

Enhancing Department Climate

A Guide for Department Chairs



Campus Climate: Behaviors within a workplace or learning environment, ranging from subtle to cumulative to dramatic, that can influence whether an individual feels personally safe, listened to, valued, and treated fairly and with respect.¹

Climate: The atmosphere or ambience of an organization as perceived by its members. An organization's climate is reflected in its structures, policies, and practices; the demographics of its membership; the attitudes and values of its members and leaders; and the quality of personal interactions.²

What is Climate? Why Does it Matter?

There is no simple definition of departmental climate, yet research shows that “climate” plays an important role in people’s satisfaction, effectiveness, productivity, engagement, and decisions to remain in or leave a department or area of study. A recent survey of 4,500 tenure-track faculty at 51 colleges and universities found that faculty place great value on departmental climate, culture, and collegiality and that these qualities are critical to faculty retention.³

Discussions with and surveys of university faculty, staff, and students reveal 8 common concerns about department climate:

- Lack of respect/consideration/politeness
- Insufficient sense of community or belonging
- Lack of recognition/visibility/value
- Ineffective communication
- Lack of support/inequitable access to professional development opportunities
- Difficulties achieving balance between work and family or personal life
- Illegal behaviors and demeaning, sexualizing, or condescending language and behaviors
- Retention/tenure of women and minority faculty, staff, and students

For each of these areas, this document provides practical advice department chairs can use to foster climates in which everyone feels welcome, respected, and valued.

When addressing these concerns, remember that though issues of climate may be common to all departmental members, the solutions or remedies for specific groups may differ. It is also important to recognize that though members of various minority groups may experience less welcoming climates than their majority peers, particular concerns may be of greater or lesser salience to specific groups. Efforts to improve climate must take into account both the nature of the department and the uniqueness of its members’ concerns.

Promote Basic Manners—Respect/ Consideration/Politeness

- ❑ Issue a policy statement establishing the expectation that all members of the department should treat each other with dignity and respect and that inequitable treatment will not be tolerated.
 - ❑ Promote these policies by personal example. Be sure to include the following:
 - ❑ Greet faculty, staff, and students pleasantly in the hallways or in other chance encounters.
 - ❑ Make requests politely and thank faculty and staff for work performed—even when it is part of their job expectations.
 - ❑ Address individuals by their appropriate titles. Program Administrators or Managers, for example, may prefer that you not refer to them as secretaries.
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“Hostility and rudeness of one or more faculty within the department detract most from [my] satisfaction at [work].” 4

- ❑ Hold department members accountable for violating basic standards of respect, consideration, and politeness by assessing these factors during annual performance evaluations and by relying on these assessments when making committee assignments, recommendations for awards and honors, etc.

Build an Inclusive Community

- ❑ Include all groups in department governance. In addition to faculty, include representatives of staff, postdoctoral scholars, and graduate students in departmental meetings and give them voting rights when possible.
- ❑ Examine departmental committees and ensure that leadership and membership are diverse with respect to age, gender, nationality, race and ethnicity, etc. Assess whether departmental teaching assignments are appropriately and equitably distributed. Consider creating a worksheet or rubric to track committee and teaching assignments and ensure equity.

- ❑ Examine departmental events such as seminar series and sponsored conferences and make sure that they include presenters of various ages, genders, nationalities, races, and ethnicities.
- ❑ Establish the expectation that all faculty, graduate students, and postdoctoral students attend departmental seminars/colloquia (those delivered by guests and by colleagues) and that they show respect to speakers by not engaging in other tasks such as grading papers, reading, and responding to e-mail, etc.
- ❑ At departmental meetings, ensure that everyone has a chance to voice opinions or concerns. Acknowledge and attribute ideas, suggestions, and comments accurately. Women and minority department members often report that their remarks are ignored or unheard.

“I have noticed that sometimes after I speak there is a small pause and the conversation just picks up again as if I had not said anything. I don’t notice this happening to men.”⁵

- ❑ Promote inclusive language by example. Avoid using only male pronouns when referring to groups composed of both sexes. Avoid language that makes assumptions about marital status and/or sexual orientation, i.e., consider using “partner” rather than “spouse.”
- ❑ Encourage faculty and staff to welcome and collaborate with new department members.
- ❑ Personally introduce new faculty and staff to department members with shared interests. Encourage new faculty to seek out colleagues in other departments and offer to make introductions.
- ❑ Host regular social events and ensure that they are open to all departmental members when appropriate.
- ❑ Create a communal space—coffee room/lunch room.

Recognize and Value the Work of Departmental Members

- ❑ Publicly recognize and praise faculty, staff, and students who perform work on behalf of the department. Be sure to attribute credit accurately.

“The professor I work for ... is always careful to acknowledge the contributions that I make and to thank me for the work that I do. It is amazing how these small comments make a difference in my day.”⁶

- ❑ Make public announcements regarding awards/recognition departmental members (faculty, staff, postdocs, or students) have received. Evaluate departmental recommendations for honors and awards and ensure that bias is not inadvertently playing a role.
- ❑ Develop and enforce departmental standards regarding authorship, or enforce standards established by your academic discipline.
- ❑ Encourage respect for varied research methodologies, for interdisciplinary research, for mainstream and “non-mainstream” research. One method of doing so is to ensure that invited guest lecturers and seminar/colloquium speakers represent a wide range of research areas and/or methodologies.
- ❑ Encourage all faculty and students to become aware of the academic contributions of their colleagues in the department and the university and, when relevant, to cite these contributions in their publications and presentations.
- ❑ Conduct regular pay equity reviews to ensure that women and minorities receive fair compensation.

Communicate Effectively

- Clearly and honestly communicate departmental values, intentions, expectations—and act in accordance with them.
- Clearly communicate departmental policies and procedures, in written form.
- Provide written clarification of conditions of employment to all departmental employees.
- Provide informational documents to students that specify all aspects of their graduate education. Distribute written announcements about position openings, fellowships, awards, etc. to all students—don't rely on word of mouth announcements that may only reach certain students.
- Clearly define qualifications and application processes for all faculty and staff position openings and promotions.
- Provide new faculty with clearly written guidelines and standards for achieving tenure in your department. Provide information on both departmental and university-wide standards.
- Ensure that all departmental members—faculty, staff, and student employees—receive annual performance evaluations.
- Provide open and honest communication about how you and your department make decisions and allocate resources.
- In communicating, consciously solicit perspectives from diverse groups of people.
- Become aware of cultural and gendered differences in styles of communication, and about culturally conditioned expectations regarding styles of communication.

Promote Professional Development

- Consider giving faculty, academic staff, and classified staff time to attend courses/workshops/national meetings.
- Consider providing financial support for faculty, staff, postdocs, and graduate students to attend or present at workshops/courses/national meetings.
- Encourage faculty to invite staff/students to present lectures in their areas of expertise.

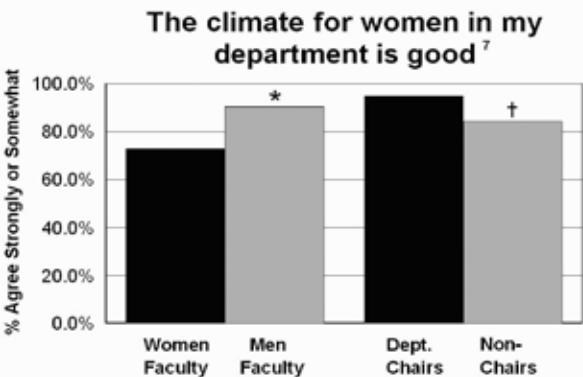
- ❑ Ensure that new faculty and staff have at least one mentor in the department and encourage them to seek mentors outside the department as well.
- ❑ Recognize the importance of providing new faculty members with a mentor who does not also serve as an evaluator who will play a role in decisions about tenure and promotion. Encourage new faculty to take advantage of formal mentoring programs that your campus may offer.

Encourage Balance between Work and Family/Personal Responsibilities

- ❑ Foster inclusiveness in scheduling departmental meetings and events. Recognize that parents may not be able to attend early morning or late afternoon meetings and events.
- ❑ Develop creative and flexible solutions to accommodate family and personal responsibilities. Invite faculty and staff to suggest solutions and find out about accommodations other departments have made. Consult with relevant campus offices and/or individuals.
- ❑ Budget for lecturers and other staff members needed for family and/or medical leave.

Develop Sensitivity

- ❑ Do not rely solely on your own perception of department climate. Rather, become aware of others' perspectives.



* Significant t-test between women and men faculty at $p < .01$.

† Significant t-test between dept. chairs and all other faculty at $p < .05$.

- ❑ Become aware of how unconscious biases and assumptions can influence interactions between departmental members.
- ❑ Listen respectfully to complaints and concerns about treatment or policies in the department. If the complaint concerns another member of the department, hold a separate meeting with that individual to address the issue and, when possible, avoid identifying any individual/s who complained. In your discussions with both parties, focus on solutions and means of improving the situation instead of dwelling on blame and ill treatment.
- ❑ If the complaint regards harassment or other illegal behavior, your response will have to differ—refer to the section below on “**Respond to Illegal Behaviors.**”

Respond to Illegal Behaviors and Complaints about Demeaning, Sexualizing, or Condescending Language and Behavior

- ❑ Develop and clearly state a zero tolerance policy for discrimination, harassment, and unreported instances of conflict of interest in a consensual romantic or sexual relationship.
- ❑ Learn about your campus’ policies and procedures for responding to and reporting complaints about such behavior.
- ❑ If approached with a complaint of such behavior do not dismiss the complaint. Rather, immediately recognize the complaint, acknowledge the courage needed to approach you, and quickly determine what the individual approaching you wants. Respect his/her decisions and avoid imposing what you think you would do in the same circumstances.
- ❑ Consult early and often with campus personnel knowledgeable in the area of responding to complaints about sexual harassment.
- ❑ If the complaint requires action, act swiftly and fairly. Be prepared to deal not only with the principals involved, but also with the influence any actions may have throughout the department.

Retention/Tenure of Women and Minority Faculty, Staff, and Students

Numerous surveys and studies conducted in colleges and universities across the nation show that individuals who are members of a minority group—whether the minority status derives from race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion, physical ability, or even area of research specialization—feel less welcome, respected, and valued than their majority peers.⁸ Working to enhance departmental climate can help retain women and minorities and increase the tenure success of women and minority faculty. To retain women and minority faculty members and to ensure that they achieve tenure, be aware of the following:

- ❑ Ensure that the isolation and alienation that many women and minority faculty members experience is not mistaken or criticized as “not being collegial” or “not being a team player,” particularly when they are evaluated for tenure by departmental colleagues.⁹
- ❑ Ensure that women and minority faculty members are not subject to higher expectations for number and quality of publications than men and majority faculty members. Be aware that inadvertent biases and assumptions may influence the evaluation of women and minority faculty members.¹⁰

Concluding Advice

Rely on resources your campus provides to help you in your efforts to enhance department climate. These may include experts and services provided by your Office of Equal Opportunity; Office for Equity and Diversity; Chief Diversity Officer; Office of Human Resources; Office of Quality Improvement; Employee Assistance Programs; Work/Life Programs; and various organizations and committees for women and/or minority groups.

RECOMMENDED READING

Bensimon, Estella, Kelly Ward, and Karla Sanders. *The Department Chair's Role in Developing New Faculty into Teachers and Scholars*. Boston: Ankar Publishing, 2000.

Lucas, Ann. *Strengthening Department Leadership: A Team Building Guide for Department Leaders*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.

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Turner, Caroline Sotello Viernes and Samuel L. Myers, Jr. *Faculty of Color in Academe: Bittersweet Success*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2000.

Valian, Virginia. *Why So Slow: The Advancement of Women*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998.

For more readings see: http://wiseli.engr.wisc.edu/office_library/Climate.htm

REFERENCES

¹UW–Madison Campus Climate Network Group, 2002.

²UW–Madison Committee on Women in the University, Work Group on Climate, 2002.

³Aguirre, 2000; Allen, 2002; Callister, 2006; COACHE Tenure-Track Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey, 2006; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; and more.

⁴Study of Faculty Worklife at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2006.

⁵UW–Madison Committee on Women in the University, Climate Vignettes, 2002.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Study of Faculty Worklife at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2003.

⁸COACHE Tenure-track Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey, 2006, 2007; Study of Faculty Worklife at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2003; and more.

⁹Haag, 2005.

¹⁰WISELI, Benefits and Challenges of Diversity, 2004.

For full references see: <http://wiseli.engr.wisc.edu/initiatives/climate/BrochureRefs.pdf>

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