

# 2023 Public Description of Work for Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education

MIT

## Guaranteed Transitional Support Program – Phase 2

### Relevant Rubric Area(s):

- Prevention: DEI in Hiring, Promotion, Advancement, and Admissions
- Evaluation: Evaluating policies and procedures;
- Remediation
  - Reducing Power Differentials
  - Reintegration Strategies and Programs
  - Preventing Retaliation
  - Other Remediation

### Purpose and goals:

MIT is deeply committed to supporting graduate students throughout the entirety of their academic development and degree. The current Program for Guaranteed Transitional Support at MIT is part of the Institute's response to the NASEM 2018 report on gender and sexual harassment in academia. Effective Spring 2021, MIT created a new transitional support program for graduate students who wish to change research advisors or groups. The transitional support program has been developed in two steps: Phase I and Phase II. [MIT sent an Action Collaborative Description of Work about Phase I in 2021](#).

Phase I provides support to students who report being in unhealthy advising situations—where they may have experienced bias, harassment, or discrimination. The program enables them to switch research supervisors by providing a semester of funding and a designated person to help facilitate the transition. Transitional support consists of financial and non-financial resources, including the opportunity for students to work with a Transitional Support Coordinator (TSC) within their home department or outside of it; clear guidance for transitioning lab responsibilities; and guaranteed advisor-independent transitional funding for a semester. It is important to note that, prior to Phase I, most MIT departments already had programs in place for transitional support but many graduate students were not aware of these local resources.

The Phase II Working Group of administrators, faculty, and students, met throughout summer and fall 2021 and spring 2022, and included overlapping membership with an Ad Hoc Committee on Graduate Advising and Mentoring—two synergistic committees.

The Phase II Working Group was charged with **reviewing and assessing the implementation of Phase I and exploring ways to:**

1. Track transitions and identify a range of appropriate responses for troubling patterns and behaviors made evident by this program.

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2. Expand financial and non-financial forms of support for all transitions, for any reason (i.e., do not limit financial support to only unhealthy situations).
3. Fund the program, while ensuring equity across the Institute.

*Note that Phase II Transitional Funding at MIT relates to the Rubric areas in the following ways:*

- **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):** The report encourages improved communications about how seeking advice and help for transitional support will be kept confidential (i.e., the student decides what to divulge) and that retaliation for seeking transitional support will not be tolerated. It also offers some retaliation prevention examples:
  - o Notifying the Respondent that MIT prohibits retaliation and what could constitute acts of retaliation
  - o Monitoring future letters of recommendations
  - o Offering an alternative person to write letters of recommendation and/or serve as a reference
  - o Assigning an additional thesis advisor to co-chair the reporting party's academic work
  - o Altering work hours or assignments to minimize interaction
  - o No Contact Directive, if appropriate
- **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. The TSC must report the transition to OGE so that MIT can identify patterns and 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):** Guaranteed transitional support is rooted in a funding model that is both locally and 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 program provides support to graduate students who report experiencing an unhealthy advising situation by providing one semester of funding and a designated person to help the student find another lab or research advisor/project.

Building a plan for Phase II:

The Phase II Working Group recognized early on that it is essential to also consider strategies to improve graduate advising and mentoring holistically while developing the transitional support safety net. [MIT's Ad Hoc Committee on Graduate Advising and Mentoring](#) was engaged in this important work in parallel to the Phase II Working Group's efforts. We sent a [Description of Work](#)

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[in 2022 about graduate advising.](#)

The Phase II Working Group gathered quantitative data and anecdotal experiences, sought input from across the Institute, and met with various stakeholder groups. In May 2022, a draft slide-deck summary of its report was circulated across MIT to gather feedback that was then included in the final report.

**The four main recommendations for Phase II are:**

1. Continue to improve Phase I implementation;
2. Launch a Two-Part Transition Data Guidance System;
3. Develop a fundraising plan for transitional fellowships; and
4. Collaboratively explore local pilots for expanded transitional funding.

[Implementation and evaluation of Phase I:](#)

The Phase II Working Group reviewed the Phase I implementation, and found there was 100% compliance: Transition Support Coordinators (TSCs) were appointed in every department/program, the TSCs received training on student support and resources, and the TSC contact person had been advertised within each department. Additionally, the Office of Graduate Education (OGE) has a TSC available to any student who prefers to speak to someone outside their department. Students, department heads, and the TSCs provided overwhelmingly positive feedback about their experience with Phase I implementation.

The review of Phase I also revealed other important information. Approximately 50% of transitions involved financial support. Many students (75%) needed financial support in the form of bridge funding for stipend/tuition/insurance and many (25%) were offered support to secure a TA appointment for interim funding. All students needed non-financial support resources and coaching to know how to navigate the transition process between advisors.

The team also made specific recommendations for a new two-part Transition Data Guidance System.

### **1. Part One: Responding**

- a. The Transition Support Coordinator (TSC) will share information about each potentially unhealthy transition with the department head as soon as possible, while respecting the privacy of the student and advisor and the wishes of the student.
- b. The TSC is a responsible employee and should notify the Title IX Coordinator *if needed* after meeting with the student (i.e., for disclosures of sexual misconduct). Discussions between the department head and the TSC may include patterns and possible problematic group dynamics that emerge through requests for transitional support.
- c. When a department head becomes aware of a potentially unhealthy advising situation, the goal should be early intervention so that informal resolutions are possible. Department heads should follow up on all potentially unhealthy

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transitions, consistent with MIT policies.

- d. Department heads are expected to discuss any patterns of potentially problematic advising trends with their Dean, while respecting the privacy of the individuals involved.

## **2. Part Two: Tracking Transitions**

Tracking transitions will be managed centrally by the Office of Graduate Education (OGE). OGE will collect anonymous data from the TSCs using a standardized form and will produce an aggregate Annual Transition Report for each department. The annual reports will ensure that everyone has a clear picture of how many transitions are happening and what resources are being used across MIT to support transitions. OGE coordinates the tracking system, working in close partnership with the Office of the Vice Chancellor, departments, and deans' offices.

Finally, the Working Group recommended that MIT consider expanding guaranteed transitional funding for any reason, not just unhealthy situations (i.e., an evolution in research interest, changing research approaches, or a mismatch in early group choice). The Working Group also suggested that MIT develop a fundraising plan for transitional fellowships that includes local and central resource development partnership; prioritization of flexible resources, primarily fellowships, that could be used for any reason including transitional support; and a staged approach using expendable and endowed funding. Finally, the Working Group suggested piloting expanded transitional funding in departments that do not already have such programs.

### **Next steps:**

The Phase II Working Group met with department heads to expound on their report's recommendations. It is recommended that department heads review the activity of Transitional Support Coordinators (TSCs) annually for effectiveness, and that MIT should provide ongoing training to TSCs and should consider seeking graduate student feedback or input on choice of a TSC. MIT should also ensure students are aware of the OGE TSC as an alternative resource.

Chancellor Melissa Nobles is additionally working closely with Resource Development to increase funding for student life and learning priorities, including fellowships for graduate students.

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