



Academic Administrator Cathy Modica with her students at the Department's 2022-2023 Undergraduate Awards dinner. Credit: Justin Knight Photography



# Physics Academic Administrator Cathy Modica retires after 24 years of service to the Institute

by Sandi Miller

Academic Administrator Catherine “Cathy” Modica joined the MIT Physics Department in Fall 2009, after ten years in Health Sciences and Technology as the Student Life and Admissions Coordinator. She has worked with three Physics department heads, four associate heads and several acting associate heads. She concluded her time with the Department, and MIT, in mid-June 2023.

Cathy graduated from Tufts University with an undergraduate degree in English and Theater, later useful when enhancing her writing and public speaking skills in Physics. She also received her EdM from Harvard University's Graduate School of Education.

Cathy's office in 4-315 is warm and inviting, filled with Tibetan prayer flags and photos of her grandchildren, and designed to be a calming space for the often highly-stressed students who have met with her over the years. Physics students are often deeply concerned about grades and getting into graduate school, but over the years Cathy also worked to help students who were hungry and impoverished, victims of assault and racial hatred, and struggling to work from home while isolated from their peers during the pandemic's extended lockdown.

Cathy channeled her feelings to become active in the Department and Institute community, including a key role developing the Physics Values Committee; helping launch and co-chairing Accessing Resources at MIT, a clearinghouse for information for low-income students; co-founder of "When Support Gets Personal," a training program for student-facing MIT administrators; co-chairing the Graduate Administrators Roundtable; search committee member for Student Support Services (S3) and the MIT Chaplain; and joining the Student Privacy Policy and MIT Memorial Planning committees. Her recognitions include the 2013 School of Science Infinite Mile Award, the 2003 Laya Weisner

Community Award, and several School of Science "Spot Awards."

**physics@mit:** Over the years, you responded to changes in how universities were working with students and discovered new ways to meet the needs of Physics students, especially those in need of economic and emotional support. How did your role as academic administrator evolve to meet these shifts to help students?

**Cathy Modica:** Supporting the well-being of students was always one of my main goals, one that I felt I could make a real contribution to—unlike, say, teaching them quantum field theory, which is not in my skillset! Focusing on this took a variety of forms. From my first years at MIT, I made efforts to learn about all the many resources available when students are experiencing problems that are not just academic, and I developed a network of contacts around the Institute that I felt confident referring our students to. Within Physics, I was a founding member of the Physics Values Committee (PVC), the genesis of which was serious concerns about the climate in the Department for any kind of "untraditional" student. Over time, the PVC, and more importantly, the Physics Community Values statement, became embedded in the life of the Department.

In parallel to my work in the Department, I served as co-chair of the Accessing Resources at MIT Coalition (ARM) for several years. ARM aims to foster and promote the many types of financial and material support

that are available to MIT's low-income students, on campus and in the Cambridge area. And, of course, I spent a lot of time just talking privately with students about whatever was on their minds. There's little that shocks me and almost nothing I haven't heard over time.

**p@m:** What will you miss most?

**CM:** Oh, the people in this wonderful community, of course! I've been privileged to work with some of the very best students in the world, to watch them grow as scientists, and to make a modest contribution to their growth as people. I keep in touch with many alums and have attended a number of weddings and baby showers! I already know how hard it is to miss seeing our students on a daily basis from our experience during the extended lockdown, and I expect missing the students will be the hardest thing about leaving.

Our Department staff is creative, hard-working and fully energetic in supporting our students. Staff seldom entirely get their due in universities, but I've been satisfied to see the kind of respect that our Department administration and our faculty have always shown towards the Academic Programs Office staff.

And I will miss the faculty! To get to see their important work close up, and simultaneously to have them as my partners in caring for our students, has been nothing short of amazing. I feel so lucky in our faculty; they are student-centered, education-driven, and endlessly kind-hearted—in addition to being world-class scientists—and many of them

have become my close friends. A particularly happy memory was the day the LIGO breakthrough was announced. To be able to see my faculty colleagues with tears in their eyes at the excitement of this event was incredibly moving, something I'll always remember.

**p@m:** What are your post-retirement plans?

**CM:** At first I'm just going to chill out at home, tend my garden, do a lot of reading, catch up on sleep, and play with my granddaughters. My one goal for this summer is to wake up one morning and not be already thinking about work when I open my eyes! Later, when being a person of leisure feels a bit more normal, I expect to do some traveling, take classes (one goal is to relearn the French I used to be almost fluent in, a million years ago) and do volunteer work. I think learning anything new is about the most fun there is, so I'm looking forward to seeing where my interests take me.

**“Cathy is the person to talk to about a problem when you don't know who to talk to about a problem.”**

**Joseph Smolsky**  
PhD Candidate

**“Cathy was a wonderful person to work with over the past year. She always advocated for others and was a great person to admire.”**

**Paige DiMatteo**  
Student Payroll Coordinator

**“Cathy is always ready with a listening ear and an open heart. Whether you came in tears or in triumph, she would always be there for you. I can't imagine my own journey without her support, and it is hard to imagine MIT Physics without her.”**

**Makinde Ogunnaike**  
PhD Candidate

***“Cathy Modica is truly a one-of-a-kind person. She has brought a unique guidance, warmth and kindness to the community that will be greatly missed. It's people like Cathy that really make the world a better place.”***

**Caolan John**  
PhD Candidate

**“Cathy is one of the most thoughtful and considerate people I know. Her personal note at the beginning of each week's student newsletter was always full of, and inspiring more, reflection on what it is that we strive to achieve here. Her dedication to the Physics Department is a major part of what keeps this place running.”**

**Simon Grosse-Holz, PhD '23**

**“Cathy helped in so many ways through these hectic four years, and always went far and beyond to help, with empathy and determination unmatched. I hope she has a fantastic next phase of her life, and makes sure to visit us.”**

**Orisvaldo Salviano Neto, SB '23**

**“For fourteen years, Cathy has been at the heart of our department. Thousands of students, more than a hundred faculty, and all of her team, have been warmed by her empathy, have learned from her wisdom, and have benefitted from her judgment. It's hard to see how we could have navigated the past few years without all three.”**

**Krishna Rajagopal**  
William A. M. Burden Professor  
of Physics

**“I've sat down and tried to write something three times now over the past few weeks and nothing comes out. No words I can come up with properly capture Cathy's presence in our community. I suppose that's grief. So all I can manage to say is, 'Much thanks, Cathy, job well done, and best wishes for the future.’”**

**Sean Robinson, SB '99, PhD '05**  
Lecturer and Associate Director, Junior Lab

“Cathy has provided a nurturing environment for our students and a collegial atmosphere for the APO staff. I wish her all the best for her retirement.”

**Sydney Miller**

Graduate Academic Program  
Coordinator

“Cathy believes in the good in every person that she encounters, and is one of the kindest people I know.”

**Michal Holland**

Undergraduate Program  
Coordinator

*“Cathy has made Physics a place where all of our undergraduate and graduate students feel supported, seen, heard and respected. She has accomplished this from policy implementation, but primarily from her actions. Our students trust her and see her as a source of information and support. She will be missed!”*

**Matt Cubstead**

Administrative Officer

“Cathy has been at the center of so much in our department’s education program that I can’t really express what she has meant: she has been the chief supporter, advocate and listener-in-chief to generations of undergraduate and graduate students, and to a pretty substantial fraction of MIT physics faculty as well.”

**Scott Hughes**

Professor of Physics

“Cathy Modica was a constant source of inspiration and comfort for our Department. She always had time for the important conversations and, I am sure, many, many of our students and faculty owe their teaching success to Cathy’s support.”

**Peter Fisher**

Thomas A. Frank (1977) Professor of Physics;  
Director, MIT Office of Research Computing and Data

“Cathy always went above and beyond to provide support and encouragement to those of us in the APO, whether offering a listening ear during a difficult project or providing encouragement during a challenging time—her office door was always open. She will be sorely missed.”

**Kim Heatley**

Web/Database/Course  
Administrator

“My wife Jaymi and I frequently attend the annual Physics Fall Reception, and although she doesn’t know many people there, Jaymi looks forward to the event mainly because of one person, Cathy. Cathy is able to connect with people at such a deep level that they instantly feel welcome. Along with doing an exemplary job in the APO, Cathy brings beauty, grace and poetry to the everyday.”

**Joseph Formaggio**

Professor of Physics; Division Head,  
Experimental Nuclear and  
Particle Physics

“Gosh, so many MIT graduate students have relied on Cathy. How many students showed up in her office with problems they did not know how to solve? I was one of them, and for me, as for so many, Cathy’s sage advice showed there was a way forward. MIT Physics will miss her greatly.”

**Michael Austin DeMarco, PhD ’22**

*“Cathy Modica has been a phenomenal supporter, resource and friend to the members of our community. She has uplifted student group efforts to build a more inclusive department and has worked tirelessly to create support structures for our students through periods of turbulence. I feel lucky to have lived through a version of MIT Physics with Cathy at the helm!”*

**Pamela Stark, SB '23**

“The best advice I’ve found to give to new faculty colleagues is to get to know Cathy Modica, because she knows everything about how the department works, and she’s incredibly generous with her time and advice. She will be very much missed!”

**Tracy Slatyer**

Professor of Physics

“Over the past four years, it’s been an incredible experience working with Cathy in my various student leadership roles. She has always been kind, helpful and receptive to student needs—and willing to hear us out when we think things aren’t going well. She’ll be sorely missed, but I’m certain that she’ll continue to do great things after her time here at MIT.”

**Rahul Jayaraman**

PhD Candidate

“Cathy was there during each step of my academic path at MIT. But what means the most to me is Cathy’s support when the war in Ukraine started. Cathy attended numerous events, spoke often with students and gave endless sympathy and help. She created warm and beautiful memories through the darkest of times.”

**Margarita Davydova**

PhD Candidate

“Cathy has been a pillar of the Physics Department and it will be impossible to imagine it without her. She supported me as a student, and now as junior faculty, with kindness, efficiency and expertise that we cannot find anywhere else. Personally, I will struggle not having her around next year.”

**Lina Necib, PhD '17**

Assistant Professor of Physics

“From research challenges to personal upheavals to a global pandemic, Cathy’s warm smile and kind words have never failed to comfort me. I’ll miss her dearly, and am so grateful for the masses of often invisible work that she and other departmental administrators do to keep the Physics Department running.”

**Adam Trebach, PhD '23**

*“When you walk into Cathy’s office, you aren’t just a physicist, but a whole human being. Whether you are a stressed-out student or a frazzled faculty member, Cathy is there with sage advice and an open heart.”*

**Jesse Thaler**

Professor of Physics; Director, NSF AI Institute for Artificial Intelligence and Fundamental Interactions

“Cathy has been our North star, guiding us calmly and consistently in the right direction.”

**Anna Frebel**

Professor of Physics; Division Head, Astrophysics