

Staff Grievance Process

What is the Problem?

As identified by the MechE Staff Committee and MechE DEI Task Force, the current staff grievance process that is in place for MechE staff is lacking in resolution, action, and support.

In late 2019 at an MIT instituted-wide Town Hall, the way that staff are sometimes mis-treated by Faculty at MIT was brought to light and the now popular phrase was coined “Students, Faculty, furniture and then Staff”. This helped to shine a spotlight on the fact that as a whole at MIT, staff are not valued enough. This leads to an environment that can be stressful, inequitable and non-inclusive for staff, but some staff have thankfully had the courage to take a leap of faith and share some of their experiences with being mist-treated.

The current unofficial MechE staff grievance process includes reporting a grievance to our HR/AO staff. The problem is that although the AO is able to help lend a friendly ear, advice, and/or help document the issue, it most often does not result in any disciplinary action for Faculty, due to the perceived untouchability of Tenured Faculty and the staff’s ultimate fear of retaliation.

Proposed Reform/Solution Implementation

Committee for Staff Concerns (CSC)

We propose to have an official Faculty Committee that also includes several staff members, for staff grievances similar to the way that we have a committee for academic performance, discipline and a faculty complaint review panel. This committee could meet once a month or as needed to address escalated staff grievances, with the explicit purpose of advocating for staff. Here, it is important to note that there is currently no part of MIT policies/procedures or grievance infrastructure that (e.g., IDHR or the Ombuds office) that provide advocacy for staff. As a result, many staff concern go documented, but unaddressed, and eventually dwindle, which leaves staff members without any real recourse for corrective action. In this proposed committee, staff and faculty advocates would discuss and /vote on appropriate disciplinary action and help protect staff against retaliation.

External Consultant Investigation and Annual 360 Reviews Survey

We propose a process whereby, when staff grievances are voiced/filed, an external consulting company is engaged to handle the subsequent investigation and is tasked with fact finding, retaliation mitigation, and resolution recommendation. The purpose of having this portion of the process outsourced is to provide impartiality. It has been posited that when members within the department e.g., faculty, are charged with such tasks there is a natural bias toward protecting faculty, and giving faculty members “the benefit of the doubt”. Therefore, to ensure impartiality, an external consulting agency that specializes in HR and conflict resolution (i.e., not faculty) should be engaged to manage grievances. In addition, Ssimilar to how staff are reviewed on a yearly basis by Faculty, we propose tocould utilize an outside consultant or agency to conduct an unbiased 360 review for both staff & faculty. This would allow staff to provide an anonymous view of how they might be treated by Faculty and help ease staff fears of retaliation. This approach will also be helpful for faculty members, so they can obtain feedback, and adjust/improve their interactions with staff and colleagues. In this process, staff would not only review their direct supervising Faculty but also any/all Faculty they may have interactions with within the department.

Disciplinary Actions

The purpose of tenure is to provide faculty with intellectual and academic freedom and latitude to take risks and try new things. It is intended to encourage faculty to explore new ideas, without fear of losing their job i.e., a sort of academic immunity. This academic immunity, however, has sometimes translated to ethical immunity, as faculty members have engaged in abuses that involve students and staff that span a broad range. This has created the perception that tenured Faculty are in “Untouchable” no matter how severe of the crime or offenses they commit. This reality has created a very unhealthy power dynamic between Faculty and their staff/students.

Staff often feel that if they were to report a grievance that it wouldn't matter and/or have any effect on the Faculty's behavior or standing at the Institute. We propose that a list of escalating disciplinary actions that can include termination be explicitly included in the faculty handbook, and that a new policy be enacted that provides the CSC (i.e., not only the department head), with the ability to execute consequences. Spreading this power to the CSC would help alleviate fear and staff's hesitations of reporting and/or continuing to put up with being mis-treated in order to keep their jobs. Suggested disciplinary actions include losing staff admin support, suspending the ability to use discretionary funds, decreased access to resources such as RAS for funding proposals, increased overhead on grants, limits on the number of research staff, students or postdocs allowed.

Metrics to Track

- Anonymous staff satisfaction surveys or other anonymous feedback submissions. Time could also be dedicated at a Town Hall or Staff Meeting to discuss how any newly implemented solutions/strategies are going and if they are successful from a staff perspective.
- Track staff retention rates and compare to historical numbers. We hope to see staff retention increased as staff are more satisfied with their jobs.
- 360 Review responses
- External consultant company summary reports
- Number of faculty cited with disciplinary actions
- Number of staff grievances reported
- Number of staff grievances acted upon
- Staff exit interviews

Cost Estimates

The Faculty Committee for Staff would not have a direct monetary cost, but it is recommended that the staff participants be compensated, so that their participation is not impeded by their normal duties. There would be a time cost for participants. This could be included as part of their “Departmental Service” part of their job.

The 360 Reviews would have a cost to hire an outside agency to conduct but I do not have any estimates.

Consequences for Tenured Faculty save money by restricting resources from faculty whose behavior creates a negative environment in Mechanical Engineering. The saved money could be used for more DEI Initiatives.