

The Status of an Ombudsperson at WHOI: Information Sheet

Summer 2020 - Workplace Climate Committee Co-Chairs

Introduction:

WHOI is an environment where people are particularly passionate to their science and the ocean. In such an environment, workplace conflicts inevitably arise. While most conflicts are minor, having an institutional capacity to support employees and students through these difficult situations by having someone available for confidential conversations about the problem, helping them to be aware of options available to them, and if requested providing mediation efforts can be beneficial to maintaining a positive workplace climate. This venue for dialogue can prevent escalation of conflicts help avoid costly lawsuits, and be part of a portfolio of employee support in collaboration with the Human Resources office. A request to reinstate the Ombudsperson position at WHOI was a message clearly present in the results of the Institutional Workplace Climate Survey, and is also a frequent and consistent request made to the WCC committee, with support particularly strong among technical and administrative staff. With respect to recent events, with the challenges associated with COVID, we have heard increased from WHOI employees there is an increased need for an Ombuds office. Also with regards to the important efforts and current momentum to increase diversity and inclusion within WHOI and Ocean Sciences, an Ombuds presence can contribute to the inclusive environment and support minority employees, indeed Ombuds offices are often found within the Diversity and Inclusion umbrella of efforts within Universities.

During the past year the WCC Co-Chairs have conducted an information gathering effort, meeting with the department chairs, WHOI's former Ombudsperson (Karen Rauss), MIT's Ombudsperson (Judi Segall), Technical staff committee, Scientific Staff committee (SciSec), Kathi Benjamin, Meg Tivey, Chris Land, Rick Murray and Mark Abbott. This document briefly describes the results of information gathering conducted by the WCC to help promote conversation about this topic within the institution.

- What is an “Organizational Ombudsperson” (also often called “Ombudsman” or “Ombuds”)? From the International Ombudsman Association: An Ombudsperson is “a designated neutral who is appointed or employed by an organization to facilitate the informal resolution of concerns of employees, managers, students and, sometimes, external clients of the organization.”
- An Ombudsperson is available to have confidential conversations with individuals regarding workplace climate concerns, and to mediate conflicts between individuals. An Ombudsperson promotes constructive conflict management, providing an alternate point of entry for individuals needing to discuss a problem in the workplace environment. At MIT and with Karen Rauss previously at WHOI, conflicts were both academic as well as workplace climate-related.
- Can Ombuds offices be confidential? Organizations such as MIT and University of Oregon have policies that allow confidential conversations, with the exception of cases in which serious health or harm to others is possible.

- Benefit to the Institution: An Ombuds office can “humanize” the institution, can have complementary and cooperative roles with Human Resources, and can provide feedback to institution leadership about emerging issues facing employees while maintaining confidentiality. We’ve heard that prospective students, postdocs, and hires often look at Institution workplace climate related efforts when making their decision to join WHOI.
- Ombuds offices are recommended as in Diversity and Inclusion efforts, as described by the recent report: “[What Works?: Evidence-based ideas to Increase Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Workplace](#)”, where a confidential grievances system avoids the backlash that can occur with formal grievances that have been observed to interrupt the careers of minority employees.
- History at WHOI: WHOI had an Ombudsperson (called “Ombudsman” at the time), Karen Rauss, for more than 20 years until her retirement around ~2006. Rauss was a part-time employee and offered confidential meetings to anyone in the institution.
- The MIT Ombuds Office: MIT has an Ombuds team that MIT-WHOI students currently utilize, and that had a working relationship with WHOI’s former Ombudsperson. The MIT Ombuds office has offered to assist WHOI in re-establishing an Ombuds office.
- An ombudsperson should be independent of Human Resources (answering directly to the Director).
- An ombudsperson should have the appropriate training and certifications for the position
- For more information: <https://www.ombudsassociation.org/ombuds-faq>