



# Lessons Learned from Mary Rowe: Not a One-Pager

JENNIFER SMITH SCHNEIDER

## ABSTRACT

I am honored to contribute to this JIOA issue celebrating Mary Rowe. She has paved the way for women in higher education and unapologetically promoted and protected the work of organizational ombuds – and she’s done it all with elegance, grace and intellect. This article references many of my favorite Mary Rowe publications and describes all the ways in which she has influenced my practice and my life.

## KEYWORDS

Mary Rowe, Ombudsman, ombuds, research



I became an ombuds in February 2015 and attended the IOA Annual Conference in Atlanta that April. While I was at the conference, I put my name on a post-it note and attached it to a posterboard expressing my interest in joining the Research and Assessment Committee. In August of that year, I was invited to my first “Remuneration Committee meeting/tele-conference,” where I naively believed I might be able to make some contribution to this field that I had only begun to discover.

That first meeting was facilitated by Willem Kweens and included several rockstar ombuds, including Tim Hedeem and Mary Rowe. I was wonderfully clueless, and it wasn’t until I began further reading about my new job that I realized what an icon Mary was. I am humbled that I was able to sneak into this elite posse of scholars so early in my career. Nine years later, and Tim, Mary and I are still grappling with surveys and data, and while I am still humbled to work with them both (and suffer from the most severe case of imposter syndrome at each and every encounter), I am particularly honored to contribute to this JIOA issue celebrating Mary. She has paved the way for women in higher education and unapologetically promoted and protected the work of organizational ombuds, and she’s done both with elegance, grace and intellect. So here we go – a not-even-close-to-exhaustive list of things I have learned from Mary Rowe:

**Be Fierce** – While I have heard her tell stories about it over the years, I only recently read [Mary’s written account of becoming ombuds at MIT in the 70s](#) (Rowe, 2023a). She recalls a few women in faculty positions at that time, but the world was so different then... especially at MIT. How brave she must have been to step onto the campus and into the office of the President, to become vulnerable to all the inequities that must have been immediately obvious, and to confront them responsibly in a space and a time when her opinions may not have been very welcomed. I wasn’t born until 1975, and women dominate the administrative halls of my university, yet I still so often feel out of place. It is in those moments of uncertainty and self-doubt that I dig deep and channel my inner Mary Rowe. She has taught me to recognize my worth and effectively use my voice without silencing the voices of others.

Mary also taught me fierceness when it comes to how I practice. She taught me to keep IOA in perspective. I am aware that I am submitting this to an IOA publication, and anyone who knows me knows that I am one of IOA’s biggest cheerleaders. I have volunteered hundreds and hundreds of hours to the association, and I appreciate its efforts in helping us explore and better define the role of organizational ombuds. But my perceptions of IOA and my own individuality as an ombuds have certainly evolved over the years, and Mary helped me appreciate that evolution. Mary has taught me that IOA’s Standards are not limiting but enabling. When I first took Foundations in 2015, I understood my role to be quiet, private, helpful but not invasive. I stayed in my office – in my lane – and did my best to do good work and do it well. When I started being asked to join committees or offer perspective to leaders, I was honored but unsure. I did not want to violate the Standards or compromise my role, but I did want to sit at the table. When I was asked to develop, and perhaps deliver, a graduate-level course on conflict engagement for administrators, I asked Mary about it, and she encouraged me. Her advice and encouragement to be seen and contribute has been central to the development of my understanding of my role on campus.

**Be Reflective** – Mary thinks deeply and writes effectively. Her insistence on my “writing a one pager” any time I make an interesting observation about visitors, patterns or anomalies is almost irritating at times. (Can’t I just talk about it??) Mary is incredibly analytical and patiently reflective regarding the world around her. I admire this. It is not so much a quality or a skill – it really is a discipline. Her works capture compelling case studies that illustrate the value of ombuds work in ways survey data never will. Her commitment to setting aside time to think about what’s



happening in her world and writing about it is admirable. To date, I owe her some writing about my use of [generic approaches](#) (about which she has often written) and how I have observed an increase in parent involvement over the past few years (Rowe, 2023b). I just can't seem to prioritize writing. My sitting here, hammering out this draft, is homage to a Mary Rowe discipline I simply have not mastered.

**Be Affirming** – Mary coined the term “[microaffirmations](#),” which she describes as “apparently small acts, which are often ephemeral and hard-to-see, events that are public and private, often unconscious but very effective, which occur wherever people wish to help others to succeed” (Rowe, 2022; Rowe, 2008). Mary is a student of affirmation; she has taken it on as a discipline, and her works on the matter are cited widely. But beyond her observations and articles about affirmation is her consistent practice. Mary personifies affirmation. I am sure she is intentional in microaffirmations, but she is also affirming in the biggest, most visible and most enthusiastic ways. In every video meeting I have attended with Mary, she has expressed enthusiasm for the ideas of others. Even when muted, she claps her hands, shoots two big thumbs up and nods emphatically in response to others. Mary is an encouragement to me in my life, and I often invoke a standard “What would Mary do in this situation?” when I encounter challenges in my role. Her affirming behavior is not performative or gratuitous; I truly believe she celebrates those around her with genuine enthusiasm and hope. I am trying to do the same.

**Be Curious** – My brain is so vastly inferior to Mary's that the idea of mimicking her curiosity is laughable – but it is a goal, nonetheless. Her brain simply never stops. She thinks deeply about practice, issues, theory, and the humans affected by them. Each time we re-evaluate a survey instrument, she wants to add more items, because she is genuinely curious about what we could learn. (We have to remind her that, for every item added, we really should remove another...) She has wondered about the power of [bystanders](#) (Rowe, 2023b; Rowe, 2024; Rowe, 2021a; Rowe, 2021b; Borum & Rowe, 2021; Rowe, 2018; Rowe & Giraldo-Kerr 2017; Scully & Rowe, 2009; Rowe et. al, 2009; Scully, Rowe & Moorehead, 1998), [matters of diversity](#) (Rowe, 1979, Rowe, 1977, Rowe, 1976, Rowe, 1974a, Rowe, 1974b, Rowe, 1973), [integrated conflict management systems](#) (Rowe, 2009b; Block et. al, 2009; Rowe 2009c; Rowe, 1997; Rowe, 1996; Rowe, 1993; Rowe, 1991; Rowe, 1990; Rowe, 1984), and responses to ombuds' [most serious cases](#) (Rowe et. al, 2022). Even when she was deeply entrenched in day-to-day ombuds practice, she took the time to research the issues that piqued her interest and then write about her findings so the rest of us could share in her learning. Mary recognizes the dearth of research on ombuds practice and takes responsibility for it. She was instrumental to the development of IOA's [research agenda](#) (Bingham et. al, 2018), and she is perhaps the individual who has made the most headway in addressing the items on it.

One of my favorite Mary Rowe inventions is [Portia](#) – a “non-committee” she established to think with...be curious with... decision-makers at MIT (Rowe, 2013). I have been trying to establish a working group like this at my university for years, and I have not yet figured out the logistics of the exact group, but her example does inspire me to pull people together and give them space to work through systemic issues that are impacting our faculty, staff and students. She started with food, and I have always believed that feeding people sets a tone – gives them some room to feel human. In an age where our every minute is dictated by our calendars, and every organization is scrambling to do more with fewer resources, setting aside time and space to just talk, eat, brainstorm, without a formal agenda or a recording or pressing accountability feels so freeing. I have established many, many meetings with various stakeholders who would not otherwise come together, and I know this is a Mary-inspired practice that has made lasting impact.

If you are not familiar with Mary's works, or you have never spoken to her about your own curiosities, you are truly missing out. It has been a privilege to learn from Mary over the past several years. Her life has challenged me to be a better practitioner, researcher, mentor,



advocate, partner, mother, and friend. She would be happy to visit with you. Just be prepared to draft a one-pager when you're done!



## REFERENCES

- Bingham, S., Smith, T., Burton, S., and Elkerson, D. (2018). The research agenda for the organizational ombuds profession: A living document. *Journal of the International Ombuds Association*. [https://ioa.memberclicks.net/assets/docs/JIOA-2018-3\\_Research-Agenda\\_for-the-Organizational-Ombuds-Profession.pdf](https://ioa.memberclicks.net/assets/docs/JIOA-2018-3_Research-Agenda_for-the-Organizational-Ombuds-Profession.pdf)
- Bloch, B., Miller, D. and Rowe, M. (2009). Systems for dealing with conflict and learning from conflict—options for complaint-handling: An illustrative case. *Harvard Negotiation Law Review*, 14, 239-247.  
<https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?PublicationDocumentID=7802>
- Borum, R. & Rowe, M. (2021). The importance of bystanders in threat assessment and management. In J.R. Meloy and J. Hoffmann (Eds.), *The International Handbook of Threat Assessment*, (2nd ed., pp. 423–435). Oxford University Press.  
<https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?PublicationDocumentID=7906>
- Rowe, M. (1973). Why do women take and keep low-paying jobs? What should be done? *Business and Society Review*, 5, 55-60.  
<https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?PublicationDocumentID=9443>
- Rowe, M. (1974a). The changing status of women: Economic realities. *Wheaton College Alumnae Magazine*, LXII(1), 36-37.  
<https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?PublicationDocumentID=5419>
- Rowe, M. (1974b). Prospects and patterns for men and women at work: To be able both to love and to work. *Child Care Reprints*, IV, Mothers in Paid Employment. Day Care and Child Development Council of America.  
<https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?PublicationDocumentID=7886>
- Rowe, M. (1976). That parents may work and love and children may thrive. In N. B. Talbot (Ed.), *Raising Children in modern America: Problems and Prospective Solutions* (pp. 286-303). Little, Brown.  
<https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?PublicationDocumentID=3987>
- Rowe, M. (1977). Child care for the 1980s: Traditional sex roles or androgyny? In M.J. Gates and J.R. Chapman (Eds.), *Women into Wives: The Legal and Economic Impact of Marriage*, Sage Publications.  
<https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?PublicationDocumentID=7883>
- Rowe, M. (1979). Managerial women and men in a changing society -- the 80s. *AT&T Management Forum Series*, 1-31.  
<https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?PublicationDocumentID=7907>
- Rowe, M. (1984). The non-union complaint system at M.I.T.: An upward-feedback mediation model. *Alternatives to the High Cost of Litigation*, 2(4), 10-18.  
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/alt.3810020407>
- Rowe, M. (1990). People who feel harassed need a complaint system with both formal and informal options. *Negotiation Journal*, 6(2), 161-172.  
[https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1571-9979.1990.tb00566.x?domain=p2p\\_domain&token=AXD45TRZNDQNQFIRJEW6](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1571-9979.1990.tb00566.x?domain=p2p_domain&token=AXD45TRZNDQNQFIRJEW6)



- Rowe, M. (1991). The ombudsman's role in a dispute resolution system. *Negotiation Journal*, 7(4), 353-361. [https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1571-9979.1991.tb00630.x?domain=p2p\\_domain&token=P5K3CZSTKDUYADSQHWEX](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1571-9979.1991.tb00630.x?domain=p2p_domain&token=P5K3CZSTKDUYADSQHWEX)
- Rowe, M. (1993). Options and choice for conflict resolution in the workplace. In L. Hall (Ed.), *Negotiation Strategies for Mutual Gain: The Basic Seminar of the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School* (pp. 105-119). Sage Publications. <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?PublicationDocumentID=9397>
- Rowe, M. (1996). An effective, integrated complaint resolution system. In B.R. Sandler and R.J. Shoop (Eds.), *Sexual Harassment on Campus: A Guide for Administrators, Faculty, and Students* (pp. 22-49). Allyn & Bacon. <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?PublicationDocumentID=7879>
- Rowe, M. (1997). Dispute resolution in the non-union environment: An evolution toward integrated systems for conflict management. In S. Gleason (Ed.), *Workplace Dispute Resolution* (pp. 79-106). East Michigan State University Press. <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?PublicationDocumentID=7798>
- Rowe, M. (2008). Micro-affirmations & micro-inequities. *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association*, 1(1). <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?PublicationDocumentID=5404>
- Rowe, M., Wilcox, L., & Gadlin, H. (2009). Dealing with—or reporting—‘unacceptable’ behavior. *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association*, 2(1). <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?PublicationDocumentID=5397>
- Rowe, M. (2009b). An organizational ombuds office in a system for dealing with conflict and learning from conflict, or conflict management system. *Harvard Negotiation Law Review*, 14, 279-288. <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?PublicationDocumentID=7803>
- Rowe, M. (2009c). Organizational systems for dealing with conflict & learning from conflict: Introduction. *Harvard Negotiation Law Review*, 14, 233-239. <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?PublicationDocumentID=7804>
- Rowe, M. (2013). Portia: It is not a ‘crisis committee,’ but one might want a ‘Portia’ anyway.” *Journal of the California Caucus of College and University Ombuds*, 10(1), 22-27. <https://mitsloan-php.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-faculty/sites/84/2023/07/20193153/Mary-Rowe-Portia-article-from-Journal-of-California-Caucus-of-College-and-University-Ombuds.2013.pdf>
- Rowe, M. and Giraldo-Kerr, A. (2017). Bystanders. *SAGE Encyclopedia of Psychology and Gender*, K.L. Nadal (Ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?DocumentID=4493>
- Rowe, M. (2018). Fostering Constructive action by peers and bystanders in organizations and communities. *Negotiation Journal*, 34(2), 137-163. [https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/nej.12221?domain=p2p\\_domain&token=XDTPP9CWEDDVXPAA9SFB](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/nej.12221?domain=p2p_domain&token=XDTPP9CWEDDVXPAA9SFB)



- Rowe, M. (2021a). Bystanders: 'See something, say something' is not enough. *Alternatives to the High Cost of Litigation*, 39(10), 153-165.  
<https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?PublicationDocumentID=8121>
- Rowe, M. (2021b). *An unusual harassment training that inspired bystanders*. MIT Sloan working paper 6478-21. Cambridge, MA: MIT Sloan School of Management.  
<https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?PublicationDocumentID=7975>
- Rowe, M. (2022). Belonging: The feeling that we "belong" may depend in part on "affirmations." *MIT Institute for Work and Employment Research*.  
<https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?PublicationDocumentID=7871>
- Rowe, M., Hedeem, T., Schneider, J. and Escalante, H. (2022, October 3). Why are data about the most serious cases (MSC) important to organizational ombuds? *The Independent Voice*.  
[https://www.ombudsassociation.org/index.php?option=com\\_dailyplanetblog&view=entry&year=2022&month=10&day=02&id=214:the-most-serious-cases-reported-by-organizational-ombuds-data-from-surveys-and-interviews](https://www.ombudsassociation.org/index.php?option=com_dailyplanetblog&view=entry&year=2022&month=10&day=02&id=214:the-most-serious-cases-reported-by-organizational-ombuds-data-from-surveys-and-interviews)
- Rowe, M. (2023a). Becoming an ombuds at MIT. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 40(4), 497–504.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/crq.21384>
- Rowe, M. (2023b). Consider generic options when complainant and bystanders are fearful. *Journal of the International Ombuds Association*, 1-7.  
[https://www.ombudsassociation.org/assets/docs/JIOA\\_Articles/JIOA-2023-F-Special-Edition.pdf](https://www.ombudsassociation.org/assets/docs/JIOA_Articles/JIOA-2023-F-Special-Edition.pdf)
- Rowe, M. (2024). Helping hesitant bystanders identify their options: a checklist with examples and ideas to consider. *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association*, 16(2).  
[https://www.ombudsassociation.org/assets/docs/JIOA\\_Articles/JIOA-2023-F-Special-Edition.pdf](https://www.ombudsassociation.org/assets/docs/JIOA_Articles/JIOA-2023-F-Special-Edition.pdf)
- Scully, M., Rowe, M. and Moorehead, L. (1998). Helping bystanders take responsibility for diversity. *Cultural Diversity at Work*. GilDeane Group, 10(6), 14-15.  
<https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?DocumentID=3999>
- Scully, M. & Rowe, M. (2009a). Bystander training within organizations. *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association*, 2(1), 89-94.  
<https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents?PublicationDocumentID=5396>





## AUTHOR BIO

**Jennifer Schneider** has served as ombuds for undergraduate, graduate and professional students at the University of South Florida since 2015. Prior to her current role, she held various administrative positions at USF, the University of Central Florida and at Polk State College. She has earned bachelor's and master's degrees in education and earned a Ph.D. in higher education administration in 2014, and has been CO-OP® certified since 2019. Jennifer serves on IOA's Research and Assessment Committee and Advocacy Committee. She also helped develop and deliver IOA's core course, *Nuts and Bolts of Setting Up an Ombuds Office*. ([jaschnei@usf.edu](mailto:jaschnei@usf.edu))