

## **Phase I Proposal: Guaranteed Transitional Support**

### **Written and supported by:**

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*The following was developed through a partnership with the working group members listed above. It is now being submitted to the Deans' Council and then to the Provost for further input with the goal of finalizing a consensus proposal that can be implemented at the beginning of the Spring 2021 semester.*

Holding true to MIT's deep commitment to supporting graduate students through the entirety of their academic development and degree, and in response to recommendations from the [National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine \(NASEM\) report](#), [MIT's NASEM Academic and Organizational Relationship \(AOR\) working group report](#), and concerns raised by the Graduate Student Council and [the RISE campaign](#), we will create a transitional support program for graduate students at MIT who wish to change research advisors or groups. The program will adhere to the following principles and outcomes:

- Clearly defined;
- Widely advertised;
- Easily accessible; and
- Sufficiently funded at the Department, School, and Institute-level to meet needs.

The work to develop the transitional support program will occur in two steps, Phase I and Phase II. In Phase I, the focus is on unhealthy advising situations in which students experience bias, harassment, or discrimination. We want students in unhealthy research situations to know that they can freely switch research supervisors without worry of

financial burden or fear of retaliation. 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 Institute is also dedicated to helping students transition research groups for other reasons, such as an evolution in research interest, changing research approaches, or a mismatch in early group choice (though, in these cases, this should ideally align with the beginning of the semester). We encourage students interested in changing research supervisors (for any reason) to meet with their Transition Support Coordinator (TSC), a new resource described below, to discuss their options. It is important to acknowledge that several academic programs already support students in transitioning groups when their research interests change. Hence, even today, a student can transition from a group for multiple reasons and be supported by the department. Thus, receiving transitional funding to switch groups should not be interpreted as the student or the advisor being at fault. Complaints will be taken seriously and will be reviewed by the academic program head using a fair process (more details will be available in Phase II).

For Phase II, a working group composed of administrators, faculty, and students will meet throughout 2021 to address the goal of expanding this program's coverage. Examples of topics that will be considered include: financial support for all types of research advisor and group switches (i.e., for reasons outside of the advising relationship); a process for addressing potentially problematic advisors that are made evident through the process of transitioning students in unhealthy advising situations; and funding resources for the program to ensure equity of the program across the Institute. Note that the process of identifying potentially problematic advisors should be closely coordinated with existing efforts to implement the recommendations from [MIT's NASEM Working Groups](#), including a separate initiative on faculty mentoring of students that is being developed by the Faculty Chair, Vice Chancellor, and Associate Provost.

The output of Phase II could include a strong recommendation to Resource Development and Institute leaders to prioritize fundraising to allow students in all departments, labs, centers, and other academic units to equitably explore new research directions and advisors. This group will also review the implementation of the Phase I proposal and utilization of the transitional support program, summarize and report this information to the MIT community, and use it as input to inform other reforms.

## **Phase I Proposal: Transition Support for Unhealthy Advising Situations**

1. Guarantee advisor-independent transitional funding for one full semester for PhD and SM/PhD students in unhealthy situations (e.g., the student is experiencing bias, discrimination, harassment, other violations of MIT policies, or other aggressive behavior from their advisor or colleagues in the unit they are wishing to transfer from).
  - a. Each department may provide advisor-independent funding in the form of a fellowship, a TA, an RA, or other sources of funding. When possible, the department will try to give the most flexible funding (i.e., a fellowship).
  - b. As the Department is the administrator of the degree program, it is expected that they should maintain sufficient reserves to accommodate the typical demands for transitional support. Should there be a period of time when an unusually high need for transitional support is needed, the Department will work with the Dean and, as needed, the Provost, to secure the needed resources.
  - c. Additional funding beyond the semester may be needed and will be determined on a case-by-case basis by mutual agreement between the degree-administering department head and both the departmental and OGE TSCs (see point 3 below).
  - d. Students can opt into this program at any time by meeting with a TSC. The TSC (see point 3 below) should perform an initial intake assessment with students seeking transitional support to learn more about their situation and educate them about other options that may be applicable in some circumstances (e.g., medical leave, moving beyond MIT, etc.). The TSC will review the student's unhealthy situation, though no proof of the student's unhealthy advising situation is required for transitional support to be granted. As noted earlier, students may still receive transitional funding for healthy situations, and as such a student receiving transitional funding should not be interpreted as the student or the advisor being at fault.
  - e. The student's original PI may ask the student to wrap-up/hand-off their duties (i.e., train new students, finalize/compile data and other materials, etc.). This should take no more than 15 hours per week of the students' time, for up to 4 weeks. In cases where the student does not agree to the terms of the requested wrap-up/hand-off duties, the departmental and the Office of Graduate Education (OGE) TSC (see point 3 below) will work with the student and advisor (separately, if the student wishes) to facilitate an equitable agreement.
  - f. If a student finds a new research advisor, prior to the end of the semester, and support is not immediately available from the new advisor, the student should continue to be funded by the transitional funding through the remainder of the semester.



4. Students utilizing this program should receive reasonable academic accommodations, including flexibility around degree requirements and milestones, to minimize the amount of time their degree is ultimately set back (e.g., allowing flexibility around the timeline for executing incomplete degree requirements and not asking students to re-execute previously completed degree requirements).
5. The Institute is committed to leveraging insight from Phase I of this program to help address problematic advising. By the end of 2021 (via Phase II of this proposal), the goal is to come up with a collective plan for tracking research advisor switches and developing appropriate responses for troubling patterns and behaviors made evident by this program. A working group will convene in Spring/Summer of 2021, with the goal of solidifying a document of guidance for how DLCs should approach these processes. Inputs will be integrated from the School/College councils (which include department/unit heads), OGE, HR, Deans, graduate students (RISE/GSC), IDHR, Chancellor, Provost, and others. The proposed approach will be completed by the beginning of the Fall semester of 2021, with the goal of implementing the recommendations starting Spring 2022.
6. Provide protection from retaliation for students transitioning research advisors.
  - a. The departmental and OGE TSCs should work with department leadership to provide avenues for the student to find alternative letter writers and references, if desired.
  - b. The TSCs should inform all students utilizing this program of MIT's retaliation policies and proactively and periodically reach out to these students throughout and following the lab transition. If retaliation is occurring, TSCs should provide students support in reporting any misconduct.