

Responding to Campus Climate Data: Developing an Action Plan to Reduce Campus Sexual Misconduct

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Abstract

Hundreds of U.S. institutions of higher education have conducted campus climate surveys recently to assess students' experiences with sexual misconduct and perceptions of institutions' related policies and procedures. Many of these surveys were implemented in response to the recommendation by the 2014 White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault. The several options for campus climate surveys, ranging from free measures campuses can implement themselves to full-service survey implementation packages, have streamlined and facilitated the climate data collection process. Unfortunately, there is little guidance on how institutions can use and respond to their climate data. This article presents a framework that institutions could use to develop an action plan based on findings from their campus climate survey, predicated on a process that begins before the survey is implemented and lasts long after data collection concludes. Each institution of higher education is different, and individual campus action plans can vary based on campus structure, dynamics, and climate survey findings.

Keywords

campus climate, higher education, sexual assault, sexual misconduct

Preventing campus sexual misconduct—any nonconsensual sexual behavior that broadly includes sexual violence, dating violence, stalking, and sexual harassment of or among college students—has been a national priority in the United States over the past several years. Specifically, in 2011, the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights issued an important *Dear Colleague Letter* (Ali, 2011) that clarified how and why campus sexual assault violates Title IX. This letter was followed by the creation of the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault. This Task Force produced a landmark report in 2014, calling for numerous strategies aimed at better understanding and ultimately reducing campus sexual assault; one of those recommended strategies being campus climate assessment. Campus climate surveys are a method to understand the landscape of a campus and its surrounding community environment, typically from the student perspective (Campbell et al., 2009; McMahon et al., 2019). Specifically, they establish and track campus-level benchmarks of sexual misconduct incidence and related student norms, attitudes, and knowledge that allow campuses to tailor their approaches to preventing and responding to sexual misconduct (Swartout et al., 2019). Some U.S. colleges and universities had already

conducted climate assessments before release of that Task Force's report (White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, 2014); hundreds of others rushed to do so soon after in response (Hanson, 2016). Although the Task Force clarified that campuses should assess their climate related to sexual misconduct and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention followed by proposing a general action plan rubric (Dills et al., 2016), the steps campuses can follow to move from climate study findings to an evidence-based action plan remain unclear. The objective of this article is therefore to propose a more detailed framework for how colleges and universities might systematically respond to the key findings from a campus climate survey.

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Brief Overview of Sexual Misconduct Climate Surveys

Climate surveys, originally used to assess campus and workplace environment related to racism and other forms of bias, have been rapidly created and adapted for interpersonal violence and harassment. After the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault (2014) encouraged universities to conduct climate surveys to understand student perceptions and knowledge, and to assess prevalence of sexual misconduct, some U.S. states mandated institutions assess campus climate regarding sexual misconduct (Kohl-Welles, 2015; LaValle, 2015). Corresponding federal legislation was discussed, written, proposed, but not passed at the time of this publication. Climate surveys typically use existing validated measurement tools, are internet-based, use a census sample and take an average of 10 to 30 minutes in length to complete (Krause et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2016). Virtually all climate surveys within this domain address sexual assault, and some assess the prevalence of dating violence, stalking, and sexual harassment. Existing climate surveys vary widely in how they implicitly or explicitly define sexual assault and the way in which they measure sexual assault and other forms of misconduct (e.g., number of items and use of “gatekeeper” items¹; Krause et al., 2018). They may underestimate sexual misconduct victimization, especially among LGBQ student populations (de Heer & Jones, 2017). Climate surveys may also include assessment of related potential mental and physical health outcomes of victimization experiences, reporting attitudes and behaviors, bystander intervention, and other prevention strategies and perpetration behaviors (Wood et al., 2016).

There are many climate surveys specific to campus sexual misconduct, including tools from institutional associations (e.g., Association of American Universities), collaborative groups of experts on sexual misconduct (e.g., Administrator-Researcher Campus Climate Collaborative), and higher education consortiums (e.g., Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium). The White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault (2014) also offered a climate survey as an appendix to their report that focused on sexual assault and dating violence, with limited associated outcome data. Although all relevant climate surveys assess some form of sexual misconduct victimization, only a small subset assess perpetration. Overall, each survey differs substantially in the depth, detail, and range of questions about associated outcomes, attitudes about bystander intervention, and other campus climate measures. Variations on climate survey administration include administration from an outside entity for a fee, university administration-led survey, or individual researcher-led efforts (Wood et al., 2016).² Campuses respond to their climate data in a variety of ways, and may include keeping the findings internal to the administration without sharing them with students or the public (New, 2016), publishing the results online with little context (e.g., Duke University, 2017), or publishing the results within a larger report that includes description of more robust initiative to reduce campus sexual misconduct (e.g., Busch-Armendariz et al., 2017; Tulane University, 2018).

The Importance of Campus Stakeholder Teams Throughout the Survey Process

Prior to implementing a climate survey most campuses convene a team of administrators, faculty, staff, and sometimes students, whose positions or expertise relate to sexual misconduct prevention or response (e.g., Tulane University, 2018). This campus stakeholder team must develop a high level of trust and respect for the role that each individual (and their position/unit) plays in reducing campus sexual misconduct. This seems straightforward at its surface, but the literature on group formation and dynamics illustrates the pitfalls of group decision making (e.g., Paulus et al., 1993), the formative work needed to develop a team that makes informed and efficient decisions, and processes needed to maintain group effectiveness amid trying conditions. This includes taking time early in the team’s existence for relatively comprehensive introductions, to bring everyone’s expertise and perspective into the open. This will build group cohesion and help avoid groupthink—the tendency toward uniformity within group discussions or decision making, which leads to a less than optimal outcome or decision (Mullen et al., 1994)—when the stakeholder group needs to make consequential decisions or recommendations such as those regarding campus policies or programming.

Each campus should commit from the start to a transparent and collaborative approach to decision making. At a basic level, this principle requires an understanding of climate surveys as more than just compliance with real or implied mandates. Everyone associated with a given college or university—including but not limited to administrators, faculty and staff members, and students—has a vested interest in promoting a campus that is free from violence and harassment. Every effort should be made to include voices in the decision-making processes that represent the diversity of campus stakeholders in violence prevention. Although differences in perspective and opinion can naturally lead to conflict, this diversity can also produce well-informed decisions (Simons et al., 1999).

Discussions of campus sexual misconduct are evoking, to both internal and external audiences. For example, criticism often comes from all sides: some claim that institutions do too little to address sexual misconduct, while others simultaneously claim there is too much attention currently devoted to these issues. This can potentially lead to a hostile campus environment, due to misinformation, lack of information, difference of opinion, or other barriers. A diverse stakeholder group can preempt or quickly resolve issues by representing the varied campus/community interests, bringing concerns from the campus community to the group for consideration, and broadly distributing information about the survey. At times, it may be important to move toward resistance, either preemptively or reactively. Preemptive approaches could involve one or more members of the stakeholder group meeting for discussion with groups or individuals whose views

might differ with those of the stakeholder group, which is more effective than simply considering potential criticism during the decision-making process (Nemeth et al., 2001). In the face of criticism, stakeholders can find areas of common ground with those who seek to question or discredit the climate survey process or its findings: most people will rally around the goals of (a) reducing campus violence and (b) creating an equitable learning environment for all as starting points for consensus or compromise.

Proposed Four-Step Climate Survey Response Framework

This four-step framework was developed using the process and guiding principles discussed by Swartout et al. (2019): (a) inclusiveness, mutual respect, and collaboration; (b) transparent and iterative survey development processes; (c) research integrity and independence; (d) use of evidence-based practices in survey development; (e) focus on victimization and perpetration; (f) a civil rights approach grounded in Title IX; (g) adherence to The Belmont Report principles; and (h) sensitivity to issues faced by diverse populations and different higher education institutional types. The framework was further refined through lessons learned during the large-scale climate survey implementation across the University of Texas System, detailed by Busch-Armendariz et al. (2017). With this four-step framework, institutions of higher education have the opportunity to extend the application of these principles during their self-examination process as they move from climate survey results to next steps and action plans. Each step in the process will result in either new or more refined action steps to reduce campus sexual misconduct. The framework is structured so all response decisions are based on evidence, informed either by data from a climate survey or by additional information the stakeholders choose to collect to elaborate on the climate data. As a stakeholder team moves through their process, they can highlight specific estimates of misconduct prevalence, student perceptions, or related findings to support subsequent requests for action, resources, or policy change. In this way, the initial three steps are iterative, potentially involving several rounds of data review, interpretation, and elaboration as key findings and action steps are continuously refined. Details included within this framework can and can be modified based on fit to institution type, context, student population, and other relevant campus-level factors.

Step 1: Review Climate Survey Results and Methodology

The goal of this first step is to develop a brief list of key findings directly supported by both the campus climate survey data and methodology. The first part of Step 1 seems intuitive—reviewing the climate survey results to determine key,

actionable findings. The datasets that result from campus climate surveys are comprehensive; it is therefore helpful to prespecify a list of analytic priorities rather than sift through the data post hoc. These priorities always include determining overall prevalence rates of the different forms of sexual misconduct assessed by the survey. These rates are typically broken down by gender and other relevant demographic factors, such as sexual orientation and race/ethnicity.

It is important, however, to consider the findings in light of aspects related to the survey methodology; this includes completion rates, the degree to which students who completed the survey represent the overall student population, and whether the institution chose a sampling or census recruitment method. For example, campuses often aim to understand the experiences and perceptions of students who report multiple minority statuses (e.g., students who identify as Latina and lesbian); only findings based on data from an adequate number of students should be interpreted and presented, as estimates based on extremely small samples can be biased (Oppenheimer et al., 2011). This specific example can also present additional ethical issues related to student confidentiality, as rare identity combinations can potentially identify individual students and their experiences if reported, especially on smaller campuses.

Step 2: Consider the Context

The reporting and response processes begin once the key findings are determined. Presentations of campus climate survey findings should be informative and accessible to both internal and external audiences. Potential solutions, in the form of an action plan, can be offered along with the key issues highlighted by climate survey data. This process can be organized, tracked, and communicated using a rubric, such as the example provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Dills et al., 2016). It is essential to understand the influence of organizational and external context on both the climate survey findings and the response options moving forward. This influence can be either positive or negative, so attention paid during this step can potentially accentuate positive outcomes or buffer against the negative. Internal context can include institutional traditions, values, philosophies, or missions. External context can include current social movements or political/policy environments. Specific contextual considerations for a campus will vary somewhat based on what a campus learns from the climate data. For example, an institution focused on promoting leadership qualities with less than ideal student attitudes toward bystander intervention might use that lens to contextualize their action plan. An action plan that fits with existing campus or social context will be more accessible to the various audiences, garner greater investment from the campus and community, and ultimately be more successful at reducing campus sexual misconduct.

Step 3: Clarify the Current Conditions

Based on the climate survey findings, and the context in which the survey took place, which groups of students, groups of employees, institutional units, programs, policies, or situations need the most immediate attention? One of the main reasons for conducting local campus climate assessments is to develop a specific understanding of sexual misconduct on a given campus, rather than making assumptions based on national estimates or findings from other campuses. This step will therefore further refine a campus' agenda. During this step, some stakeholder groups choose to elaborate on the climate survey data by conducting either formal (e.g., interviews or focus groups) or informal discussions (e.g., "town halls") with individuals and groups whose position on campus is highlighted by the climate data (e.g., LGBTQ students, campus health center staff). This is an excellent way to add the depth of people's experiences to elaborate on the climate survey data in key areas. Campuses can also consider existing resources, programs, policies, or student groups related to the key findings, as these can be leveraged or otherwise addressed during the response process (e.g., Tulane University, 2018).

Step 4: Determine and Define Preferred Outcomes (Aspirational Goals)

This step is the most hopeful and forward facing. This process can take many forms based on the outcomes of the previous three steps. No U.S. college or university with a physical campus can claim that their students do not experience sexual misconduct. Every campus should therefore take steps to reduce sexual misconduct prevalence, equipped with an understanding of the most pressing forms of misconduct and the students most affected. Additional preferred outcomes can relate to student knowledge and perceptions as well as campus policies, programming, and resources (e.g., 90% of students will know how to file a Title IX report at the institution). Finally, this is the stage when a follow-up climate assessment should be scheduled. The decision on intervals between assessments can be based on the key findings from the baseline climate survey. If most or all of the key findings are directly related to sexual misconduct prevalence, which is likely to change gradually across time even in positive conditions, allowing 3 to 5 years to pass before reassessment could be appropriate (e.g., Pennsylvania State University Student Affairs Research and Assessment, n.d.). If many key findings center on student knowledge or perceptions, which can change relatively quickly, reassessment after 1 to 2 years could be the best strategy (e.g., Miami University, n.d.). Unfortunately, it is not possible to specifically offer specific guidance on the staff member or office responsible for implementing action plan components because (a) institutions vary widely in their administrative and faculty structures and (b) different action steps will call for different implementation strategies.

Conclusion

Hundreds of U.S. colleges and universities have surveyed their students to assess sexual misconduct and related issues over the past 5 years, in most cases for the first time in the institution's history. The literature discusses the spectrum of climate survey assessment tools, implementation strategies, and the need to develop a campus-wide action plan to prevent sexual misconduct. Up to this point, however, the steps a campus can follow to bridge the gap between a campus climate assessment and an evidence-based action plan have been unclear. We therefore proposed a detailed framework for how colleges and universities can systematically respond to the key findings from a campus climate survey and develop a tailored action plan to prevent sexual misconduct. The steps we described were (a) review climate survey results and methodology, (b) consider the context, (c) clarify the current conditions, and (d) determine and define preferred outcomes. Implicit to this framework is an overarching sexual misconduct reduction initiative that begins before the climate survey is implemented and lasts long after data collection concludes. Each institution of higher education is different, and individual campus action plans can vary based on campus structure, dynamics, and climate survey findings.

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Notes

1. Gatekeeper items refer to initial items that, if endorsed, trigger follow-up items to collect more specific information. In this case, students are asked to respond to general items that assess their general experience with sexual victimization; if those general items are endorsed, students then receive additional items regarding the specific elements and context of the victimization.
2. An in-depth review of campus climate survey methodology is outside the scope of this report, see Krebs et al. (2016), Krause et al. (2018), and Hanson (2016) for comprehensive treatment of this topic.

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