

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

Sarah McMahon, Ph.D.
Kate Stepleton, MSW
Julia Cusano, MSW
Julia O'Connor, MSW, MPH



Center on Violence
Against Women and
Children

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research team thanks the many members of the Rutgers University community who contributed to the development and dissemination of *Understanding and Responding to Campus Sexual Assault: A Guide to Climate Assessment for Colleges and Universities*. The campus climate assessment and this guide are the result of the enthusiastic support and participation of administrators, faculty, staff, and students across Rutgers.

Advisory Board

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

[Judy L. Postmus, Ph.D., ACSW](#)

Director, Center on Violence Against Women and Children
Associate Professor, School of Social Work

[Ruth Anne Koenick](#)

Director, Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance

[Jackie W. Moran, JD](#)

Director of Student Affairs Compliance
Title IX Coordinator

[Jordan Draper, MA](#)

Community Standards Coordinator, Residential Life

Rutgers University

We would especially like to thank the following members of the Rutgers community for their continued support of the Campus Climate Assessment:

[Richard L. Edwards, Ph.D.](#)

Executive Vice President of Student Affairs
Chancellor, Rutgers University, New Brunswick

[Felicia E. McGinty, Ed.D.](#)

Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs

[Cathryn Potter, Ph.D.](#)

Dean, School of Social Work

RESEARCH TEAM

[Sarah McMahon, Ph.D. \(Principal Investigator\)](#)

Assistant Professor, School of Social Work
Associate Director, Center on Violence Against Women and Children

[Kate Stepleton, MSW](#)

School of Social Work

[Julia Cusano, MSW](#)

School of Social Work

[Julia O'Connor, MSW, MPH](#)

School of Social Work

[Alexis Sellas, MSW, MFA](#)

School of Social Work

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

Chapter 1: Introduction



Center on Violence
Against Women and
Children

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.¹ And while there are fewer reliable estimates, research indicates that approximately 6.1 percent of men are sexually assaulted while in college.² 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,³ the American College Health Association,⁴ and the National Institutes of Justice.⁵ 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.⁶ 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 ap-

What to Expect from the Guide

As the Rutgers research team completes phases of its campus climate assessment, new resources detailing the process will be released as toolkit chapters. Some forthcoming chapters include:

- Conducting a Resource Audit (Available now)
- Conducting a Student Survey (Winter 2015)
- Gathering Qualitative Data (Spring 2015)
- Putting it All Together: Consolidating Results (Summer 2015)
- Developing an Action Plan (Summer 2015)

Tools for use on your campus, as well as detailed descriptions of campus climate assessment process at Rutgers will be released along with these chapters. Check <http://vawc.rutgers.edu> for the newest pieces of the toolkit.

proach 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

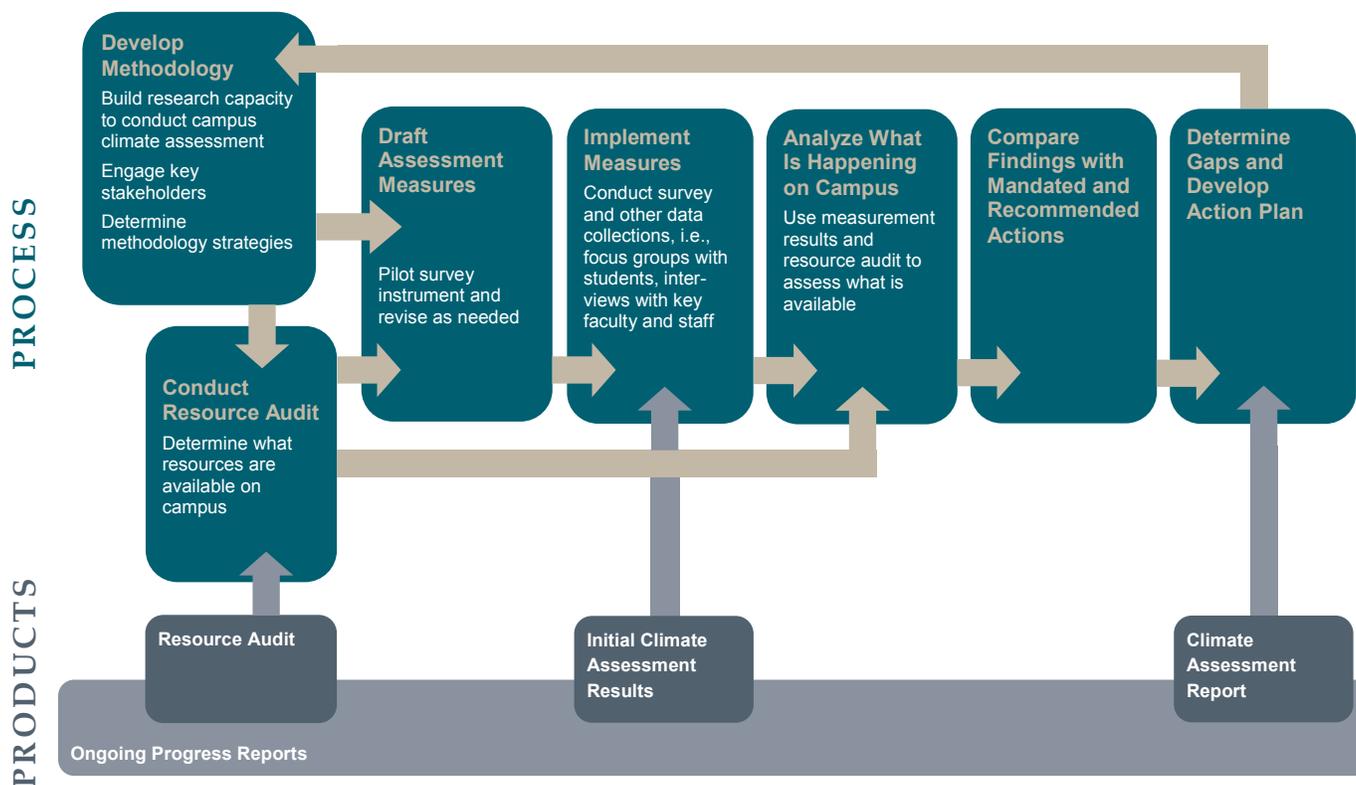


Figure 1. Process and products for conducting a campus climate assessment regarding sexual assault

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

McMahon, S., Stepleton, K., Cusano, J., & O'Connor, J. (2014). Understanding and responding to campus sexual assault: A guide to climate assessment for colleges and universities: Chapter 1: Introduction. Center on Violence Against Women and Children, School of Social Work, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey: New Brunswick, NJ.

Notes

1. Krebs, C.P., Lindquist, C.H., Warner, T.D., Fisher, B.S., & Martin, S.L. (2007). *The Campus Sexual Assault (CSA) Study*. Washing-

ton, DC: National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice.; Krebs, C.P., Lindquist, C.H., Warner, T.D., Fisher, B.S., & Martin, S.L. (2009). College Women's Experiences with Physically Forced, Alcohol- or Other Drug-Enabled, and Drug-Facilitated Sexual Assault Before and Since Entering College. *Journal of American College Health*, 57(6), 639-647.

2. Krebs et al., 2007
3. As described in the report SAFER & V-Day (2013). *Making the grade? Findings from the campus accountability project on sexual assault policies*. New York: SAFER (Students Active for Ending Rape). Retrieved from: <http://www.safercampus.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/2013-Campus-Accountability-Project-Report-Executive-Summary.pdf>
4. American College Health Association. (April, 2007). Position statement on preventing sexual violence on college and university campuses. Retrieved April 20, 2014 from http://www.acha.org/info_resources/ACHA_SexualViolence_Statement07.pdf
5. Karjane, H.K., Fisher, B.S., & Cullen, F.T. (2002). *Campus Sexual Assault: How America's Institutions of Higher Education Respond*. Final Report, NIJ Grant # 1999-WA-VX-0008. Newton, MA: Education Development Center, Inc.
6. Walsh, W. A., Banyard, V. L., Moynihan, M. M., Ward, S. & Cohn, El. S. (2010). Disclosure and service use on a college campus after an unwanted sexual experience. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 11(2), 134-151.

© Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, 2014