

WISELI Department Climate Workshops:

Formative Evaluation Report (11/14/03)

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The following report was written to provide feedback about the pilot sessions of the Department Chair Climate Workshops created by the Women in Science and Engineering Leadership Institute (WISELI). These comments reflect my observations of the workshops, my interactions with the Chairs when deploying the surveys, and the participants' feedback about the experience.

The pilot was completed with three current department Chairs, each of whom was invited to participate. Due to human subject guidelines, we have attempted to keep their participation confidential; consequently, their names will not be disclosed in this report. Of the three participants, one is a woman, and the other two are men. One has been a department Chair for six years, one has been a Chair for 4 years, and one has been a Chair for about 1½ years.

The Workshop Series

The following objectives were set for each of the three sessions:

Session I: Introduction to climate issues and introduction of survey

Session II: Presentation of survey results, presentation of toolkit, discussion and development of an action plan

Session III: Discussion on how climate is influenced by leadership style, organizational structure, and decision-making

Initially, each meeting was scheduled two weeks apart. Due to scheduling conflicts, the first two sessions were scheduled twelve days apart (Sept 11, Sept 23) and the third meeting was scheduled six weeks later (Nov 4) to allow the participants enough time to report the survey results to the department and to try 1-2 ideas within their department and report back. Each session lasted 1½ hours.

Observations

The previously identified objectives, which provided the basis for each meeting's agenda, were followed during the sessions. The agenda appeared to be broad enough to allow for changes in the flow of the discussion, while being prescriptive enough to give the facilitator and participants guidelines for discussion. Facilitation of the workshops seemed to improve when both the participants and the facilitator used the same materials in discussion. In other words, they were literally "on the same page." This realization led to a review of the materials and changes made for sessions 2 and 3.

Two weeks is the minimum time necessary between the first two meetings, especially with the deployment of the survey and analysis of the results. Having the break in between the second and third workshop did appear to be helpful. The participants used this time to report the results to their department and to implement 1-2 ideas in their department. This break, however, need not be the full six weeks. This timing was suggested by one of the Chairs to accommodate a busy schedule during October. The break in between session 2 and 3 should accommodate the

participants to be able to report the results at a departmental meeting or in written form. Once again, it need not be as long as six weeks.

All three of the participants answered “Yes” when asked if participating in the workshops was valuable. When asked about the content of the workshops, the participants noted that they received “lots of ideas for improvements” and that the workshops and surveys brought “issues of climate to the forefront.” They especially appreciated the discussion and ability to dialogue with other chairs. The discussion “raised their attention” to the issues of climate, which they found very valuable. They all felt that they needed more opportunities to talk with others who are in similar situations, and that these sessions provided them the venue to do so.

Facilitation of the Workshops

Jo Handelsman and Eve Fine attended each of the sessions. Jo took the “lead” role and provided the facilitation for the discussions at each session. Eve contributed to the discussion occasionally, by asking follow-up questions and by clarifying or answering questions about the workshop design and materials.

Observations

In general, Eve’s and Jo’s participation was “behind the scenes,” which allowed for the participants to talk with each other. When asked about the facilitation, the participants called Jo “skilled” and felt that she was “dedicated to [issues of climate]” and was doing the workshops because “she believes in them.” They thought she had high credibility and that she had experience as a faculty member, both within her department and cross-campus. In their opinion, the facilitator of these workshops did not have to be a Chair, him or herself; rather, they needed to be respected, feel strongly about the topic, and have cross-campus experience. In other words, knowledge about the topic of “climate” was far more important than knowledge about being a department Chair.

The Department Climate Survey

A key component of the workshops is the department climate survey, which was scheduled to be deployed after the first session and compiled and reported to the participants during session 2. The following schedule was followed with the pilot participants:

DATE	
Sept 11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussed human subject guidelines; participants signed forms • Presented draft survey • Discussed survey questions • Participants added and deleted questions • Participants added other department groups to be surveyed
Sept 12-18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email and phone conversations to finalize individualized department surveys and prepare for deployment by obtaining email lists
Sept 16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department #1 and #2 surveys deployed
Sept 18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department #3 survey deployed
Sept 22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results downloaded at 12pm

Sept 23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results presented to Chairs at workshop #2, along with “caveats” and suggestions about interpreting the results
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The response rates to the surveys were:

- Department 1: 75%
- Department 2: 48%
- Department 3: 33 respondents out of X? (email was sent through the department)

Observations

The Chairs specifically mentioned the survey as being extremely valuable by providing them with concrete ideas and the “general feel” of the department regarding climate. They did appreciate the chance to review and edit the survey previous to its deployment and to individualize it to the department. One thought it was too long, which explains this Chair’s deletions of some of the items on the survey. One Chair said he felt permission to edit the survey because he considered himself part of a pilot—the survey as it currently stands could be used for future participants.

Other comments were related to when the survey was deployed. Because the Chairs did think that three sessions might be too many, they considered the idea of having the survey completed before the beginning of the workshop and having the results presented at session #1. However, they did find it valuable to be able to review the items first. Also, they appreciated hearing the caveats about interpreting the data. With these in mind, they re-visited the initial design, which they determined to be the best (i.e., session 1—deploy survey, session 2—get results, session 3—discuss action items).

Recommendations for Future Department Climate Workshops

The following recommendations stem from my experience and from the responses to specific questions by the pilot participants:

- Number of sessions
 - Three sessions at a maximum, with appropriate spans of time between each meeting for the survey and results, and to report the results back to their department.
- Length of sessions
 - 1 to 1½ hours seems to be the most we can expect from a department Chair.
- Participants
 - Cross-college groups enable the participants to freely disclose information about their department, School or College.
 - Three to five participants in each cohort is ideal.
- Inviting Participants
 - Recommend names, although the participants did note that doing this could be “touchy.”
 - Have the Deans announce the workshops and encourage Chairs to attend at meetings.
 - Connect one Chair with another and have them attend together.
 - Frame the workshop series as a means to “benefit” department climate, not improve it.

- The “Toolkit”
 - Provide up front, along with the agendas and what is expected from the participants at each subsequent meeting.
 - Include short, practical readings on a variety of subjects to allow for department Chairs’ interest in particular subjects.
 - Include resources and other sources of support on campus.
- The Survey
 - Use one survey and allow them to choose the groups who will participate.
 - Individualizing the survey was extremely time-intensive and increases the risk of error.
 - Further, having a number of different surveys deployed across campus will not allow us to compare results.

Final Comments

All three of the participants were willing to be approached in the future (six months), but none was willing to have their department complete the survey again. This will prove to be a limitation if we choose to use the survey results as one form of evaluation of the program.