

Requests for Personal Work May Pose a Conflict of Interest

Mary Rowe

[Ombudsperson Mary Rowe warns against misuse of faculty influence.]

From time to time, the Ombuds Office hears from support staff, graduate students, post-docs, undergraduates, technicians, and others about being asked by faculty to do personal work. I write this note to report back to the MIT faculty about these concerns.

In the last several years I have heard of requests to help with income taxes, or legal briefs. I have heard of requests to do laundry, pick up dry-cleaning, drive family members or a faculty member to the airport, take a child to summer camp, take a car to be fixed, buy presents for a spouse, cook dinner for a large party, arrange for housing for relatives, do regular house-cleaning, provide some child care or

elder care, or fix some piece of personal equipment in one's home.

Some requests might be construed as academic dishonesty, as well as potentially a conflict of interest, such as asking a junior person to help a child write a high school paper, help a spouse with a technical paper, help a child write an essay for college admissions, or do the reading and writing required to review technical articles or books, for the faculty member's signature.

Some requests might be construed as a form of harassment as well as potentials for conflict of interest, such as a request to model clothing that was bought as a present for a spouse, or to stay overnight with a faculty member who has been ill, or to have the spouse of a student provide personal services.

MIT policy proscribes requiring personal work from employees and "personal exploitation" of students. If you should know a faculty member who has requested personal work from a more junior person at MIT, your taking some low-key action may be effective in getting this behavior to stop, especially if there has been some misunderstanding due to cultural differences.

Also, it can be very difficult for a postdoc, student, or staff person to come forward when they feel importuned. If you should see or hear of such a concern, please consider talking with the people involved, or the department head, the deans for students, an ombudsperson, or some other appropriate person.✦

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