Chapter 4: Conducting a Student Survey

Understanding and Responding to Campus Sexual Assault: A Guide to Climate Assessment for Colleges and Universities

Center on Violence Against Women and Children
Having assembled a team and an Advisory Board (see Chapter 2: Fostering Collaboration) and conducted a resource audit (see Chapter 3: Conducting a Resource Audit), researchers are ready to conduct a campus climate survey. The survey is the centerpiece of the campus climate assessment process, providing data about students’ experiences, behaviors, and attitudes regarding sexual assault and their perceptions of the school’s response to it. In designing the survey methodology, researchers will be faced with many decisions. Will a random sampling strategy or a census be used? Should incentives be in the form of cash or consumer goods? While there is no “right” choice, each decision has implications for the rest of the project. The purpose of this chapter is to outline these and other core considerations for colleges and universities preparing to conduct campus climate surveys.

In April, 2014, the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault (henceforth “White House Task Force”) released two documents with valuable information about campus climate assessment at colleges and universities. The more general report and a detailed toolkit offer recommendations that were central to the design of the student survey conducted by the Center on Violence Against Women and Children at Rutgers University-New Brunswick in Fall 2014. This chapter is intended to complement the White House Task Force documents.

WHY CONDUCT A CAMPUS CLIMATE SURVEY?

As described in Chapter 1 of this guide, the student survey is one piece of a comprehensive assessment of campus climate regarding sexual assault. It is informed by the steps that precede it—the development of the project’s methodology and the resource audit—and shapes what follows—gathering qualitative data, analyzing findings, and constructing an action plan. Most importantly, a student survey gathers information that can only be gleaned from first-hand reports. This information includes measurements of subjective characteristics, such as students’ opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and awareness of campus resources. Surveys may also yield more accurate estimates of the prevalence of sexual assault than statistics from law enforcement, as many victims of campus sexual assault may never report the incident(s) to the authorities.

When designed carefully and thoughtfully, student surveys can also allow researchers to investigate specific questions of interest. For instance, an investigator might be especially interested in what makes undergraduates more or less likely to intervene to prevent a potential sexual assault. Questions or scales about bystander behavior can be inserted into the survey at the design stage to allow for analysis once data have been collected.

Finally, if researchers view the survey as part of the comprehensive assessment process, the findings will directly inform the development of an action plan for improving the campus response to sexual assault. Anticipating that the data will be used in this manner, researchers should design the survey to collect information that will be most useful in identifying and prioritizing needs, as well as in generating and implementing solutions.

Partners

Chapter 2 of this guide articulated the importance of fostering collaborations with key campus partners who serve either as advisors or as implementers of the research design. During the data-gathering phase of the project, it will, in most cases, be necessary to engage additional offices or individuals to support the smooth rollout of the student survey. Working partnerships with an Institutional Review Board and, if possible, an Office of Institutional Research, will be a significant asset to the project.

Institutional Review Board

A campus climate survey requires approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB). Most colleges and universities have IRB offices with protocols that will be familiar to faculty and researchers, but it is wise to review the specifications for application and approval before beginning any research project. For schools lacking an internal IRB, private review boards are available. It must be emphasized that data collection may not begin until an IRB has approved the research protocol.

Before composing the application, researchers should determine whether the project requires a full or expedited review. While institutional requirements may vary, a basic student survey like the one described in this chapter is likely to qualify for an expedited review, provided that it poses no more than minimal risk to subjects. Once again, researchers should consult the specific policies of their
IRB in determining which type of application to submit. Further, it is essential that there be sufficient time built into the project’s timeline to allow for review and approval of the IRB application and any anticipated amendments. Having a good working relationship with IRB staff can help researchers plan the timing of submissions, track applications and amendments in the review process, and answer any questions about human subjects research in a university setting that may arise.

Institutional Research

Many colleges and universities have an office or designated staff specifically charged with collecting and reporting data, often to federal or state governments, about the school and its students. At Rutgers, for instance, the Office of Institutional Research and Academic Planning maintains a warehouse of student data, administers one-time and recurring student surveys, conducts analyses, and reports information to internal and external bodies for planning and evaluation purposes. If a college or university conducting a campus climate survey has institutional research capacity, it is highly recommended that researchers engage them in the process for at least one of the following reasons:

- Institutional research staff have extensive expertise in data collection, survey research, and data analysis.
- They are familiar with the unique characteristics of the institution and its student body, which ought to be considered in the design of the survey and campus climate assessment overall.
- In some cases, the entity responsible for institutional research may have resources, such as staff, software, or funding, to support the campus climate survey.

At minimum, researchers should consult with the institutional research staff of the college or university before beginning a campus climate survey to make them aware of the survey’s timeline. At Rutgers, preliminary conversations with the Office of Institutional Research and Academic Planning staff yielded valuable insights about scheduling the survey and designing an incentive structure that was likely, in their experience, to facilitate the highest possible response rate. As the project proceeded, the office’s staff provided essential support in the design and administration of the online survey.

DESIGN

In designing the methodology for the campus climate survey, researchers must make several fundamental decisions. At each point, the available options have both benefits and drawbacks that ought to be considered carefully. Balancing these pros and cons forces tradeoffs, with response rates and data quality on one side of the equation and cost and feasibility on the other.

Survey Instrument

Constructing a campus climate survey is a process with multiple steps, but researchers need not start from scratch. Beginning with the question, “What do we want to know?” investigators should identify the constructs that are central to understanding the campus climate. The White House Task Force recommends convening a working group to enumerate and define these constructs; the advisory board, school administrators, and even students can be helpful at this stage.

Once researchers have identified what will be measured, they should seek out valid and reliable instruments that tap those constructs. For several of the constructs that will be included in typical campus climate surveys, scales

Altering Question Wording to Fit the Sample

The survey administered at Rutgers University-New Brunswick included a well-established scale for measuring Sense of Community. However, the scale was originally used in neighborhoods. Researchers made minor changes to the question wording to make it more relevant for the student sample:

Original question wording:
“I can get what I need in this community.”

Revised question wording:
“I can get what I need in this campus community.”

The alterations were discussed with the scale’s author during the drafting of the survey. In analysis, researchers will examine the revised scale’s performance against previous applications to assure that the results are equally valid and reliable.
or questions that have been subjected to trials and evaluation are available, along with their supporting research, for public use. The sample survey disseminated by the White House Task Force includes several “promising practice examples” of these scales and items, as does the pilot survey conducted at Rutgers University-New Brunswick (based on the White House Task Force survey). If there are constructs the research team hopes to measure that do not have validated scales associated with them, investigators should use care in developing them based on available research, pilot testing them, and drawing conclusions.

Informed Consent. In order to provide their informed consent to participate in the survey, students must be given an adequate explanation of the project’s purpose, including an explanation of the survey’s general content. Informed consent materials should outline any anticipated risks and potential benefits to respondents, explain that participation is voluntary, and emphasize that participants may withdraw from the study without consequence. IRB regulations also require researchers to include details about how the privacy of participants will be protected and how data will be securely stored. Investigators are encouraged to consult IRB guidelines about the scope of information to be provided to students in securing their informed consent.

Students must be informed that they will be asked questions about their experiences, attitudes, and behaviors regarding sexual assault. For some students, receiving the invitation to participate in a survey of this nature may be upsetting. For some, it may bring experiences of trauma to the fore. Some of these students may go on to complete the survey, while others will not. There is, therefore, an ethical obligation to provide information about where to go for counseling or support in communications presented before the survey is even administered. Information about available resources, either on campus or off, should be included in the informed consent materials.

Tailoring Items to Your Campus. Colleges and universities differ widely from one another, meaning that no single campus climate survey instrument will be appropriate in all higher education settings. Does the school serve only undergraduate students or are there graduate programs? Is there a rape crisis and counseling center on campus? Are fraternities, sororities, or social clubs a significant aspect of campus life? These and other characteristics of colleges and universities necessarily influence what is asked in a campus climate survey, as well as how questions are presented. Researchers should draw on the findings from the resource audit to shape questions about students’ awareness and utilization of available campus services, programs, and policies.

If researchers are using a survey instrument, scales, or items that have been developed for other schools or settings, it will likely be necessary to add, remove, or edit questions to better suit the particular campus environment in which the survey will be administered. When using validated scales, any alterations threaten the reliability and validity of results. However, minor changes, such as adapting pronouns or other words that do not apply to the population or the setting, may be necessary for the items to be relevant. In these cases, using the items’ original wording would sacrifice validity more than the small edits. All alterations to item wording, order, response scale, or any other fundamental aspects of a previously validated scale must be recorded and reported. Researchers should keep a log of edits to a survey instrument noting the original form of the scale or item, the updated form, and a justification of the change.

Social Desirability. As with all research, investigators should consider the potential sources of bias that may
Matching Survey Responses with Demographic Information

At Rutgers, respondents logged into the online survey by providing their student identification numbers; these numbers were used to match survey responses to student records, from which basic demographic information was pulled. The unique identifiers, in our case the student identification numbers, were then removed from this matched dataset, yielding the final raw dataset.

The school’s Office of Institutional Research and Academic Planning handled matching records and redacting identifying information. Because students provided their identification numbers, our survey was confidential, not anonymous.

The matching procedure, as well as the subsequent removal of unique information from the final dataset, was thoroughly explained in the informed consent language that students were required to agree to before proceeding to the survey.

Matching Survey Responses with Demographic Information affects the results of a campus climate survey. There are many excellent volumes on the topic that researchers may consult to better understand and avoid common sources of bias in survey research. One source of bias deserves explicit note here: social desirability bias. The campus climate survey addresses several issues for which certain answers are more favorable or pro-social, such as bystander willingness to intervene and prevent sexual assault. Researchers should expect some degree of social desirability to influence their findings on scales and items like these. Although it cannot be eliminated, assuring students that their responses are confidential and encouraging them to respond honestly can minimize social desirability bias.

Demographic Information. To better understand the experiences of students, researchers should examine survey results within and across groups. Investigators might dig deeper into the data, once they are collected, by looking at first-year students compared to all others, females compared to males, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) students compared to others, among other groups. This analysis requires some demographic information about each student who takes the survey.

The need to have demographic data raises two issues: confidentiality and respondents’ fatigue. First, assuming that the survey is anonymous or confidential (see below), researchers must be on guard against collecting information that can in any way link students to their responses. The nature of the campus climate survey is sensitive and personal, and collection of data ought to be anonymous or confidential to protect participants and encourage honest responding. If students are asked to enter e-mail addresses, identification numbers, or other unique information, they will be dubious about the research team’s ability to keep survey responses unconnected. However, some basic information, such as gender identity, sexual orientation, and class year, may be necessary to collect and is common enough as to make individual identification of subjects unfeasible.

Second, reporting demographic information on surveys can be tedious for respondents. Worryingly, it may lead to frustration or careless responding that can impact non-demographic items. Placing minimal demographic at the end of questionnaires can reduce this risk. Another option, if the survey is conducted online and your school’s student records are also electronic, is to pull this basic information from the latter and match it to the former. This method requires students to provide some unique identifying information, such as an ID number, to facilitate the matching procedure. Once demographic data have been drawn from student records and merged into the campus climate survey dataset, the unique identifiers must be redacted. Matching student records imposes the minimum burden on students, but it is complex, and students may question the ultimate confidentiality of their responses.

Sampling

One of the most important design decisions to be made in the course of conducting a campus climate survey is how to select students to participate. This decision influences each aspect of the project going forward, including, most notably, the outreach strategy and incentive structure.

Defining the Study Population. Determining who should be surveyed can be challenging. Most colleges and universities enroll a heterogeneous mix of students who will have vastly different campus experiences; in fact, some may not have campus experiences at all. When defining the study population, researchers must decide if all types of students or only some will be sampled, considering, as always, feasibility and the quality of results. Meaningful
distinctions between students at colleges and universities might include:

- Graduate or undergraduate
- Full-time or part-time
- Living in on-campus housing, off-campus housing, or commuting
- Taking classes on campus or taking classes online (or a mix)
- Matriculated or non-matriculated
- Domestic students or students studying abroad

At a large, complex institution like Rutgers, sampling from a full roster of enrollees necessarily includes students with little to no campus experience, whose responses to questions about campus resources might be limited (e.g., a part-time, online student living out-of-state). However, limiting the sample population may be messier and might filter out groups of students whose experiences are important in the context of campus sexual assault and should be better understood (e.g., commuting students who spend significant time on campus). Researchers should consider what is gained or lost by including or excluding certain groups of students.

If the student population of a school is highly heterogeneous, the dataset resulting from the campus climate survey must include variables that allow researchers to group students for analysis. Some of these variables may be available from administrative data (if matching student files to pull demographic information), while others must be translated into survey questions. Investigators should think about the characteristics of students’ experiences that might affect their responses to survey questions about sexual assault and campus resources (e.g., students taking all of their classes online are unlikely to report high awareness of school policies regarding sexual assault) and ensure that they will be able to distinguish different types of students in the final dataset.

**Sampling Strategy.** Once the study population has been defined, there are two main sampling strategies researchers might employ: random sampling, in which a representative subset of the population is invited to complete the survey, or census, in which the entire population may participate. Within random sampling, more complex methods, such as stratified or systematic random sampling, may be used to ensure representativeness or oversample certain groups. Deciding which strategy to use involves weighing the pros and cons of each and settling on the method that maximizes the features of the study deemed most important. Some of the benefits and drawbacks of random sampling and a census approach are enumerated in the table on the following page.

**Random sampling** has many advantages for researchers, most notably that it produces results that are, in theory, generalizable to the entire study population. If the sampling procedures are sound and the response rate sufficient, the quality of the data gathered in this manner will be quite good. Further, if investigators are interested in studying typically underrepresented groups, they can use more complex sampling strategies to ensure that the sub-sample’s size will be large enough to analyze. In the case of a campus climate study, an argument can be made for oversampling members of several groups: LGBTQ students, fraternity or sorority members, and student athletes, for instance. Because the random sample is a small subset of the study population, another advantage of using a random sampling strategy is that outreach is precisely targeted and relatively inexpensive (compared to outreach in project using a census).

However, random sampling is not without its drawbacks. Compared to conducting a census, using a random sample increases the logistical complexity of the project. Assuming a complete list of students in the study population can be acquired, selecting members of the sample is fairly easy with the help of statistical software. The challenges arise with outreach, tracking, and delivery of incentives. Because the sample is, by definition, only a small portion of the total study population, it is all the more important to

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### More Issues for Survey Design

The White House Task Force documents raise other issues that researchers should consider in designing campus climate surveys, including:

- How far back should students be asked to think for questions about exposure to sexual assault?
- Will the survey be repeated? If so, how often?
- How will the design protect against multiple or repeat responses?

Consult the resources provided by the White House Task Force for more on these and other issues related to survey design.
achieve a sufficient response rate. Typically, when using a random sample, all selectees who complete the survey receive some sort of incentive for their participation. While maintaining confidentiality, researchers must somehow track which members of the sample have completed the survey in order to deliver incentives to each eligible student. In a medium-sized university, a research team responsible for well-designed campus climate survey using a random sample may need to deliver over 1,000 incentive payments or rewards. Regardless of the type of incentive used, over 1,000 unique transactions will then need to be budgeted for, tracked, and delivered; under any circumstances, this is a daunting administrative task.

A second set of drawbacks to random sampling relate to the broader goals of the campus climate assessment process as a whole. In many ways, campus climate assessments are designed to bring the frequently hidden experiences of students to the forefront. In discussions of campus sexual assault, too often whole groups of people – male survivors, LBGTQ students, and transgender students, for example – are unlikely to come forward with their experiences, or worse, they are ignored or silenced. Even careful, stratified random sampling may omit groups whose experiences would enrich the campus climate assessment’s findings. Further, a campus climate survey can be an opportunity for raising community awareness and encouraging students to speak up, together, about the environments in which they learn and live. In this way, the survey itself may serve to improve the campus climate regarding sexual assault. Inviting only a few members of the community to participate through random sampling necessarily limits the effort’s inclusiveness and its immediate effect on the campus climate.

A census, on the other hand, has the advantage of inviting all students in the study population to participate, maximizing inclusiveness. Rather than targeted outreach, a census design requires a broader public awareness campaign to reach students, creating opportunities for education and community-wide discourse around sexual assault (see Outreach, below). However, a census will typically yield a lower response rate (though likely a larger sample size) than random sampling, due in part to the incentive structure the design necessitates. While random sample survey designs often reward each participant for their time, financial constraints generally limit researchers’ ability to use the same incentive structure in population surveys. Instead, raffles or drawings for a smaller number of larger prizes may be used to entice subjects to complete a survey. This incentive structure has the advantages of being cheaper and far simpler to administer than one in which each participant receives something. From the perspective of a potential survey-taker, though, a chance to win something, even if it is relatively valuable, is less attractive than a guarantee of receiving a smaller incentive. Thus, compared to random sampling with rewards to all participants, a lower percentage of the total population will complete the survey if all are invited but only a few rewarded. Even if a large number of students participate, if the response rate is low, the data may not fully generalize to the study population.

SURVEY ADMINISTRATION

Once again, there are many choices to be made about how to actually administer the survey to the student population. Again, there are no “right” or “wrong” decisions. Rather, some options will be a better fit in some school

Table 1. Sampling Design: Random Sampling versus Census

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RANDOM SAMPLE</th>
<th>CENSUS</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROS</strong></td>
<td><strong>CONS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unbiased and generalizable</td>
<td>Per respondent incentive payments are expensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can be used to oversample underrepresented groups</td>
<td>Administrative complexity to deliver incentives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficient outreach</td>
<td>Less inclusive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Higher response rate</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>More inclusive</td>
<td>Lower response rate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Incentive drawings are less expensive overall</td>
<td>Less efficient outreach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incentive distribution is less administratively complex</td>
<td>Self-selection bias among respondents</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public education opportunity</td>
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A table comparing the pros and cons of random sampling and census.
environments while others will not. Researchers should weigh each option with respect to feasibility, cost, and effect on data quality before determining a course of action. Some of the decision points that are central to the administration of a campus climate survey are listed below.

Anonymous or Confidential?

The data collected through the campus climate survey must be either anonymous or confidential, and investigators must clearly understand the difference. In the case of an anonymous survey, students complete the survey without ever providing any unique identifying information, such as a name, student identification number, or e-mail address. At no point in the survey administration or data analysis is it possible for anyone to connect an individual student with his or her survey responses. Anonymous data collection provides the most protection possible to students, allowing them to safely reveal sensitive or even incriminating information without fear of being identified.

However, it may not be possible to conduct a truly anonymous survey. Researchers may want to keep track of which students have completed the survey and which have not for at least three reasons: First, if the study design includes incentives for participants, it is usually necessary to have some method for tracking who has earned or is eligible for the reward. Second, using some identification system protects against multiple responders who might take the survey more than once. Third, knowing who has completed the survey allows researchers to target reminders and follow-up messages to those students who have not yet participated, sparing those who have already done what was asked from further messages. Reducing the number of unnecessary contacts maintains goodwill—important, in a time when online survey tools are being used to subject students to more surveys than ever before.

When it is necessary to keep track of students who have participated, researchers can conduct a confidential survey. Unlike anonymous data collection, confidential research protects the privacy of subjects even as it is possible, at least at some point during the study, to connect an individual with his or her survey responses. If researchers ask students to provide a unique identifier, such as a name, ID number, or e-mail address, at any point in the study, the project is confidential, not anonymous. In that case, investigators can guarantee students that only members of the research team (or some subset of the team) will be able to identify them or link them with their responses, explaining in informed consent materials how their privacy will nonetheless be maintained. Whether researchers choose to conduct an anonymous or confidential survey, the distinction must be made clear in informed consent materials with an explicit description of how students’ privacy will be protected throughout the course of the research.

Piloting

Before administering the survey to the full sample of students, it is wise to conduct a pilot to identify potential problems and fine-tune the survey process. Researchers can recruit a small convenience sample of students from interested campus groups by advertising, or through other mechanisms to participate in the piloting. These students are asked to take the survey and provide feedback on item wording, the ordering of questions, and any other facets of the process. If the budget allows, the research team may want to provide members of the pilot sample with a small incentive to compensate them for their time and thoughtful input.

What to Look for When Piloting

Students participating in the pilot should consider the following questions as they take the survey:

- Is the language in the survey relevant?
- Are the words and phrases used in the survey clear and easy to understand?
- Do the response choices make sense?
- Are you unsure how to answer any of the questions?
- Does the order of the questions make sense?

Once the pilot sample has been recruited, investigators should give some thought to how they will solicit feedback on the survey instrument and process. One option is to insert spaces throughout the questionnaire to allow students to provide open-ended, written feedback. If researchers are interested in students’ reactions to particular items, they can ask more specific questions about the survey. Some researchers may prefer to facilitate discussions with students piloting a survey; however, in the case of the campus climate survey, the sensitive subject matter may make confidential, written feedback the preferred choice. For instance, if the questionnaire employs skip logic, such that only students who report having experi-
ence any sexual assault are presented with further questions about victimization, any student commenting on those items in a focus group or interview would be identifying him- or herself as a survivor of sexual violence, possibly without intending to do so. Once all of the feedback has been gathered, members of the research team can determine where and how changes to the instrument or the survey process should be made. It may be helpful to keep a log of students’ comments and whether or not they will be addressed in revisions to the questionnaire.

Online or Pen and Paper?

With the availability of powerful and flexible online survey software, most colleges and universities have the option of administering the campus climate survey electronically. Compared to pen and paper, online administration has several benefits. First, since students’ responses are automatically compiled in a database, online surveys do not require manual data entry, eliminating a major source of errors in pen and paper surveys. Second, the use of skip logic to customize the questions presented to each participant is smooth and seamless online, but cumbersome and error-prone in pen and paper administrations. For example, each student taking the campus climate survey should be asked whether or not he or she has experienced unwanted sexual contact since enrolling in school. Those that indicate having had such experiences are then asked to answer a series of questions about what happened; those that do not report victimization skip to the next section. Online, this transition is undetectable. Students with no reported experience of victimization are unaware that they have surpassed an entire section of the survey. This sort of skip logic, which can be used throughout the survey, allows researchers to ask follow-up questions only of those respondents for whom further questions are relevant. It is possible to incorporate skip logic into pen and paper surveys, but it cannot be similarly automated, causing an increase in complexity that will likely result in poorer quality data.A third benefit of online survey administration is its flexibility across platforms. Many online survey programs allow investigators to make their questionnaires mobile-friendly, so they may be completed on tablets, smartphones, and computers alike. Students need not be sitting in a computer lab or in front of their laptop to take the survey. Rather, they can complete it when and where they like on mobile devices, if desired. This flexibility logically increases the survey’s response rate.

Although it will almost always be preferable to administer the survey online, one advantage to pen-and-paper questionnaires should be noted in particular. Provided the survey does not ask for any unique, personal information, a campus climate survey administered in hard copy can be anonymous. Further, students can be sure that their responses cannot in any way be traced back to them, since they can observe that the researcher makes no record matching them to their survey responses. While it is possible to administer an online survey that is anonymous, it is much more difficult to demonstrate to participants that their privacy will be protected. At Rutgers, however, only a few students expressed concern about confidentiality in the online survey. For these reasons, online administration of a campus climate survey will generally be preferable.

When to Administer the Survey

The research team will need to decide when to schedule the survey to maximize both the student response rate and the quality of the data gathered. The availability of online survey tools has dramatically increased the number of questionnaires students are asked to complete, leading inevitably to survey fatigue. When scheduling the campus climate survey, it is best to choose a time when there are few or no other surveys open.

Investigators should also consider the point during the school year that the survey should be administered. If the survey is conducted during the fall, most first-year students will have had relatively little exposure to the campus environment. As the first year of school may be associated with a greater risk of experiencing rape, harassment,
or other unwanted sexual contact, administering the survey too early in the year may yield misleadingly low rates of sexual assault. When possible, it is recommended that schools conduct climate surveys in the spring to ensure that most participants have experienced several months of campus life. Avoiding periods when students are busier than usual, such as exam weeks, or less engaged, like over school breaks, is also wise.

How Long to Keep the Survey Open

Along with determining when to administer the student survey, researchers must also decide how long to make it available. The window ought to be wide enough to allow sample members ample time to complete the survey. At Rutgers, the survey was available for two weeks, such that students had opportunities to participate across several weekdays, weeknights, and two full weekends. Even if a student was too busy to take the survey on a given day, the team expected nearly all students would have some free time in the course of the weeks to participate. Limiting the time frame to two weeks will also ensure that most students who wish to take the survey do not put it off indefinitely. A finite window also allows researchers to have an anchor in the project’s timeline around which they can plan their work.

However, if, during the course of the survey’s administration, researchers are tracking the response rate and find that they are not observing the participation they anticipated, it is possible to extend the survey window. Maintaining some flexibility in this manner is advisable, since researchers essentially have one chance to gather the best information possible. If a strategy does not appear to be working, there ought to be some room to tweak the approach for better results. It should be noted that researchers should not extend the survey period more than once or twice, lest students grow skeptical about the strictness of the deadlines. Whenever investigators alter their research protocol, however, they must ensure that the IRB has approved of the changes. Writing anticipated changes, like the option to extend the survey period by a few days, can be written into the original IRB application or subsequent amendments prior to the administration of the survey, allowing researchers to make approved modifications without additional review.

MAXIMIZING RESPONSE RATES

Whether using a census approach or inviting a randomly selected sample to participate in the survey, researchers should aim to maximize participation among eligible students. A larger sample almost always translates into better data. Strategies for increasing response rates typically fall into one of two categories: outreach and the use of incentives. Elements of each have been discussed throughout this chapter, as they relate to other components of the survey design. Below is a lengthier treatment of incentives and outreach, highlighting the points that researchers may wish to consider in developing their approaches.

Incentives

Certainly, some students will respond to the survey because they are concerned about campus sexual assault, because they value community participation, or because they want their school to establish stronger policies and protocols. Conversely, some students will never take a campus climate survey, regardless of enticements offered by the university or research team. Many students, however, fall somewhere in between, and will take the survey if they are given some sort of tangible reward for their time and participation. Survey researchers commonly use incentives, such as cash payments, gift cards, or entry into raffles for prizes to attract a larger sample of respondents.

Because resources are limited, investigators will usually be required to balance the monetary value of each incentive with the number of prizes or payments to be delivered. In general, research studies will offer large prizes to a few participants, selected in a raffle, or smaller incentives to more, or sometimes all, members of the sample. The incentive structure will typically correspond with the sampling method selected. When a random sampling ap-
approach is used, researchers will often encourage participants to join the study by promising each one a small payment for his or her time. Even though the payment may be relatively small, the guarantee of compensation is enough to draw many students into the final sample. As only a small subset of the total population is invited to take the survey, researchers can spread their budget for incentives across all respondents while still providing sufficient compensation for participation.

If a census approach is used, it is unlikely that the research team will have the resources to provide a sufficiently attractive incentive to each student completing the survey. Even with a modest response rate, per respondent payments quickly balloon in population studies, overwhelming the project's budget. As an alternative, researchers may provide each participant with an entry into a drawing or raffle for prizes that are more valuable but fewer in number.

The next question for the research team is what exactly to offer as an incentive. Cash, gift cards, and consumer goods, like tablets or smartphones, are often used to motivate students to participate in surveys. When determining what sort of incentive to provide, researchers should consider how attractive students will find the reward and how easy it will be to acquire, account for, and distribute. Because the goal is to entice as many students as possible to take the survey, the incentive should have wide appeal. The experience of the Rutgers team suggests, and research corroborates,\(^\text{12}\) that the majority of students prefer cash incentives over gift cards or consumer products. This makes sense: students are limited as to where they can redeem gift cards, making them unattractive if the designated vendor is not universally used. Similarly, if researchers offer tangible goods, like small electronics, students who already own such products will not be attracted by the incentive. If it is possible to offer cash payments, either in small sums to each participant (i.e., in a random sample design) or in larger amounts to randomly drawn winners (i.e., in a census design), researchers are encouraged to do so.\(^\text{13}\) However, the best way to determine the incentives that students in a particular setting will find the most attractive is simply to ask. An informal poll of students can provide helpful insight into what will encourage students to participate in the project. This question may also be posed to students during the pilot.

**Outreach**

To encourage students to participate in the survey, a communications strategy is necessary. The nature of the outreach will depend on whether researchers are using random sampling or a census approach. In random sample designs, researchers will be primarily concerned with inviting the selected subset of students to take the survey and informing them about how they will be compensated for their participation. This communication can take the form of a series of personalized e-mails or letters, strategically planned for maximum impact.\(^\text{14}\) An initial note might let students know they have been randomly chosen to participate, describe the study, and explain how to take the survey and collect their incentives. Follow-up messages might remind students who have not yet taken the survey that their input is especially important, emphasizing that they have a limited amount of time to participate if they wish to claim their reward. In a random sample study, outreach will be targeted to a small group of students and limited to three to four points of contact, probably online.

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**A Tiered Incentive Structure for Census Design**

At Rutgers University-New Brunswick, where all students were invited to participate in the study, those who completed the survey were entered into drawings for cash prizes. A tiered incentive structure was used to encourage students to participate early in the survey period:

- 20 winners of $300, drawn from students who completed the survey in the first three days
- 15 winners of $200, drawn from students who completed the survey in the first week, excepting those who already won
- 15 winners of $150, drawn from all students who completed the survey, excepting those who already won

Additional prizes were added in the final days of the survey period to boost the response rate:

- 15 more winners of $150, drawn from all students who completed the survey, excepting those who already won
Outreach costs in a random sample study, therefore, are likely to be relatively low.

If the research design calls for conducting a census, on the other hand, communication will occur on a much larger scale, likely incurring greater costs. In this case, outreach takes the form of a multimedia public awareness campaign with the goal of reaching as many students as possible, multiple times. Students absorb information through many different channels, so a successful campus-wide outreach effort will take advantage of the array of communication platforms available. E-mails, poster campaigns, and social media messages should be a part of any school’s broad-based outreach. If there are regular newsletters, e-mail blasts, or announcements to students, the research team should aim to include information about the survey in communications in the weeks leading up to administration. Direct messages from known and respected figures on campus, such as a dean or the student council president, can be useful in demonstrating widespread support and buy-in for the project.

Across platforms and for all study designs, messages should be clear, consistent, and extremely concise. They should convey the topic of the study, include all of the necessary information about how to access the survey during the administration period, and emphasize that participation earns each student a chance (or chances) to win a prize. For students who would like more information, the research team may create a dedicated website to house details about the project.

To facilitate clear communication, you may also choose to “brand” your survey. This gives all members of the community an easy way to discuss the project while also creating “buzz” about the survey. At Rutgers, the campus climate survey was named #iSPEAK to emphasize that it provided an opportunity for students to share their personal experiences with an audience that valued their input. The name is short, easy to spell, and memorable. Additionally, by incorporating the hashtag into the name when written, the Rutgers research team signaled the intention to use social media in communicating about the survey and solicit student participation in messaging. Across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, members of the Rutgers community used the hashtag #iSPEAK to talk about the survey and ending sexual violence on campus.

Encouraging students to partner with researchers in campus-wide outreach can significantly strengthen the project’s communications. Students’ participation, from individuals joining an online discussion by using a project-specific hashtag to student groups hosting events for their members, allows students to feel some ownership of the survey, engendering a higher response rate. Ultimately, the hope is that students feel personally invested in their campus community and view the survey as an opportunity to influence their environment for the better. Further, if students are engaged throughout the campus climate assessment process, including interpretation of the data and development of an action plan, efforts to strengthen campus policies and procedures regarding sexual assault are more likely to be successful.

Outreach Avenues

Rutgers University-New Brunswick is a large institution with multiple campuses serving many different types of students. Our research team aimed to use as many outreach avenues as possible to communicate with the largest swath of the population. Some of the ways we publicized the survey included the following:

- Ads in the school newspaper
- Displays on monitors in student centers
- Table tents in dining halls
- Pop-up survey stations in libraries
- Notifications on student web portals
- Door hangers on all rooms in residence halls
- Rubber bracelets with the #iSPEAK logo

A detailed outreach plan describing each activity used on our campus is included in Attachment 2.
AN OPPORTUNITY FOR EDUCATION

While the campus climate survey is primarily a tool for gathering information about students’ experiences, attitudes, and behaviors regarding sexual assault, it can also serve to educate participants and raise their awareness about the issues addressed. Many students may not know that sexual assault is a serious issue on their campus until the survey asks them direct questions on the topic. Researchers can capitalize on students’ interest and attention by providing a detailed list of campus and community resources at the conclusion of the survey, along with information sources for those who wish to learn more.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this chapter has been to lay out some of the central elements of a campus climate survey process, as well as choices to make and issues to consider in implementing such a project. As a complement to the White House Task Force’s resources, this chapter details the different ways in which colleges and universities might design and administer a climate survey regarding sexual assault, informed by the authors’ experience surveying students at Rutgers University-New Brunswick in the fall of 2014. As schools set out to conduct campus climate assessments, of which a student surveys are a crucial component, the considerations and lessons learned that are described here can serve as a guide.

Throughout the assessment process, however, numerous issues will arise that have not been addressed specifically in this document or by the White House Task Force. When determining a course of action, researchers should always weigh the options, knowing that tradeoffs must be made. For example, increasing response rates will almost always incur greater costs. Most important when making any design choice is ensuring that students and their privacy are protected. Beyond that, investigators should aim to uphold rigorous research standards as much as possible and be realistic about what can be achieved.

A topic this chapter has not addressed is what is to be done with the data gathered in the course of conducting a campus climate survey. Researchers should follow established guidelines for data storage and data cleaning, proceeding with analysis and reporting once the team is confident that the data quality is acceptable. A future chapter of this guide will discuss how findings from the student survey can be synthesized with qualitative data, providing a more complete understanding of the campus climate. This understanding ultimately informs the development of an action plan to strengthen policies and protocols for preventing sexual assault, responding to it when it occurs, and supporting victims.

Recommended Citation


Notes

3. Ibid.
5. Providing information about campus resources in the informed consent would, by definition, increase students’ knowledge of available services and programs, priming them to report higher levels of awareness in the survey. An alternative approach is to provide students invited to take the survey with the phone number and URL for counseling and support offered by an agency external to the school, such as a state crisis counseling center. Reduces some of the potential bias while allowing researchers to uphold their ethical obligations to survey participants.
10. It should be noted that, in either scenario, some students will participate in the survey for reasons other than the incentive.
13. It is possible to provide cash-like incentives to students in the form of pre-paid debit cards, but these often have fees and expiration dates associated with them, making them more costly and their use more limited. Online money transfers have also been used, though these require more effort on the part of the students to accept the payment. To make the incentive maximally attractive to students, researchers should make it as easy as possible to use. Hence, cash will generally be the most desirable option.