

## **“How Faculty Can Effectively Handle Student Complaints”**

In addition to serving as researchers, educators, advisors, mentors and managers, MIT faculty serve as complaint handlers to students, staff, post docs, and others within the MIT community. With this responsibility comes the need to be aware of the host of resources within the Institute that are available to assist them. This handout offers supplemental information about resources that faculty as managers may want to add to their list of resources when complaints are brought to them.

### **I. MIT Community Standards of Behavior**

Violations and perceived violations of community standards of behavior cause a great deal of pain and uncertainty and create risks to individuals and to the entire MIT community. They can take a considerable amount of time, with high emotional and financial costs for those involved. There is NO perfect way to deal with complaints AFTER the fact. The goal should be to try to promote prevention or at least early intervention by educating faculty and other managers about good practices and available resources for dealing with complaints, e.g.,

- a. Active bystanders help to uphold community standards (<http://web.mit.edu/bystanders/>)
- b. Local DLC Heads are seen as critical to whether people will act or come forward
- c. Faculty Internal Mediators (FIMs) and faculty who advise REFS provide support to faculty and graduate students respectively. Some DLCs have varying degrees of such programs. Some DLCs are establishing or considering establishing such programs.
- d. Resources for Easing Friction & Stress (REFS) programs for graduate students have proven helpful to graduate students who are stressed by conflict or facing other dilemmas and want to discuss their issues with a peer. Chemistry, EECS, Physics, and Biology have REFS programs. MechE and other departments are also establishing or considering establishing REFS programs.

### **II. Role of Faculty as Complaint Handlers**

- a. Convince people that the DLC managers want to know about unacceptable behavior so it can be prevented/stopped
- b. Ensure that policies/resources are well known and easy to access

- c. Know that complainant and complaint handler have a choice of options
- d. Mitigate bad consequences if possible
- e. Opt for good consequences when possible
- f. Work to see that people will be appropriately supported
- g. Work to see that people will be appropriately held accountable
- h. Take timely action, be fair to all parties, and maintain privacy when possible

**III. Ways to Prevent Problems and Prepare for Addressing Complaints**

- a. Participate in complaint handlers' training, e.g., dealing with conflict, sexual & other harassment prevention training, supervisory training, bystander training, mediation training (mediation coordinator: Ruthy Rosenberg (<http://web.mit.edu/mediation/resources.html>), x.88423
- b. Establish FIMS and REFS programs with a common charge and common training
- c. Provide support within the DLC such as talking about the program(s)
- d. Share best practices with each other
- e. Implement relevant 2004 GSC recommendations, e.g., posting list of resources on DLC bulletin boards
- f. Hyper-link documents & websites on ethics, bystanders, harassment, etc. for easy access when needed
- g. Brainstorm options with an Ombud or other appropriate resource contact

**IV. Ombuds Office (<http://web.mit.edu/ombud>), x. 35921**

- a. Neutral, confidential, informal, independent complaint handlers; design and conduct workshops on effective communication, dealing with conflict, harassment, discrimination

- b. Listen to perceptions, concerns, allegations from faculty, all staff, students, post docs, their relatives, alums, visitors to campus, contractors, prospective employees
- c. Help brainstorm options, evaluate pros and cons of options
- d. Train, facilitate, mediate, coach one-on-one and groups on how to achieve more constructive results
- e. Identify policies, procedures, past practices to help in dealing with issues
- f. Do not conduct formal investigations, adjudicate, arbitrate, keep records, accept notice for MIT, or serve as witnesses in administrative or legal proceedings at the Institute or elsewhere

**V. Resource Documents for Faculty Complaint Handlers**

- a. Faculty are Managers

Policies & Procedures (P&P) 7.3 – Responsibilities of Supervisors

- b. Policies, procedures, rules, guidelines, etc.:

Academic Integrity, A Handbook for Students  
Discuss/Surface a Concern  
Fear of Violence in the Workplace (<http://web.mit.edu/bsat/>)  
Fostering Academic Integrity (Widnall Report)  
Guidelines for Raising Complaints about Harassment (12/07)  
MIT Student Life Handbook  
Ombuds Terms of Reference  
Ombuds FAQ sheet  
Tips for Talking to Someone about a Complaint  
Sloan Professional Standards  
When People See Unacceptable Behavior  
P&P 4.4 – Conflict of Interest  
P&P 4.5 – Outside Professional Activities  
P&P 9.1 – Personal Conduct & Responsibility Toward Students & Employees  
P&P 9.4 – Policy on Racist Behavior  
P&P 9.5 – Policy on Harassment  
P&P 9.6 – Complaint & Grievance Procedures  
P&P 10.1 – Dealing with Academic Misconduct in Research & Scholarship  
P&P 10.2 – Dealing with Student Academic Dishonesty

P&P 14.3 –Research on Human Subjects  
P&P 14.4 – Office of Sponsored Programs  
Rules & Regulations (R&R) of the Faculty – 1.73.5 Committee  
on Academic Performance  
R&R of the Faculty – 1.73.7 Committee on Discipline  
R&R of the Faculty – 2.90 Discipline, 2.91 – Authority of  
Instructor