



---

## TALKING POINTS: CAMPUS CLIMATE SURVEYS

Campus climate surveys are essential for colleges and universities committed to preventing campus sexual assault. They generate valuable school-level data about the nature and extent of sexual assault on individual campuses so that schools can create tailored prevention and response efforts.

### SUMMARY

- Campus climate surveys are an essential tool to prevent and respond to incidents of campus sexual assault.
- The White House and the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights have identified campus climate surveys on sexual assault as a best practice.
- Existing reporting mechanisms and national data do not capture the nature and scope of sexual assault as it exists on individual campuses. Without valid school-level data schools cannot effectively prevent and respond to incidents of sexual assault.
- As demonstrated in the Department of Justice’s [Campus Climate Survey Validation Study](#), best practices for conducting campus climate surveys have now been established and every campus climate survey conducted should meet these standards.
- Campus climate surveys can help schools direct resources where they are needed most and will be the most effective.
- Campus climate surveys should serve as the foundation of a comprehensive campus sexual assault action plan.

### **Campus climate surveys are essential to prevent and respond to incidents of campus sexual assault.**

- One of the most important purposes of a campus climate survey is to generate school-level data about the nature and extent of sexual assault on individual campuses so that schools can use the information to effectively prevent and respond to incidents of campus sexual assault.

- Campus climate surveys can help schools:
  - Uncover blind spots in existing institutional responses to campus sexual assault;
  - Reveal whether students perceive certain campus environments or populations as hostile;
  - Identify student populations most at risk for sexual assault;
  - Show whether sexual assault is more likely to occur during certain times of year or to coincide with certain campus events;
  - Demonstrate whether students feel comfortable reporting incidents of sexual assault to school officials;
  - Show the level of knowledge that students have about campus resources for victims; and
  - Bring to light any confusion about policies and procedures related to campus sexual assault, including how and where to report incidents.
- The regular administration of campus climate surveys can show changes over time, such as decreases in sexual assaults and increases in awareness or reporting, helping schools measure whether their prevention and response efforts are working.
- Campus climate surveys can lead to safer campuses by demonstrating a school's commitment to combatting sexual assault, which can build trust with students, faculty, and parents, creating an environment where students feel more comfortable reporting incidents of sexual assault.
- Having students who feel comfortable reporting sexual assault on campus enables campus or local law enforcement to deal with serial perpetrators and helps victims heal from trauma, stay in school, and feel confident in the school's handling of the assault.

**The Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) recommends that schools conduct campus climate surveys.**

- OCR's 2015 [Title IX Resource Guide](#) recommends that Title IX coordinators help develop a method to survey the campus climate, evaluate whether any discriminatory attitudes pervade the school culture, and determine whether any harassment or other problematic behaviors are occurring, where they happen, which students are responsible, which students are targeted, and how those conditions may be best remedied.

- In its 2014 “[Questions and Answers on Title IX and Sexual Violence](#),” OCR recommends conducting a climate survey as one response to incidents of sexual violence on campus, regardless of whether a victim is pursuing a complaint, to help limit the effects of sexual violence, prevent its recurrence, and eliminate a hostile environment.
- Since 2013, climate surveys have been a [standard requirement](#) in resolution agreements OCR enters into with schools to resolve Title IX complaints.
- In its 2011 [Dear Colleague Letter on Title IX Coordinators](#), OCR recommends that Title IX coordinators coordinate the collection and analysis of information from an annual climate survey if, as recommended by OCR, the school conducts one.

**Campus climate surveys have been identified as a best practice to combat sexual assault by the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault.**

- The White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault characterizes regular climate surveys as “a best-practice response to campus sexual assault” and recommends that schools use them to “examine the prevalence and incidence of sexual assault on campus and assess students’ perceptions of a university’s response to sexual assault.”
- In recognition of the important role campus climate surveys play in combatting campus sexual assault, the Task Force developed the *Not Alone* campus climate survey toolkit to serve as a guide for schools to plan and conduct their own surveys. The toolkit includes a sample survey piloted by [Rutgers University](#).

**Best practices for conducting campus climate surveys have now been established and are freely available to any school.**

- In 2015 the U.S. Justice Department successfully developed, tested, and validated a campus climate survey, the [Campus Climate Survey Validation Study \(CCSVS\)](#), which was grounded in the *Not Alone* toolkit. The express intention of the CCSVS was to create a survey that meets the highest standards of survey research that can be used by any school to efficiently collect valid school-level data from students about their experiences with sexual assault on campus.
- The CCSVS successfully demonstrated best practices for campus climate survey research and every campus climate survey should meet these standards to be considered valid. Some examples of best practices include:
  - The survey instrument should be brief (less than 20 minutes) and available on a variety of electronic devices.
  - The survey should be administered towards the end of the academic year and remain available to participants for at least one month, but preferably two.

- The methodology should include multiple follow-up reminders for non-respondents.
- Recruitment materials should be personalized for potential respondents and messages should be customized for males to increase participation.
- The [survey instrument and methodology](#) used in the CCSVS are free to any school that wishes to conduct its own survey.
- Best practices and guidance regarding [confidentiality in sexual assault research](#) and [communicating and using survey results](#) are also available through the University of New Hampshire's Prevention Innovations Center. The [CCSVS](#) final report also includes information on how students' confidentiality was maintained during the survey.

**Campus climate surveys conducted according to established best practices are necessary to provide an accurate picture of sexual assault as it exists on individual campuses.**

- Sexual violence is an underreported crime and existing reporting mechanisms do not capture the true prevalence of campus sexual assault. For example, The [CCSVS](#) revealed that the majority of students who experience rape on campus do not report it to school authorities. Of the 2,380 incidents of completed rape experienced by students participating in the CCSVS during the 2014-15 academic year, 770 occurred on campus. Of those 770, only about 60 were reported to school authorities.
- The nature and extent of sexual violence on campuses can differ greatly from school to school and may or may not reflect national data, or even data from other similarly situated schools. Both the CCSVS and a [2015 Association of American Universities Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct](#) revealed a wide variation of rates of sexual assault across participating colleges and universities.
- The [CCSVS](#) found that across the nine participating schools, only 13% of rape incidents and 4% of sexual battery incidents were reported to school or law enforcement officials.
- The American Association of Universities Campus Climate Survey revealed wide variations in the types of sexual assault and misconduct, as well as in opinions about how problematic it is at the school and how students and university officials might react to an incident, across the 27 colleges and universities that participated in the survey. For example, the percentage of students who thought it was very or extremely likely that the university would take a report of sexual assault or misconduct seriously varied from a low of 46 percent to a high of 77 percent.

**Campus Climate Surveys can help schools direct resources where they are needed most and are most effective when they serve as the foundation of a comprehensive campus sexual assault action plan.**

- When schools understand the specific obstacles to addressing sexual assault on campus, they can focus resources where they are needed most, whether it be to raise awareness about policies and procedures for reporting incidents of sexual assault; improve campus counseling services for students who have experienced sexual victimization in their lifetimes; develop targeted prevention efforts; or increase outreach to student populations most at risk for campus sexual assault.
- Several schools, including the [University of California](#) system, [Rutgers University](#), and the [University of Wisconsin-Madison](#) have used the results of their campus climate surveys to inform action plans based on information learned from their surveys. Some of the specific actions these schools have taken, or plan to take, include:
  - Rewriting sexual assault policies to include an affirmative consent definition.
  - Developing prevention programming aimed at male students and hiring additional staff to focus on men’s engagement.
  - Creating a [website](#) to serve as a “one-stop-shop” for information and resources about campus sexual assault that included the results of the survey.
  - Enhanced counseling support for survivors.
  - Student affairs staff members received updated training and counseling center staff members learned more about PTSD and how it pertains to sexual assault victims.
  - Modifying references used during new student orientation and throughout first-year student programs in response to the revelation that a high number of female students had been sexually assaulted before enrolling at the university.
- Climate surveys are even more effective if an audit of available resources is conducted before the survey is released because knowing exactly what resources are available on campus can be used to tailor the survey.
- Action plans in programs, policies, and services to address any gaps identified by the assessment require a strong, collaborative approach among researchers, student affairs, and university leadership.

**It is possible to conduct a cost-effective scientifically valid campus climate survey.**

- The [survey instrument and methodology](#) tested in the CCSVS is freely available for any school to use.

- Regional consortiums are an effective way for schools to pool resources to conduct campus climate surveys.
- The Office on Violence Against Women at the Department of Justice has [grants](#) available to combat sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking on campuses.
- The Office on Women’s Health of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has [funding available](#) through its College Sexual Assault Policy and Prevention Initiative.
- The Office on Violence Against Women is available to answer any questions regarding the CCSVS and campus climate surveys in general at [ovw.campus.surveys@usdoj.gov](mailto:ovw.campus.surveys@usdoj.gov) .