

Addressing climate issues within a department

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.

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 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.

While not everyone agreed that the recommended changes should be adopted, there was a consensus to take an experimental attitude. Most of the department recognized that there was a problem, respected the work the committees had performed, and were willing to adopt many of the recommendations, with the understanding that, in two years, the department would reassess the climate with a repeat survey and determine the value of the recommendations.

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 this department's efforts are (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.

Benefits of diversity

Modified from *An Inclusive Academy: Achieving Diversity and Excellence*, chapter 2
Abigail J. Stewart and Virginia Valian (MIT Press, 2018)

Benefits of diverse faculty

- Fairness
- Maximization of talent pool
- Innovation
- Demographic diversity leads to intellectual diversity and new fields
- Greater success with ill-defined problems
- Better outcomes for students

Why diverse groups fail

- Identity congruence theory
- Psychological safety
- Assumptions about source of new ideas

Learn how to develop strong diverse groups

- Appreciate and articulate what each group member has to offer
- Be open to others' views
- Create an atmosphere where people feel free to express their opinions
- Facilitate group harmony and equal discussion

Recognizing faculty accomplishments

Modified from *An Inclusive Academy: Achieving Diversity and Excellence*, chapter 10
Abigail J. Stewart and Virginia Valian (MIT Press, 2018)

Recognize faculty internally

- Create a climate of informal recognition of faculty accomplishment: name particular contributions, thank individual faculty in writing or orally for their contributions, and hold other leaders accountable for identifying faculty contributions of many different kinds.
- Create formal recognition for many kinds of contributions by faculty. Seek funding for those formal awards. The procedures for nominations should allow many faculty to make nominations (including self-nomination) and should engage many diverse faculty in the selection process.

Recognize faculty externally

- Nominate faculty—including White women and underrepresented minorities—for disciplinary and meta-disciplinary awards. The more awards faculty have, the better known their department and institution will be, the more likely it is that faculty will be successful in getting grants, and the more likely it is that their letters of recommendations for students will count.
- Develop committees that are charged with identifying potential awardees and matching them with potential awards. A committee structure helps solve the problem of lack of knowledge of a person's work, makes it more likely that helpful ideas will emerge, and increases everyone's knowledge about awards.

Provide nomination support

- If nominators are not knowledgeable about the potential nominees' work, confer with them about the names of external people who could be approached about nominating the person. Consulting the letters of recommendation that were written for people when they were hired or the referee letters that were written when they was promoted could be useful. They might be willing to nominate or co-nominate a faculty member. The chair of a department, or the dean or provost of a school, can also be a nominator, using as a draft a letter that someone else at the institution may have written. The institution's imprimatur will be helpful.
- Solve the problem that a potential nominator may not know how to write a good letter even if they are knowledgeable about the potential nominee's work. Help nominators write letters and help provide constructive critiques from others, both inside and outside the institution. A well-crafted letter carries weight.

Track who is nominated

- Track the distribution of informal and formal awards as well as nominations by gender, race- ethnicity, and field. Regular review of those data can identify under-recognized individuals and fields and can lead to corrections in the process.

Formal leaders and institutional change

Modified from *An Inclusive Academy: Achieving Diversity and Excellence*, chapter 11
Abigail J. Stewart and Virginia Valian (MIT Press, 2018)

Prepare for change

- Identify important changes that would make the institution more “ideal.” Try to articulate them early, so that you will not pay so much attention to the goals prescribed by others that you lose sight of those important to you.
- Explicitly show how your goals will facilitate the core mission and strategic plan of the institution or unit you are leading.
- Recognize and resist the tendency only to respond to crises rather than to set an agenda yourself.
- Consider the special challenges and opportunities afforded by your particular gender and racial-ethnic identities.

Implement change

- Develop a process for gaining faculty and other constituencies’ input on any change you contemplate.
- Allow the process to be iterative, involving changes and adaptations in the change plan before it is implemented.
- Enlist all levels of leadership and faculty involvement in all stages of change making.
- Engage in frequent, consistent communication about any important activity or goal.
- Allocate the necessary resources to create and institutionalize the change you are working for.

Track the process and results

- Ensure that there are adequate longitudinal data maintained in the institution to assess the impact of any change. Monitor the data and report on it to key constituencies, asking them to review it and address any issues they see reflected in the data.

Maximizing faculty retention and building community: The role of senior administrators

Modified from *An Inclusive Academy: Achieving Diversity and Excellence*, chapter 7

Abigail J. Stewart and Virginia Valian (MIT Press, 2018)

Institutional policies

- Create, publicize, and implement policies that
 - Link institutional expectations (e.g., for contract renewal, promotion, and tenure) to institutional resources provided to faculty
 - Ensure broad access to resources for all faculty
 - Guarantee fair and transparent procedures
 - Address human needs of faculty throughout the life cycle (e.g., dual career and child and elder care) as faculty entitlements
 - Respect the need for boundaries and limits to demands of work and the workplace
- Set an institutional norm of zero tolerance for disrespect, incivility, and harassment
- Ensure that all communication about important issues (e.g., tenure criteria and procedures, grievance procedures) takes place through multiple methods of communication (email, websites, snail mail, discussion in formal meetings)

Institutional programs

- Create, publicize, and implement
 - Formal programs that support development of faculty professional networks inside and outside the institution
 - Formal programs that increase the likelihood of a climate of civility, respect, and freedom from harassment
 - Networks of faculty with similar life situations (e.g., faculty of color, LGBTQ faculty, women scientists, single parents, etc.)
- Provide educational opportunities for department chairs and deans to learn about how to create and maintain a positive departmental, school, or college climate

Track the process

- Collect data and report regularly on issues of equity (salary, workload, etc.) and climate, as well as policy
- Act on findings proactively