

# 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.<sup>1</sup>

**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.<sup>2</sup>

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## What is Climate? Why Does it Matter?

There is no simple definition of department 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. Multiple studies and surveys demonstrate that faculty place great value on department climate and collegiality and that these factors are critical to faculty retention.<sup>3</sup>

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

- Lack of respect, consideration, and/or politeness
- Insufficient sense of community or belonging
- Lack of recognition, visibility, and/or value
- Ineffective communication
- Lack of support or inequitable access to professional development opportunities
- Difficulties achieving balance between work and family or personal life
- Illegal behaviors and demeaning, sexualizing, hostile, condescending language and behaviors
- Retention and/or 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 department members, the solutions or remedies for specific groups or individuals 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, and Politeness

- ❑ Issue a policy statement establishing the expectation that all members of the department treat each other with dignity and respect and that inequitable treatment, incivility, bullying, and harassment will not be tolerated.
- ❑ Promote these policies by personal example:
  - ❑ 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].”<sup>4</sup>***

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

## Build an Inclusive Community

- ❑ Include all groups in department governance. In addition to faculty, include representatives of staff, postdoctoral scholars, and students in department meetings and give them voting rights when possible.
- ❑ Examine departmental committees. Ensure that leadership and membership are diverse with respect to age, gender, nationality, race, ethnicity, and other aspects of human difference. 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 seminars, colloquia, and conferences and make sure they include presenters of various ages, genders, nationalities, races, and ethnicities.
  - ❑ Establish the expectation that all faculty, graduate students, and postdoctoral scholars attend departmental seminars or colloquia delivered by guests and colleagues, and that they show respect to speakers by not reading, checking email, grading papers, or engaging in other tasks during the event.
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***“Being physically disabled, I am sometimes dismissed or challenged by coworkers and administrators.”<sup>5</sup>***

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- ❑ At department meetings, ensure that everyone has a chance to voice opinions or concerns. Acknowledge and attribute ideas, suggestions, and comments accurately. Women and members of minority groups often report that remarks they make during department meetings are ignored, unheard, dismissed, or inaccurately attributed to their majority male departmental colleagues.
- ❑ 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” or “spouse,” rather than “husband” or “wife.”
- ❑ 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 department members when appropriate.
- ❑ Create a communal space—a lunch or break room—where department members can informally gather and exchange ideas.

## **Recognize and Value the Work of Department Members**

- ❑ Publicly praise faculty, staff, and students for their work on behalf of the department. Be sure to attribute credit accurately.
- ❑ Make public announcements regarding awards or recognition department members (faculty, staff, postdocs, or students) have received. Evaluate departmental recommendations for honors and awards and ensure that bias is not inadvertently influencing the nomination or selection process.

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***“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.”<sup>6</sup>***

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- ❑ Develop departmental standards regarding authorship, or enforce standards established by your academic discipline.
- ❑ Encourage respect for varied research methodologies, for interdisciplinary research, and for mainstream and “non-mainstream” research. Ensure that guest lecturers and speakers represent a wide range of research areas and/or methodologies.
- ❑ Encourage all faculty and students to be aware of the academic contributions of their departmental and campus colleagues 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 and 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 education.
- ❑ Distribute written announcements about position openings, fellowships, awards, and other opportunities to all students. Do not 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 departmental and university-wide standards.
- ❑ Ensure that all department 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**

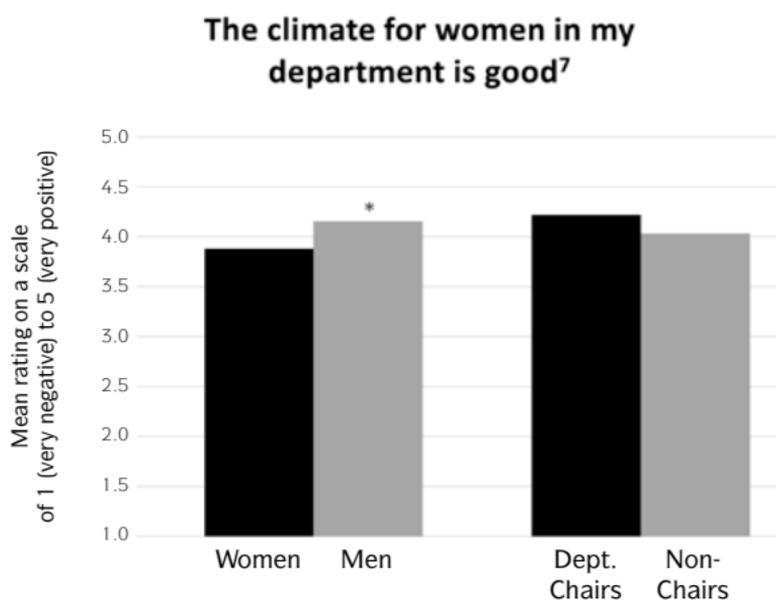
- ❑ Enable faculty and staff to use work time to attend courses, workshops, and national meetings.
- ❑ Provide financial support for faculty, staff, postdocs, and students to attend or present at workshops, courses, or national meetings.
- ❑ Encourage faculty to invite staff and students to present lectures 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 or 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 or individuals.
- ❑ Budget for lecturers and other staff members needed for family and/or medical leave.

## Expand Perspectives

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



- ❑ Become aware of how unconscious biases and assumptions can influence interactions between department members and how they can lead to microaggressions.<sup>8</sup>

- ❑ Listen respectfully to complaints and concerns about treatment or policies in the department. If the complaint concerns another department member, 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 bullying, harassment, or other unacceptable or illegal behaviors, refer to the section below on **“Respond to Illegal and Unacceptable Behavior.”**

### **Respond to Illegal and Unacceptable Behavior**

- ❑ Develop and clearly state a zero tolerance policy for discrimination, bullying, harassment, sexual 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 behaviors that violate institutional policy or state and federal laws.
- ❑ If someone approaches you 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 such complaints, especially if the complaint involves illegal behaviors such as discrimination or 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 on the department and its members.

## Retention and Tenure of Women and Minority Faculty

Numerous surveys and studies conducted in colleges and universities across the nation show that individual members of a minority group—whether 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.<sup>9</sup> Working to enhance department climate can help retain women and minorities and increase their success. To retain and successfully tenure women and minority faculty members, consider the following recommendations:

- ❑ Ensure that the isolation and alienation that many women and minority faculty members experience is not mistaken for or criticized as “not being collegial” or “not being a team player,” particularly when they are evaluated for tenure by departmental colleagues.<sup>10</sup>
- ❑ 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.<sup>11</sup>
- ❑ Ensure that women and minority faculty members are not disproportionately burdened with committee and other service obligations. Help them determine which service opportunities will foster their professional goals.<sup>12</sup>
- ❑ Value the diverse perspectives members of underrepresented groups can bring to the research, teaching, and administration of your department.<sup>13</sup>

### Concluding Advice

Rely on campus resources as you work 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 organizations or committees for women and 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.

Moody, JoAnne. *Faculty Diversity: Removing the Barriers*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Sue, Derald Wing. *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010.

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

For more readings see "Campus/Department Climate" in WISELI's online library (<http://wiseli.engr.wisc.edu/library.php>)

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> UW–Madison Campus Climate Network Group, 2002.
- <sup>2</sup> UW–Madison Committee on Women in the University, Work Group on Climate, 2002.
- <sup>3</sup> Rosser, 2004; Ryan et al., 2012; Trower, 2005, 2014; and more.
- <sup>4</sup> Study of Faculty Worklife at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2006.
- <sup>5</sup> Study of Faculty Worklife at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2012.
- <sup>6</sup> UW–Madison Committee on Women in the University, Climate Vignettes, 2002.
- <sup>7</sup> Savoy and Sheridan, 2013.
- <sup>8</sup> Sue, 2010, 2012.
- <sup>9</sup> Callister, 2006; Carr, 2015; COACHE, 2010; Fries-Britt et al, 2011; Gardner, 2012; Jayakumar, 2009; Study of Faculty Worklife at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2012; Victorino et al., 2013; and more.
- <sup>10</sup> Haag, 2005.
- <sup>11</sup> WISELI, Benefits and Challenges of Diversity, 2004.
- <sup>12</sup> Misra, et al., 2011
- <sup>13</sup> Caleb, 2014; Freeman and Huang, 2014; Page, 2007; Woolley et al., 2010; and more.

For full references see: <http://wiseli.engr.wisc.edu/climate/BrochureRefs2015.pdf>



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*Women in Science & Engineering Leadership Institute  
University of Wisconsin-Madison*

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Preparation of this document was made possible by grants from the National Science Foundation (NSF #0123666 and #0619979). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

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*Prepared for WISELI by Eve Fine and Jennifer Sheridan.*