

## MIT Ombuds Office 2023-2024 Report to the President

### **Overview**

This report covers the 44th academic year (AY2024) the MIT Ombuds Office has been in operation to support the MIT Community. The service remains an integral resource for people who are seeking ways to resolve concerns constructively and navigate challenges in a dynamic time and to provide feedback to strengthen the Institute.

AY2024 was another year of significant change for the Institute in multiple ways. Influences external to MIT continue to shape how people engage and influence their perceptions of stability, including the aftermath of the pandemic and continued political turmoil in the U.S. and beyond.

MIT reached some notable milestones, including the first full year of Dr. Kornbluth's presidency and the first year of operation for the newly established graduate student union. At the same time, the community continued to struggle with questions around free expression and respectful dialogue.

### **Ombuds Office Principles**

Consistent with requisite International Ombudsman Association (IOA) Standards of Practice, the Ombuds Office serves as a confidential, independent, informal and neutral resource for all cohorts of the MIT community (i.e., undergraduate students, graduate students, post-doctoral fellows and associates, support and operational staff, administrative staff, faculty, lecturers, research staff, alumni, affiliates and MIT community members at large).

In an affirmation of the International Ombuds Association standards of practice, in April 2024 the U.S. Department of Education formally recognized that Organizational Ombuds are designated as "confidential employees" for purposes of Title IX regulations.

The Ombudsperson is neither an advocate for the individual visitor, nor an advocate for management. The Ombuds Office is however an advocate for fair processes. The Ombuds Office operates within the ethical standards set forth by IOA:

#### *Independence*

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

#### *Neutrality and Impartiality*

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

Source: Ethical Principles of the International Ombuds Association, [www.ombudsassociation.org](http://www.ombudsassociation.org)

## **Conflict Management at MIT**

Conflict is an inherent, and necessary part of human interaction and knowledge advancement and a critical element of cultural and organizational change. When handled well, conflict can be a catalyst for creativity and growth, strengthening both interpersonal and institutional bonds. The MIT Ombuds Office helps people find ways to engage in constructive conflict management while maximizing the potential for growth and positive change. Serving as a no barriers point of contact for ALL members of the MIT community can help people navigate the challenges noted above.

Concerns typically raised to the Ombuds Office relate to organizational change; interpersonal dynamics; intercultural differences; scientific disagreements; and Institute policies and procedures. Providing a point of contact and thought partnership to explore constructive communication and issue resolution has been more important than ever in the current environment. The MIT Ombudspersons help clarify issues, explore options and assess where the most constructive outcomes might lie. In addition to individual consultations, we offer coaching, facilitation, shuttle diplomacy or consultation with others to help foster mutually acceptable outcomes.

## **Emerging Issues**

The Ombuds Office continues to have a consistent level of use and the general basis for concerns remains similar to previous years. At the same time, our observation is that changes on a macro level, frequently external to MIT, are having an increasingly significant impact on how people within the MIT community relate to each other.

Polarization, most notably along political lines and related to the conflict in the Middle East, impacts both how people interact with each other and sometimes disengage from constructive communication. In a setting in which dialogue and differing ideas should be welcomed, we frequently see absolutism and a lack of curiosity and respect for people with different views.

Vocal disagreements are easily identified, but the Ombuds Office also hears from people who do not feel comfortable expressing opinions and retreat from participating in discussions for fear of offending others. Isolation reduces exploration of views related to external social change and results in fewer spontaneous opportunities for interactions about research.

While technology connects people in many ways, it can also enable avoidance of engagement, especially around difficult issues. Sometimes that results in lost opportunities for people to learn from each other and allows conflicts to fester and potentially escalate.

Many efforts are being made at MIT to encourage dialogue and find the sometimes difficult balance between free expression and respectful exchanges. The Ombuds Office plays the important role of providing consultation to MIT community members to help support constructive engagement that advances mutual understanding and strengthens the social fabric.

### **Academic Year 2024 Casework**

In AY2024 the Ombuds Office handled 357 cases. A “case” is defined as an issue or inquiry brought to the attention of the Ombuds 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); multiple meetings or conversations, and/or numerous contacts with second or third parties involved in a particular concern. The majority of consultations with the Ombuds Office this past year occurred via Zoom, but the office also continued to offer in-person and phone meetings to ensure that there are as few barriers to contacting the office as possible. The Office responds very promptly to inquiries (usually within hours) and most cases were resolved or “closed” in a relatively brief time (three weeks or less), others, possibly with greater complexity, multiple parties, or evolving circumstances required an extended period of time 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 Ombuds 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 Ombuds Office to assess

organizational trends and to provide aggregated systemic feedback when appropriate.

<b>Cases</b>	<b>357</b>
Female Visitors	59%
Male Visitors	39%
Gender Queer/Gender Nonconforming/Gender Fluid	1%
Administrative, Research and Support Staff	47%
Graduate Students and Post Docs	22%
Faculty (including lecturers and instructors)	13%
Post Doc Fellows and Associates	6%
Undergraduates	5%
Operations/Facilities/Service Staff	1%
Lincoln Lab	2%
Alumni	2%
Other (Affiliates, Contractors, Temps, non-MIT)	2%

### **Issues by Type**

Issues brought to the Ombuds Office involve all cohorts and areas of the Institute. The categorization of issues represents a clustering of a broader range of concerns that students, faculty, post-doctoral fellows 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 Ombuds Office during AY2024.

#### Career/Workplace Issues:

- Conflict with Supervisor: Performance Review
- Supervisory Deficit and Mentoring
- Conflict within DLC: Department Organizational Change
- Conflict with Administrative Staff: Professional Conduct
- Issues with Institute Policies

#### Faculty Issues:

- Professional Conduct
- Conflict with Graduate Student: student conduct non-academic
- Proactive Consultation
- Issues with Institute Policies

#### Academic/Course Related Issues:

- Conflict with Advisor/PI: communication, intellectual property & authorship
- Mentoring/Advisory/Supervisory Deficit
- Conflict with Faculty: harassment and inappropriate behavior

- Conflict with Peer or Colleague: communication, student non-academic conduct

## **Academic Year 2024 Education/Training/Outreach Activities**

In addition to the core work of individual consultations and facilitated conversations, the MIT Ombudspersons continued to provide a range of workshops, trainings and facilitated discussions on constructive conflict management, organizational development, group dynamics and effective communication. These efforts allow the Ombuds Office to maintain a requisite measure of engagement with the community at large as well as providing a valued resource to support positive change, growth and resiliency throughout the Institute. These efforts proved even more valuable during this incredibly challenging year. The training and educational activities listed below included over 969 staff, faculty and student participants.

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 bi-annual East Coast Ombuds Group (ECOG), a seminal professional development meeting of approximately 60 academic, corporate and government ombudsmen and other dispute resolution professionals from the greater Northeast region.

### **I. MIT Training and Consultation**

Academic Council – Conflict Management Resources  
 Institute REFs Conflict Management Workshop  
 CSAIL REFS Workshop  
 SLOAN Resource Fair  
 Lincoln Lab Ombuds Program Support  
 Working Group for Support Staff resource  
 Work-Life Advisory Committee  
 Post Doc Resource Fair  
 Human Resource Leadership Meetings  
 Center for Work-Life Team Workshop  
 Human Resources Strategic Talent Management  
 Risk Management Quarterly Consultation  
 Plasma Science Fusion Center Grad Resource Panel

### **II. MIT Community Engagement**

Women’s Advisory Group Convener (quarterly meetings)  
 Office of Graduate Education Diversity Orientation  
 Graduate Student Council Orientation Fair  
 MIT Community Fair Participants  
 Health Sciences and Technology PhD Orientation  
 Graduate Women at MIT Orientation  
 Random Acts of Kindness Week Participant  
 WHOI-MIT Program Orientation  
 Post Doc Resource Fair

SAP/BAC Greater Presidents Office Steering Team Member  
Interphase Edge/23 Resource Fair

**III. External Activities**

American Bar Association Dispute Resolution Section Ombuds Committee  
East Coast Ombuds Group (conveners/participants)  
International Ombudsman Association Conference  
International Labor Organization – Managing Employment Disputes Effectively  
(presenter)  
California Caucus of College and University Ombuds (participant)  
Ombuds Academy (participants)

For more information about the Ombuds Office see [hombudsoffice.mit.edu](http://hombudsoffice.mit.edu)

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