

ADDRESSING CLIMATE ISSUES WITHIN A DEPARTMENT

The impetus for change in one department was the observation that female graduate students were dropping out of the program at a much higher rate than male students were. Climate seemed to be the major problem. Two faculty went to a workshop on gender and, inspired by what their colleagues at other institutions were doing, formed a committee consisting of faculty and graduate students to discuss climate issues in the department. They created a survey based on existing surveys and on comments from the students. One practical issue that took some time to work through was the university's concern that the survey might disclose problems that they would be legally obligated to address. Although the committee had wanted the survey to be completely anonymous, the university required links that would allow it to identify individuals if someone reported any illegal activity. Respondents were informed that the university might identify them if it thought it had a duty to intervene. Developing the survey and reaching agreement with the university took about a year. Because the committee believed in the importance of assessing and changing the climate, they persevered.

THE FIRST SURVEY

The survey combined multiple-choice and short-answer items. The office of institutional research, not the department, analyzed the results in order to preserve the confidentiality of students' responses and forwarded aggregate data to the committee. The committee summarized the data—basic patterns, numerical results, and some quotations—and discussed the results in three meetings: a faculty-faculty meeting, a student-student meeting, and a meeting with the department as a whole.

To ensure receptivity among the faculty, the committee tied the issues to education. For example, if students were not attending colloquia because of the climate, that interfered with the department's educational mission. One surprise was that all students had complaints about the climate. Another surprise was that women were about twice as dissatisfied as men. Faculty were taken aback and concerned by the extent of the problem. The department developed several faculty-student subcommittees to make recommendations for change. Each subcommittee met four to five times over a two-month period and presented recommendations to the main climate committee. That group created a combined list of recommendations, which ranged from learning about bystander interventions to creating a more respectful climate. The whole department met again to discuss the recommendations.

THE SECOND SURVEY

The second survey found dramatic improvement on almost every question. Dissatisfaction had been cut roughly in half and greater attrition by women from the program had stopped. A large majority of students thought that the department now had a respectful climate.

As with the first survey, the results were presented at a joint meeting of students and faculty. The subcommittees continue their work, and there will be another survey in a year. Newer students take the current climate to be the norm. Some older students and faculty are still skeptical, but since the department is manifestly a much more congenial place, they are willing to go along.



What we find **exemplary** about the department's efforts:

1. Their recognition that there was a problem;
2. Their efforts to find solutions that went against long-standing norms;
3. Their persistence in the face of difficulties, including legal constraints imposed by the institution and reluctance on the part of some faculty;
4. Their recognition that climate issues cannot be solved in one fell swoop but require ongoing efforts on a number of fronts by a number of people;
5. Their commitment to gathering and analyzing data on a regular basis; and
6. Their discovery that their department became a better place for almost everyone.

Excerpt from Stewart, A. & Valian, V. (2018). *An inclusive academy: Achieving diversity and excellence*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Box 7.2, pp 269–270, How one department addressed a climate issue.