

Year 2 Public Description of Work for Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education

MIT

Guaranteed Transitional Support Program

Relevant Rubric Area(s):

This program applies to:

- Prevention (*Practices to improve retention*); and
- Remediation (*Preventing retaliation; Reintegration strategies and programs; Reducing power differentials; and Other efforts to remediate the harm of sexual harassment and/or support those that experience sexual harassment*)

Description of Work:

The purpose or goals of the guaranteed transitional support program are interconnected. **The program aims to support graduate students through the entirety of their academic development and degree program and respond to challenges identified by the 2018 NASEM Report; recommendations from MIT's NASEM Academic and Organizational Relationship (AOR) working group; and concerns expressed by graduate student leaders.** A primary objective is to remove barriers to changing research advisors or groups because we do not want students in difficult situations to worry about their financial security or the threat of retaliation. As the policy clearly states, "The guarantee of transitional support will empower students to more freely exercise autonomy over decisions that will deeply impact their health and wellbeing, research progress and productivity, and future career after leaving MIT."

The work to develop this program is occurring in two phases. **Phase 1, which went into effect in the Spring 2021 semester after extensive consultation during the Fall 2020 term with a large cross section of student leaders, faculty, and staff,** is focused on providing guaranteed transitional support for graduate students who wish to switch advisors or research groups for unhealthy reasons, such as experiencing bias, discrimination, harassment, or other violations of MIT policies. Students may also turn to this program if they are encountering a conflict they cannot resolve. Students in either of these situations will be assisted by **new department-level and central resources – a Transition Support Coordinator (TSC) –** and will be provided with one guaranteed semester of funding to support them through the transition to a new advisor or research group.

A Phase 2 working group comprised of graduate students, faculty, and staff is currently **exploring ways to assist with transitions related to students' evolution in research interests, changing research approaches, or mismatches in early group choices.** The Phase 2 working

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group is also charged with leveraging insights from Phase 1 to address problematic advising. **A key deliverable for Phase 2 is the development of a plan for tracking research advisor switches and implementing responses for any troubling patterns or behaviors Phase 1 identifies.** The Phase 2 working group anticipates releasing their recommendations by the end of the Fall 2022 semester.

While guaranteed transitional support has been met with enthusiasm by the MIT community, and other schools have inquired about our efforts to implement this innovative practice, it is important to keep the following points in mind:

- Before the launch of this program in Spring 2021, several of the Institute’s academic programs already supported students in transitioning advisors or research groups for a variety of reasons, providing financial and non-financial support. The guaranteed transitional support program therefore marks **a new centrally coordinated effort** to ensure students understand the options available to them and receive support from dedicated staff – the TSC - along the way. **A central commitment to a well-defined, easily accessible, widely advertised, and sufficiently funded program that is available to all graduate students is what sets the new program apart from previous efforts.**
- It is also essential to note that MIT has made clear in its policy that **receiving transitional funding to change advisors or research groups should not be interpreted as the student or the advisor being at fault.** While all complaints will be taken seriously and reviewed closely, students do not have to provide proof of an unhealthy advising situation in order to receive funding.

The program is responsive to the following elements of the 2018 NASEM Report Rubric:

- **Prevention (*Practices to improve retention*):** By guaranteeing one semester of advisor-independent funding to PhD and SM/PhD students who feel they are in an unhealthy advising situation or facing a conflict they cannot resolve, students will be more likely to find an alternative situation that enables them to continue to pursue, and ultimately complete, their degree program.
- **Remediation (*Preventing retaliation*):** Per the guaranteed transitional funding policy, protecting students who are transitioning advisors or research groups from retaliation is a priority. Both the department and centrally-based TSC in the Office of Graduate Education (OGE) are responsible for working with departmental leadership to identify alternative letter writers or references if necessary. The TSC is also charged with ensuring students are aware of the Institute’s non-retaliation policies, and with checking in with the students periodically to see how the transition is going.
- **Remediation (*Reintegration strategies and programs*):** Guaranteed transitional support provides an avenue for students to manage their education and work over the long term, and to receive support along the way (see description of supports provided below). The TSC must report the transition to OGE so that MIT can identify patterns and

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trends. The TSC must also share any reports of harassment with the Institute Discrimination and Harassment Response Office (IDHR) so that appropriate follow up can occur.

- **Remediation (*Reducing power differentials*):** Phase 1 guaranteed transitional support is rooted in a funding model that is centrally-backed, either by the department, School/College, or Provost's Office. It is independent of funding decisions by individual PIs.
- **Remediation (*Strategies and services that provide support to the target – even if not confidential – and limit the damage from sexual harassment*):** The TSC is a new network of support that students wishing to switch advisors or research groups can consult at any time, for any reason. While not a confidential resource, the TSC is an advocate for students who helps them navigate the transitional support structure. The TSC is connected to OGE, IDHR, and other central and department-based resources, and is responsible for:
 - Performing an initial intake of the student's situation;
 - Helping students and their original PIs develop an "equitable agreement" for wrapping up and handing off duties;
 - Ensuring prompt transitional support payments so students do not miss a pay period;
 - Supporting smooth transitions, especially if students are transitioning between different academic programs; and
 - Providing protection from retaliation as stated above.

Website for further information (if applicable): <https://oge.mit.edu/finances/financial-assist/guaranteed-transitional-support/>

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