

MIT Ombuds Office

This past year marked the 38th academic year that the [MIT Ombuds Office](#) has been in operation. The Ombuds Office continues to pursue its long-standing mission to help improve MIT community members' ability to manage and resolve conflict constructively; provide support to the larger system of MIT conflict management resources; identify systemic issues for the Institute; and continue to effectively communicate the role and resources the Ombuds Office brings to the entire MIT community.

The Ombuds Office offers a versatile set of tools to enable the Institute community to:

- Constructively manage individual concerns or conflicts, or both, as they arise
- Identify broader systemic areas of concern and strategies for addressing them
- Support Institute values and principles that foster an increasingly collaborative and supportive community

Conflict is an inherent, and many would suggest necessary, part of human interaction and dynamic organizations. When handled well, conflict can be a catalyst for creativity and growth, but conflict can also be an inhibitor of collaboration when issues are not resolved appropriately.

Concerns typically emerge around issues related to organizational change; interpersonal dynamics; intercultural differences; scientific disagreements; and Institute policies and procedures. 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.

Consistent with requisite International Ombudsman Association (IOA) Standards of Practice, the MIT 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 office is, however, an advocate for fair processes. The office operates within the ethical standards set forth by IOA. This means that the MIT ombudspersons will act in accordance with the principles mandated by the IOA: independence, neutrality and impartiality, confidentiality, and informality.

International Ombudsman Association Ethical Principles

Independence

The Ombudsman is independent in structure, function, and appearance to the highest degree possible within the organization.

Neutrality and Impartiality

The Ombudsman, 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 Ombudsman 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 Ombudsman, as an informal resource, does not participate in any formal adjudicative or administrative procedure related to concerns brought to his/her attention.

From the [International Ombudsman Association](#).

Overview

There are some types of issues that are consistent year over year that predictably emerge when people work together, such as tensions between supervisors and supervisees or advisors and students. There are also issues that emerge that are symptomatic of the environment in which we operate.

In academic year 2018 the Ombuds Office has noted an especially high rate of anxiety related to change within the Institute and on a national political level. Uncertainty in the greater society manifests in how people engage with each other and the ability to function well with concerns about changes to legal status or funding sources, for example.

Casework

In AY2018 the Ombuds Office handled 372 cases. A case is defined as an issue or inquiry brought to the attention of the 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. Most cases require several points of contact with the visitor(s), such as multiple meetings or telephone contacts, numerous contacts with second or third parties involved in a particular concern, or both. The majority of consultations with the office occur in private meetings, with a smaller percentage occurring over the telephone. 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 (a month or more) 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 office uses this data to inform our practice in several ways. The data assists us in handling disputes and assessing

where we need to focus outreach efforts. Data collection also enables the office to assess organizational trends and to provide aggregated, systematic feedback when appropriate.

Service Utilization Data

	AY2017	AY2018
Cases	400	374
Visitors	420	378
Female Visitors	65%	62%
Male Visitors	35%	38%
Faculty (Including Lecturers)	14%	13%
Administrative and Support Staff	49%	47%
Graduate Students, Postdocs, and Research Staff	31%	18%
Undergraduate Students	5%	5%
Alumni*	-	2%

*Data not collected in AY2017

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, postdocs 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 office during AY2018.

- Career/Workplace: (75%)
 - Conflict with supervisor
 - Personnel issues/career development
 - Salary/Compensation
 - Ethics/Conflict of interest
 - Medical/Mental health
 - Departmental/Organizational change
 - Equity/Harassment/Discrimination
 - Immigration/Visa status
- Academic/Course-related: (25%)
 - Conflict with advisor/principal investigator
 - Academic integrity/authorship
 - Intellectual property/conflict of interest
 - Medical/Mental health
 - Faculty/Student conflict
 - Peer conflict
 - Immigration/Visa status

Education, Training, and Outreach Activities

In addition to the core work of individual consultations and facilitated conversations, the MIT ombudspersons participate in a number of other activities to give presentations on conflict resolution; facilitate group meetings; or participate as a nonvoting member of a task force. While time intensive, these efforts are critical to maintain a requisite measure of engagement and awareness. In addition, the ombudspersons facilitated group workshops and trainings for faculty, department heads, employee resource groups, student leadership, and postdocs in conflict management, constructive communication, mediation, and negotiation.

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, a seminal professional development meeting of approximately 50 academic, corporate, and government ombudspersons and other dispute resolution professionals from the greater Northeast region.

Objectives for AY2019 include continuing to focus on providing coaching to managers to help resolve issues prior to escalation and to share additional observations on systemic issues that might be addressed to support the Institute.

Training and Consultation

- Office of Minority Education Interphase Edge Program: trainer
- Disability Employee Resource Group Committee: consultant
- Lincoln Lab Safe Workplace Workshop: presenter
- Division of Student Life MedLinks Workshop: presenter
- MIT Press Staff Diversity Workshop: presenter
- Graduate Women at MIT Title IX Program: panelist
- Electrical Engineering and Computer Science Graduate Student Conflict Management Seminar: presenter
- Postdoctoral Association Conflict Management Training Workshop: presenter
- Sloan School Mentoring Workshop: presenter
- Institute for Data, Systems and Society Staff Development Workshop: presenter
- Institute Resources for Easing Friction and Stress Conflict Management Workshop: presenter
- Chemistry, Chemical Engineering, and Electrical Engineering and Computer Science Resources for Easing Friction and Stress Workshop: trainer
- Lincoln Lab Staff Circle Mentoring Workshop: trainer
- Mind, Hand, Heart Pilot Program for Department Support: consultant
- Lincoln Lab Ombuds Program Mentors
- Working Group for Support Staff resource: consultant

- Work-Life/Earth, Atmosphere and Planetary Sciences Advisory Committee: member
- All-Gender Restrooms Project Advisory Committee: member
- Human Resource Officers Quarterly Meetings
- Alignment Group: members

MIT Community Outreach

- Women's Advisory Group Convener (quarterly meetings)
- Office of Graduate Education Diversity Orientation
- Graduate Student Council Fair
- MIT Community Fair Participants
- Health Sciences and Technology PhD Orientation
- Graduate Women at MIT Orientation
- Office of Minority Education
- International Scholars Office Orientation
- International Students Office Orientation
- Faculty Policy Committee
- School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Faculty Meeting
- Random Acts of Kindness Week
- Executive Vice President Senior Management Team Meeting
- Graduate Student Seminar

Professional Development

- Cultural Competency Webinar and Workshop
- Race Forward Training
- East Coast Ombuds Group: conveners and participants
- American Bar Association Dispute Resolution Section Ombuds Committee
- American Bar Association Dispute Resolution Section Conference
- International Ombudsman Association Professional Development Committee
- International Ombudsman Association Foundations Course: lead faculty
- International Ombudsman Association Conference: presenter
- Tufts Fletcher School: guest speaker
- New School Change Management Workshop

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