

Ombuds Office

The MIT Ombuds Office serves as a neutral, confidential, independent, and informal resource to the diverse MIT community. The Office helps in resolving and managing conflict and encourages productive ways of communicating. It advocates for a fair and effective conflict management system, and recommends and supports systemic changes to achieve this goal.

The Office heard an unusual number of anonymous concerns; more multi-cohort, multi-generation, multi-ethnic, multi-issue concerns; issues that involved more than one department, laboratory or center; and more from people away from the Institute.

During AY2007, the Ombuds Office continued with the goals of its Operations Plan: (1) working to improve the effectiveness of the Office; (2) communicating the roles and responsibilities of the Office more widely; (3) providing support to the MIT conflict management system in collaboration with the other elements of the system; and (4) helping to improve the abilities of members of the MIT community to prevent, and deal with conflict. We have extended the outreach of our website with new resource materials, including “How Faculty Can Effectively Handle Student Complaints” and “Micro-Affirmations & Micro-Inequities.”

The Ombuds Office received nearly 900 callers and visitors including faculty; support, service, administrative, and research staff; graduate and undergraduate students; postdocs; alumni, and other non-MIT individuals. Common issues included academic concerns, conditions of work and study, performance and supervision, policies and procedures, personal and interpersonal concerns, concerns about various perceived transgressions, separations and terminations from MIT, requests for referrals, and consultations about how to deal with a specific concern.

The MIT Ombuds Office, like those in many other organizations, received concerns about values and ethics, such as bullying, harassment, and discrimination, academic integrity, mentoring, conflicts of interest, fear of retaliation and retaliation, threats of violence, intrusions on privacy, lying, defamation, theft, and misuse of alcohol. We heard many concerns about stress and fear in this time of considerable reorganization.

Ombuds staff collaborated with Graduate Student Council and Undergraduate Association officers, colleagues in Human Resources, the Office of the Vice President and General Counsel, MIT Medical, MIT Police, the Working Group on Support Staff Issues, the Graduate Students Office, the Dean for Student Life, the Dean for Undergraduate Education, the Office of Minority Education, and Lincoln Laboratory, as well as many department and school groups on such issues as harassment, advisor-advisee relationships, research ethics, leadership skills, violence against women, and Resources for Easing Friction and Stress (REFs) programs. We worked with various networks, including the Black Women’s Alliance and Conexión.

Ombuds facilitated group sessions, and provided training in conflict management, negotiation, diversity, and mediation for faculty, department heads, student leaders,

and administrators. The sessions provided information on MIT's resources, and focused on helping managers and supervisors improve complaint-handling 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, dormitories, and department, lab, and center meetings. Sessions dealt with the roles and responsibilities of members of the MIT community, issues that may become a complaint, discussion of policies and procedures, resources inside and outside MIT, and improving conflict management skills.

Externally, Ombuds staff designed and delivered training, and participated on panels about the role of ombudspersons around the world, with the International Ombudsman Association, the Program on Negotiation, YearUp, and other forums. We continue to host the East Coast Ombuds Group. Ombuds staff continued to survey ombuds worldwide and to make reports to the profession on new problems. Ombuds continue to mentor new ombuds, and provide guidance to organizations contemplating establishing ombuds programs. We continue writing with other ombuds about conflict management systems, and are continuing research on dealing with—and reporting—unacceptable behavior.

Toni P. Robinson, Ombudsperson

Mary P. Rowe, Ombudsperson and Special Assistant to the President

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