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

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We gratefully acknowledge the thoughtful input of the Campus Climate Assessment Advisory Board in the development of this guide:

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Chapter 1: Introduction
Sexual violence has been a long-standing problem on college campuses. It is currently estimated that one in five women is sexually assaulted while in college. And while there are fewer reliable estimates, research indicates that approximately 6.1 percent of men are sexually assaulted while in college. There has been a number of calls for colleges and universities to respond to the issue of sexual assault, from organizations such as Students Active for Ending Rape, the American College Health Association, and the National Institutes of Justice. Despite this, progress in reducing sexual victimization on college campuses has been slow, leaving many colleges and universities in need of more feasible and effective solutions. As a result, there is growing interest among researchers, advocates, and lawmakers in responding to the needs of victims on campus and in holding schools accountable to their obligation to protect students from sexual violence.

In January, 2014, President Barack Obama established the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault with a mandate to strengthen federal enforcement efforts and provide schools with recommendations and resources to help reduce sexual violence on college campuses. The White House Task Force released its first report in April 2014, recommending initial steps for schools to take to foster a campus climate that is supportive of sexual assault survivors and intolerant of sexual violence.

By systematically assessing the campus climate regarding sexual assault, colleges and universities can examine the extent to which students report awareness of sexual assault and use of campus resources. This information can provide a baseline for schools to evaluate and tailor their efforts to ensure that students have access to necessary services and are receiving accurate, usable information while at the same time not creating policies that place barriers to survivors getting the services they want and feel they need. In order to create such a climate, schools must critically evaluate themselves to identify gaps in their sexual violence services, policies, and prevention efforts and develop an action plan that is evidence-based, meets federal mandates, and effectively addresses students’ needs.

To begin this process, the White House Task Force recommends conducting a campus climate assessment, including a survey of student knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to sexual assault. This helps to determine the scope of the problem of sexual violence on campus and to assess students’ perceptions of the university’s response to sexual violence. The survey may be complemented by additional means of data collection to gather more comprehensive campus climate information related to services, school protections, and the prevalence and incidence of sexual violence. Figure 1 outlines one approach for assessing campus climate, from identifying existing resources to surveying students to action planning for improvement. Although the steps outlined below are presented linearly, the structure presented here is not necessarily so rigid. Each school is encouraged to think about how this design might be altered or refined to best meet its needs, given its organizational structure, student body characteristics, and available resources.

Researchers from the Center on Violence Against Women and Children (VAWC) at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, are piloting an evidence-informed method for assessing the climate regarding sexual assault on the school’s New Brunswick campus, following the approach depicted below, during the 2014-2015 academic year. Throughout the campus climate assessment process, the researchers are sharing lessons learned in a guide comprised of serially released chapters. The purpose of this guide is to provide direction, informed by research evidence and best practices as well as the experience of the research team at Rutgers-New Brunswick, on conducting a campus climate assessment.

In this guide, each chapter describes a different step in the campus climate assessment process and is designed...
to present generalizable steps outlining the assessment process, while providing specific examples of the from the experience at Rutgers-New Brunswick to illustrate how the process may be tailored to fit a school’s needs. This guide provides key considerations and lessons learned, comprising a generalizable method that may be adapted to other higher education settings. Certainly each campus has a unique set of needs, opportunities, and constraints. School officials should feel free to adapt any steps and criteria presented in the tool kit to match their capacity, while still upholding rigorous methods.

RECOMMENDED CITATION


Notes

2. Krebs et al., 2007

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