

UW Madison: Campus-wide climate survey

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MADISON – UW-Madison officials shared results today from the university’s first ever campus-wide climate survey, pledging to use the findings to make the campus more welcoming to all students.

The survey found that while most students view the climate at UW-Madison positively, that’s not true for everyone. In particular, students from historically underrepresented and disadvantaged groups report experiencing a less favorable campus climate than majority students.

“We must insist and ensure that every student on our campus is free from harm, feels a strong sense of belonging, and is treated with respect. Anything less is unacceptable,” says Chancellor Rebecca M. Blank. “We are working very hard to address these disparities, but this effort will require everyone’s involvement.”

In the fall of 2016, all undergraduate, graduate, professional and non-degree-seeking students were invited to take the survey of nearly 200 questions; 8,652 students did, a 21 percent response rate. The full results are available at diversity.wisc.edu/climate/survey.

Among the key findings:

-About four out of five students report feeling very or extremely safe, welcome and respected, and 70 percent feel like they belong very or extremely often.

-Depending on background and identity, groups of students have different experiences on campus. For instance, while 81 percent of students overall feel

welcome on campus, the same is true for only 69 percent of LGBTQ students, 67 percent of students with a disability, 65 percent of students of color, and 50 percent of transgender/non-binary students.

-Eleven percent of students reported being the target of hostile, harassing or intimidating behavior while at UW-Madison.

-Students generally feel that their comments and questions are respected by instructors in the classroom. A smaller share feel that their fellow classmates respect their input.

-Four out of five students indicated that valuing diversity is “very or extremely” important to their future success and that they often try to create a welcoming environment for other students on campus.

-First-generation, international, transfer, Muslim and Buddhist students and students from a working-class background reported a less positive climate on some measures. In contrast, Jewish, Hindu and Christian students were as likely as other students to say they feel welcome and respected, and white students and politically conservative students were significantly more likely to feel respected, welcome, and like they belong compared to other students.

“This is crucial feedback from the people who experience life on this campus on a very personal, emotional level every day,” says Patrick Sims, the university’s chief diversity officer. “To the students who reported negative experiences, I would say, ‘We’ve heard your concerns very clearly, and we will use this data to make our campus a more just and inclusive place.’”

Sims and Dean of Students Lori Berquam led a task force that studied the survey results and issued a set of recommendations. Those include:

-Promoting instructional best practices that ensure an inclusive learning environment;

-Boosting recruitment of underrepresented students, faculty and staff and making sure we retain them; and

-Increasing the capacity of students, faculty and staff to intervene in response to hostile, harassing and intimidating behavior.

"We all have a responsibility to be part of the solution," Berquam says.

"Fortunately, the survey results show that the vast majority of students want this campus to be a welcoming place for everyone and understand that a diverse environment is essential to their own success. We can continue to build on this strong foundation so that all students, from their first day here, feel a powerful sense of belonging."

To track progress, the university plans to survey students about campus climate in four years.

Senior Tiffany Ike, a student member of the task force, says one challenge for the campus moving forward will be to help majority students turn their positive talk about diversity and inclusion into tangible action.

"It's one thing to say on a survey that you want diversity and inclusion to exist, but it takes real effort in your personal life to make sure it happens," says Ike, a psychology and communication arts major from Houston, Texas. "I think that's an important campus conversation we need to have. These recommendations are a good end goal, but it will take work to get there."

The task force recommendations expand on the campus Diversity Framework and its 2015 implementation plan, called R.E.E.L. Change. A few key campus initiatives that are already underway:

-In its second year, "Our Wisconsin," a community-building program that aims to equip students with the skills to live and work effectively in a diverse world, expanded to about 7,000 students this fall, up from 1,000 its pilot year.

-The School of Education developed The Discussion Project, a professional development opportunity beginning this fall to help faculty and academic staff members facilitate high-quality classroom discussion and engage all students. Additional training on classroom inclusion has also been provided to teaching assistants.

-The Badger Promise initiative began this fall to help first-generation Wisconsin students afford a UW-Madison education. The effort is expected to boost enrollment of low-income and underrepresented students.

-The Dean of Students office created the full-time position of bias response and

advocacy coordinator last spring to oversee the university's Bias Reporting Process. The process itself was recently enhanced to be more responsive and transparent.

Members of the campus community will have numerous opportunities in the months ahead to join the conversation on campus climate, beginning with the annual Diversity Forum on Nov. 7 at Union South, 1308 W. Dayton St. It features nationally known keynote speakers, breakout sessions and a town hall meeting. It is free and registration is required.