

Rutgers Campus Climate Survey Pilot Assessment: Lessons Learned

Trigger Warning: This document addresses the issue of campus sexual violence, which may be a difficult topic for some readers. Please see the end of the document for resources available.

A Report to the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault and the Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women: Executive Summary

Background

Addressing the problem of sexual violence on college and university campuses has emerged as a national priority, evidenced by the creation of the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault and the release of its report, *Not Alone*. The White House Task Force and the U.S. Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) invited the Rutgers School of Social Work's Center on Violence Against Women and Children (VAWC) to pilot a campus climate survey developed by OVW regarding students' experiences, behaviors, and attitudes related to sexual violence.

During the 2014–2015 academic year, researchers from Rutgers engaged in a comprehensive campus climate assessment project at Rutgers University–New Brunswick. The campus climate survey was embedded in this multi-phase, mixed-methods assessment effort. Throughout the process, the team learned lessons about what worked well and what could be improved. Rutgers' Center on Violence Against Women and Children team prepared a report on the process, the lessons learned, and recommendations for implementation for the White House Task Force and the Office on Violence Against Women.

A major theme of the Rutgers findings is that higher education institutions must develop a process and tools that are tailored to the needs of their specific campus community to make them meaningful. The key findings and recommendations outlined in the full report provide guidance to other universities that seek to engage in this important work.

Key Lessons Learned

Campus climate surveys provide more meaning when they are part of a larger assessment process. Our experience at Rutgers University–New Brunswick suggests that a campus climate survey can be more informative if it is part of a comprehensive, continuous assessment process. This process includes conducting a resource audit prior to the survey so that the university is aware of all services on campus and can utilize that information to tailor the survey tool. It may also include follow up methods to gather more detailed information, such as focus groups. Additionally, the assessment includes developing an action plan.

The administration of campus climate surveys has the most impact when it is linked with the development of an action plan. The meaningfulness of the data is found in its translation into the development of an action plan for the university. The action plan should build upon the strengths of the particular university and clearly outline changes in programs, policies, and services to address any gaps identified by the assessment. This requires a strong, collaborative approach among researchers, student affairs, and university leadership.

One size does not fit all. Campus climate surveys should be tailored with questions specific to each campus, for each university or college to make the data collected meaningful at that institution. Using a one-size-fits-all tool might lead to data that does not reveal the particular individual needs relevant to each university or college.

It is important to find ways to represent all student voices. It was imperative at Rutgers University–





New Brunswick to find ways to involve students in sharing their voices and experiences. There are a number of ways to accomplish this such as: 1) inviting all students to participate in the survey and 2) conducting focus groups with various groups of students such as survivors, athletes, students from cultural centers, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered students, among others. Other institutions should find appropriate methods of involving students' voices in the assessment process to the greatest extent allowable.

A campus climate survey can be an educational tool in and of itself. We found that developing a careful outreach plan that was built on collaboration across campus offered a way to engage the entire campus community in raising awareness about the issue of sexual violence and allowing students to share their experiences.

For More Information

Specific recommendations for conducting a campus climate assessment are provided in the full report and address the following key areas: developing the methodology, preparing the assessment measures, implementing the measures, performing data analysis, developing an action plan, and disseminating findings. For the full report and information on each of these areas, please see the website of the Center on Violence Against Women and Children, at <http://vawc.rutgers.edu>.

The research team at Rutgers' Center on Violence Against Women and Children is also compiling and sharing *Understanding and Responding to Campus Sexual Assault: A Guide for Colleges and Universities* (<http://socialwork.rutgers.edu/CentersandPrograms/VAWC/researchevaluation/CampusClimateProject.aspx>). This report documents methodological issues for consideration, lessons learned, and recommendations across dimensions of the campus climate assessment process, including: fostering campus collaborations, conducting a resource audit, conducting a student survey, collecting qualitative data, and developing an action plan. The guide is free and available on the center's website, <http://vawc.rutgers.edu>.

In addition to the recommendations provided in this report, the *Not Alone* toolkit provides a number of helpful guidelines for developing and implementing campus climate surveys (www.notalone.gov/assets/ovw-climate-survey.pdf). Many of our recommendations build upon the information provided in the toolkit.

About the Rutgers University–New Brunswick Campus Climate Assessment Project

The campus climate assessment is a collaborative project conducted by Rutgers' Center on Violence Against Women and Children, Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance, and Office of Student Affairs.

Support for the project was provided by the Rutgers University–New Brunswick Office of the Chancellor, School of Social Work, and Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs. Details about the campus climate assessment can be found at <http://vawc.rutgers.edu>.

Resources

To speak confidentially with a trained advocate or counselor, contact the Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 848-932-1181. Services are free and confidential to all members of the Rutgers University community.

For assistance outside of Rutgers, please visit the New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault (<http://njcasa.org>) or the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (<https://rainn.org>).

Contact the Research Team

Members of the research team (principal investigator Sarah McMahon, and research team members Kate Stepleton, Julia O'Connor, and Julia Cusano) deeply appreciate the opportunity to engage in the pilot process for the survey and comprehensive assessment. We are hopeful that the lessons learned will inform future efforts to address campus sexual violence. Contact the research team at campusclimatestudy@ssw.rutgers.edu.