



A PEER'S PERSPECTIVE ON CAMPUS CLIMATE SURVEYS

OVW Interview with Julia O'Connor, Rutgers University

Why did you decide to become involved in advocating for your campus to conduct a climate survey?

I actually become involved due to luck! When I started my Ph.D. program in social work, the campus climate assessment project had begun several months earlier. I worked on the project as part of my graduate assistantship for the PhD program. However, I had been active in the area of sexual assault as far back as my undergraduate career (over 15 years ago). As an undergraduate I was active with a student group working to get the college administration to address sexual violence. To create a record of the problem, this group documented stories of students who had experienced sexual assault. We wanted to document the extent of the problem from year to year. A campus climate survey is a more systematic and quantitative approach to tackling the same problem of sexual assault that I addressed as an undergraduate.

Which parts of the campus climate survey process were you engaged in?

I worked on project coordination, survey data analysis, and focus group analysis. Our campus climate assessment involved multiple methods of data collection and assessment of the campus, including a resource audit, survey, and focus groups. We also repeated the process on several of my university's other campuses. As such, I have been privileged to work on many aspects of the projects from start to finish.

What value did the student perspective bring to the process?

The student perspective is invaluable. Because sexual assault is an issue that affects students directly, it is key that we understand the issue in the same ways students understand it. This includes not only understanding victimization but also students' attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge around sexual assault, campus resources, and policies. Conducting focus groups, in addition to the survey, allowed our administration to understand sexual violence in students' own words as well as the nuances of students' perception of the issue, which can't be captured by a survey alone.

What first steps should a student take to advocate for their institution to conduct a climate survey?

To make the campus climate assessment a meaningful process that results in change on the campus, buy-in must occur at all levels of campus administration. This does not necessarily mean each level of the administration will be involved with conducting the campus climate assessment; they might be involved in action planning after the assessment as well as providing implicit support throughout the process. Forming an advisory board or a working group of students, staff, faculty, and administrators can help ensure that you have a dedicated group of stakeholders who are thinking through the process and working together to make the process have impact.

What is your advice to a student advocate who wants to know how to most effectively engage with administrators on this issue?

Sexual violence is a sensitive topic that may be upsetting to some people. In order to ensure the campus is ready to address the issue, it is necessary to have an advocate for the issue within the administration or faculty. I recommend finding a college administrator or faculty member who can work one-on-one with students to facilitate buy-in and support from within the campus to effectively engage the campus.

Did anything about the survey results surprise you?

I was not surprised by many of the findings, as we largely found what researchers have told us for years. That being said, the results are difficult to digest and have clear implications for campus administrators. A situation in which one in five undergraduate women experience sexual violence— a rate that has been repeatedly confirmed by research— is a social justice concern for all students and staff.

Did your institution change any of its institutional responses to campus sexual assault as a result of the survey? If so, were you involved in this part of the process?

Yes, due to the strong campus support from my university's administration, a number of changes were implemented across campus. The administration implemented an action plan to address specific issues raised by the campus climate assessment project. Some of these changes were minor, such as changing intake forms for accessing services, while other changes were larger and are ongoing, such as educating students on the issue of sexual violence and raising awareness within the student body at large.

Is there any other advice you would like give to students?

Don't forget to take care of yourself! The issue of sexual violence is difficult and may involve hearing disturbing things that are challenging to take in. Additionally, working for change across large bureaucratic institutions can be slow and frustrating. Self-care in whatever form works for you— going for a run, journaling or venting with likeminded friends—can help prevent feelings of burnout or helplessness. Remember to take care of yourself while trying to change your campus.