

Lessons for Campuses Conducting Sexual Assault Surveys from the Campus Climate Survey Validation Study (CCSVS)

In April of 2014, as part of the work of the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, with RTI International, partnered with the Office on Violence Against Women to initiate a study to strengthen and validate the Task Force's toolkit for conducting sexual assault climate surveys (available at: <https://www.notalone.gov/assets/ovw-climate-survey.pdf>). The complete report on the results of the CCSVS study, released on January 20, 2016, can be found at <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ccsvsfr.pdf>. Below is a summary of some key lessons that emerged from the CCSVS and that build upon issues raised in the notalone.gov toolkit.

How to do the survey

Consistent with most other campus climate surveys, the CCSVS used a web-based survey platform. The CCSVS report highlights the benefits of this approach, including the importance of confidentiality for participants.

- The CCSVS found that 70% of students took the survey on a laptop or desktop computer while 26.8% took the survey on their smartphone. Schools should have the web-based survey in a form that is available to students across a range of electronic devices they may want to use.

Choosing what to measure

Much of the CCSVS report describes the multi-stage process they used to design items used in the survey. These steps included listening sessions with subject matter experts, review of methods in the peer reviewed research literature, and, importantly, cognitive testing using both online crowdsourcing methods and interviews with students who were given survey questions. The results were changes to the ordering of questions, adjustments designed to reduce the likelihood that students would stop in the middle of the survey, rewording questions that students found confusing, and reducing the number of items where students were asked to write in answers.

- Findings from the CCSVS highlight the importance of campuses using questions and measures that have been carefully designed and tested in the field rather than campuses creating their own questions and measures.
- The CCSVS used behaviorally specific questions related to victimization and perpetration, consistent with best practices in the field.
- The study found that more research is needed on the ability to measure perpetration through a self-report survey. If perpetration questions are included, careful attention should be given to where and how these questions are asked so that they do not lead to students breaking off from participating in the survey.

Choosing participants

A key to having a survey that provides trustworthy information is making sure that the students who answer the survey represent as closely as possible the experiences of different groups of students in the school community:

- The CCSVS was successful in obtaining representative samples from the nine campuses they worked with. They did this by obtaining a random sample (separated by gender so that separate

samples of male and female students were drawn) from each campus. The size of the sample was related to the overall size of the school (see the full CCSVS report for more details about these methods). Schools may also vary in their success at obtaining a representative sample and may need to use statistical weighting strategies when analyzing their data. Schools are encouraged to partner with researchers who are skilled in sample selection strategies. These researchers may be part of the local campus community, may be available to work regionally with campuses, or could be hired as outside consultants to work with a campus or group of campuses.

- Using representative samples of students compared to a census of the entire population can be more cost-effective, particularly when each student participant is given an individual incentive for taking the survey. Sampling allows for schools to use incentives which can result in more representative estimates.
- Using samples of students reduces the research burden on a campus as all students are not asked to take the time to participate. This can be important to reduce survey-fatigue on campuses where surveying students about a variety of topics is important. Using such methods with each survey means only some students get each survey and most students likely do not get more than one or two.
- On smaller campuses (less than 1400 males and/or less than 2800 females) it may be necessary to administer the survey to all students in what is known as a census approach.

Reaching participants and motivating them to take the survey

Once the survey sample is selected, the next step is to motivate students to complete the survey. Rates of participation in sexual assault campus surveys vary quite a bit from campus to campus (as was found in the Association of American Universities' (AAU) survey in 2015). Key recommendations from the study include:

- Use a neutral title for the survey instrument to avoid biasing participation.
- Keep the survey short. The CCSVS took participants on average 15 minutes to complete.
- Use incentives. The CCSVS obtained response rates that are higher than other campus surveys. The overall rates were 54% for females and 40% for males (AAU, for example, had an overall rate of 22.9% for females and 15.6% for males, but many of the participating schools provided only a lottery incentive or a \$5 incentive for each participant). The CCSVS provided incentives for all participants who took the survey and also varied the amount of the gift cards to test these effects. The CCSVS findings, as well as the results of other postsecondary surveys, suggest that individual participant incentives that range from \$20-\$30 are optimal.
- Use some marketing strategies both to legitimize the survey and to showcase its benefits to participants and their campus. For example, the CCSVS sent advance notice of the survey to students that highlighted the importance of their voices for creating positive campus change. Students also received emails from campus staff encouraging participation.
- Emphasize confidentiality. Email communications also highlighted that responses to surveys would be kept confidential and not linked to a student's identity.
- Personalized greetings rather than generic invitations are more effective when recruiting students to participate in the survey.
- The CCSVS used multiple follow-up reminders to students selected to take the survey.
- The CCSVS provided all participants with links for more information about support services and 15% of respondents followed such links. Including such resources is an important part of engaging and protecting participants.

Timing of surveys

As discussed in the Task Force toolkit on notalone.gov, there are several important considerations related to survey timing. The first is when during the academic calendar the survey is given. Next is how long the survey is in the field for students to participate. Third is how often the survey is re-administered on any one campus. The CCSVS provides helpful information for schools making these decisions:

- The CCSVS was conducted during the spring semester of the academic year. This is consistent with a number of other sexual assault campus surveys as it permits better estimates of incidence and prevalence rates for one academic year.
- Researchers who conducted the CCSVS found that for all but one school in their sample, the sample sizes they sought were reached after 28 days in the field. This suggests that being in the field with the survey for at least one month may be good. However, extending the field period will allow for more reliable estimates due to larger sample sizes, which is especially important for making subgroup comparisons. Individual schools may need to adjust this time frame up or down depending on their particular characteristics and calendar.
- Obtaining a high response rate, identifying representative samples of participants, and conducting analyses that provide trustworthy estimates of the problems of sexual assault, domestic and dating violence, and sexual harassment on campus are resource intensive. The CCSVS used careful sample selection procedures and provided individual incentives to all who participated. This level of resources makes it unlikely that campuses can administer sexual assault climate surveys every year. Rather, campuses will need to think about what frequency of administration makes sense from a resource and strategic planning perspective.

Where do we go from here?

- Schools and other interested stakeholders need to work together to identify the resources needed to conduct reliable sexual assault climate surveys.
- The CCSVS, as with most campus surveys on this topic to date, focuses exclusively on research with students. Given growing research on the importance of the broader campus context, including attitudes and behaviors of faculty and staff, we need to know more about effective surveys for these populations.
- CCSVS researchers also recommend more work to tailor recruitment strategies for men, given the lower response rates from this group of students.
- Additionally, graduate students may pose different or unique challenges that researchers should consider.