

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 AY2009, the Office received 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 more concerns from and about people who are not at MIT.

The Ombuds Office continued with longstanding goals: working to improve its effectiveness by communicating its roles and responsibilities more widely, providing support to the MIT conflict management system in collaboration with other elements 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 a new brochure, various new website materials, several articles, and many workshops and presentations.

The Office received about 950 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 500 people, and raised well over 4,000 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 dean for graduate education, the dean for student life, the dean for undergraduate education, the Office of Minority Education, and Lincoln Laboratory. We collaborated with department and Institute groups on harassment, advisor/advisee relationships, research ethics, leadership skills, violence against women, Resources for Easing Friction and Stress (REFs) programs, and with 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, 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 bystanders; discussion of policies and procedures; issues that may become a complaint; resources inside and outside MIT; micro-inequities and micro-affirmations; and improving conflict management skills.

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, the Connect Chairs Public Higher Education Partnership, and in other forums. The Office continues to host the East Coast Ombuds Group. 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. We continue writing, with colleagues, about organizational ombudsmanry and about conflict management systems. We continue 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/>.