 800 visitors. We describe these individuals as "visitors" to emphasize the neutrality of the office. These visitors included members of the faculty; support, service, administrative, and research staff; graduate and undergraduate students; postdocs; alumni; and non-MIT individuals. Visitors discussed concerns involving a total of nearly 500 people. Many visitors simply explored their own concerns rather than complaining about other people.

Collectively our visitors raised nearly 3,800 different issues. These included academic and research concerns, work and study conditions, performance and supervision practices, personal and interpersonal problems, concerns about various perceived transgressions, fear of layoffs and terminations from MIT, requests for referrals, and clarification of policies and procedures. There were many consultations about dealing with specific situations. A few cases involved dozens of contacts and meetings over many months.

The MIT Ombuds Office, like ombuds offices in other organizations, listened to a wide variety of concerns about values and ethics, including bullying, harassment, discrimination, academic and research integrity, intellectual property, mentoring, conflicts of interest, retaliation and fear of retaliation, safety and fear of violence, intrusions of privacy, lying, defamation, theft, destruction of personal or research-related property, and poor service. As in the past, we heard concerns about stress; many of these concerns were related to reorganization, economic cutbacks, new opportunities,

diversity and inclusion. As in the past, we handled many queries about policies and heard suggestions for changes to the system. Ombuds also heard commendations about the services of many MIT faculty and staff members, postdocs, and students. Finally, this year brought acute grief and stress about the campus gunman hoax incident, the Boston Marathon bombings, and the murder of MIT police officer Sean Collier.

Ombuds staff continued to collaborate with members of the Graduate Student Council (including Graduate School 101/102, an orientation program sponsored by the GSC) and the Undergraduate Association, as well as colleagues in the Audit Division; Environment, Health, and Safety Headquarters Office (and other MIT compliance offices); Haystack Observatory; the Human Resources Department (including Employee Resource Groups); the International Scholars Office; Lincoln Laboratory (including the Circle Mentoring program); MIT Medical (including Mental Health and Counseling); MIT Police; various offices of the MIT Sloan School of Management; the Office of the Dean for Graduate Education; the Office of the Dean for Student Life (including the Office of Student Citizenship, LBGTQ@MIT, and Religious Life); the Office of the Dean for Undergraduate Education (including the Office of Minority Education and the Office of Undergraduate Advising and Academic Programming); the Office of the Vice President and General Counsel; and the Working Group on Support Staff Issues. Over the course of the year, Ombuds staff attended several Human Resources-sponsored courses.

Ombuds staff met regularly with MIT senior officers, administrative and academic department heads, and student groups. We collaborated with department and Institute groups on many topics, including advisor/advisee relationships, harassment, leadership skills, mentoring and inclusion, micro-affirmations and “positivity,” MIT’s conflict management system, research ethics, start-up companies, entrepreneurship, violence against women, and how to be an “active bystander.” We worked together with Graduate Women at MIT, the Women’s Advisory Group, Resources for Easing Friction and Stress, and ConflictResolution@MIT. We helped with specific initiatives including those related to Title IX, the Black History Project, the Diversity Summit, the MIT Skoltech Initiative, and the development of Room 8-219 as the MIT One Community Room. We joined a number of meetings to discuss faculty recruitment. We also met with many people about the 2013 campus gunman hoax, the Boston Marathon bombings, and the murder of MIT police officer Sean Collier.

Ombuds facilitated group sessions and provided training in conflict management, diversity and inclusion, negotiation, and mediation—for faculty, department heads, student leaders, affinity groups, and administrators. The sessions provided information on MIT’s many resources, and focused on helping managers, supervisors, and peers to improve specific 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 dormitory discussions, 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. Discussions focused on policies and procedures, issues that may evolve into complaints, resources both inside and outside of MIT, and micro-inequities and micro-affirmations.

Externally, Ombuds staff designed and delivered training and participated in panels and teleconferences addressing the role of ombudspersons around the world, sponsored by the International Ombudsman Association and various other universities. The office hosted the East Coast Ombuds Group biannual meetings. Ombuds staff continued to help survey ombuds worldwide, to make reports to the profession on new issues, to mentor new ombuds, to serve on the *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association* editorial board, to provide guidance to organizations who may wish to establish an ombuds program, and to make occasional presentations at other organizations. Together with colleagues, we write about organizational ombudsmanry and conflict management systems, and continue research on “dealing with and reporting unacceptable behavior,” and on bystander behavior.

Toni P. Robinson
Ombudsperson
Special Assistant to the President

Mary P. Rowe
Ombudsperson
Special Assistant to the President