



AN ADMINISTRATOR'S PERSPECTIVE ON CAMPUS CLIMATE SURVEYS

OVW Interview with Jaime Nolan, Associate Vice President for Community, Equity and Diversity, University of New Hampshire

In your experience, why do institutions of higher learning decide to conduct campus climate surveys?

The purpose of a climate survey is to assess how the faculty, staff, and students are experiencing the environment/climate in terms of living, learning, and working at the university. The data collected give both the "big" picture for the university as a whole as well as the experiences for specific groups of people who live, work, and learn at the university. The information from the surveys is crucial in informing institutional efforts to addressing any issues that negatively impact the climate at the university and reinforcing efforts that are working well. Research indicates that universities should conduct climate surveys every three years as part of a larger effort to assess and improve the climate.

Have you ever been surprised by survey results?

For me, frankly no. Anyone who has done inclusion, community building, and social justice work in education understands the issues and trends associated with institutionalized racism, heterosexism, homophobia, sexual violence, etc., that continue to plague not only education institutions, but our culture as well. It's important to understand that universities are situated in a broader social, cultural, and political context, and whatever issues impact the broader society will inevitably impact educational institutions as well. That's what makes these surveys so important because they help form policies and actions, but they are also educational/teaching tools, and as an educational institution we have an obligation to seize the teachable moments that the information provided by these surveys make visible.

Have you engaged with student advocates during any part of a campus climate survey process? How so?

On the front end we conducted focus groups as a way to both gauge where students were with regard to their understanding about climate studies as well getting a general sense of how they are experiencing the campus. Students then became ambassadors for the survey and provided outreach and education to other students. Their efforts were important for building support for the surveys, informing the community, and allowed us to follow-up with specific groups.

How would you describe the value that student advocates bring to the process?

Students are crucial to all aspects of university life. They have tremendous power to create institutional change.

If you were a student who wanted to advocate for your institution to conduct a campus climate survey, what would your first steps be?

These efforts happen just like social movements happen. Students can work with various student groups to educate themselves about the importance of climate surveys - many universities have done them and continue to do so, and the results and processes they use are widely available and open to the public. Understand the benefits to the institution, particularly that creating a healthy campus climate is essential for student success, and if a university is serious about student success (which they say they are), that is a strong rationale for conducting a climate survey to gather baseline data and then establish a program of follow-up surveys.

What would your advice be to a student advocate who wanted to know how to most effectively engage with administrators on this issue?

Do your homework. Understand the reasons and rationales for pursuing specific policies or taking various institutional actions, and as students always frame your arguments in terms of student success. Universities are all about creating inclusive environments where students feel safe, welcome, and cared about, which research proves is essential to their persistence and overall academic success.

Have any of the institutions you have worked with changed institutional responses to campus sexual assault due to the results of a survey?

Yes. Survey results informed a comprehensive university response and development of a systemic approach to address sexual violence. We realized for example, that we needed to better coordinate all efforts, collaborate with one another to ensure that we all operating from the same knowledge base, using the same language etc. This process involved a broad cross section of campus community stakeholders including, of course, students.

Is there any other advice you would give to student advocates working on campus sexual assault issues?

Students are an essential to informing the need for and the creating of change. There are a variety of ways to engage in processes that impact policy, programs and practices with regard to sexual violence on college campuses. Whether through volunteering at prevention programs, student organizations or participating on councils and committees, there are multiple avenues through which to engage and doing so makes a difference. I'm reminded of a quote I often use in my work with groups when talking about the importance of community from filmmaker Abigail Disney: "*We all have the choice every day to be part of the answer, or part of the problem. And if we choose to conceive of an "us" that is greater than simply the people in our immediate vicinity, we will start to build a community of fellowship and shared empathy rather than of mistrust and hostility. We each have this choice and we influence the choices made by those around us.*"