

# Considerations for Conducting Climate Surveys at Minority-Serving Institutions and Community Colleges

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## Why Might Adaptations to Climate Surveys be Needed at Some Schools?

Many institutions of higher education conduct student climate surveys on sexual misconduct to help guide decisions about resources, policies, and prevention programming. Although a number of climate survey instruments are available for schools to use, adaptations to these instruments—or to survey administration procedures—may be needed at some schools to ensure that their goals are met.

This factsheet summarizes considerations for population-specific adaptations to campus climate surveys. Specifically, we focus on the needs of community colleges and minority-serving institutions (MSIs), including historically black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, tribal institutions, and Asian-Pacific Island institutions. Considerations at these institutions may overlap because both MSIs and community colleges serve many “nontraditional” students, including nonresidential, part-time (or noncontinuous), or older students. Further, community colleges and MSIs typically have a limited research infrastructure (due to lack of material resources) and face other common challenges to administering climate surveys.

### Adapting Survey Content

The first set of adaptations pertains to the survey questions that are included in the climate survey instrument. Frequently, community colleges and MSIs serve students who spend minimal time on campus. Therefore, students’ experiences at home (or off campus) may be more impactful than their on-campus experiences.

### General Considerations for Selecting and Adapting Climate Survey Measures

Regardless of institution type, the following considerations are important to examine when designing a climate survey.

#### *Step 1: Define Survey Goals*

For many schools, the goal is to learn about students’ experiences with sexual assault victimization and their perceptions of school climate. However, some schools also would like to learn more about how their school compares to other schools in terms of sexual assault victimization rates. Well-articulated goals help inform decisions about selecting and adapting survey measures to meet your needs.

#### *Step 2: Select Survey Measures*

Once your goals are well-defined, you can design your survey to capture the desired information. Many schools choose free, publicly available climate surveys that have been validated or are widely used (e.g., the [CCSVS instrument](#), the [AAU/Westat survey](#), the [ARC 3 survey instrument](#)). Using these validated tools can save resources and allows schools to compare their data to those at other schools.

#### *Step 3: Determine Whether Adaptations Are Needed*

Existing survey items may not cover all topics of interest or may require other adaptations. Adding questions about school-specific programs, trainings, and policies is recommended, and existing questions about survivors’ reporting experiences or student’s perception of climate can easily be adapted. However, schools should avoid modifying questions that serve as the basis for the survey’s estimates of victimization; often these items have undergone extensive testing, and modifying them will limit your ability to compare your estimates with those of other schools.

Survey questions that ask about victimization experiences (e.g., partner violence, sexual assault) may need to be reworded to ensure that students include both on- and off-campus experiences in their answers. Schools may also want to include questions that assess whether students are full or part time and the amount of time they spend on campus, so that the experiences of students with different levels of campus involvement could be compared. Additionally, existing climate scales that focus on student norms on campus may be less relevant to include, due to the uniqueness of the lived experiences of many community college and MSI students.

Other potential areas of adaptation pertain to questions about students' awareness of on- and off-campus services for survivors of violence or mechanisms for reporting such incidents, as students may be unaware of the resources their school has available (regardless of where the victimization occurred). Schools may want to develop customized questions to assess students' knowledge of school- and community-specific services, use of services (among survivors), barriers to accessing support, and reasons for not reporting incidents. MSIs may also want to add questions (or specific response options) that assess culturally specific barriers to reporting and utilization of services, such as distrust of law enforcement and social service systems, concerns about the services not being culturally responsive (particularly for students who are members of racial/ethnic minority groups or who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning), and hesitance to contribute to the criminalization of minority men (if the perpetrator was a person of color).

## Adapting Administration Procedures

Administrators at community colleges and MSIs can sometimes be resistant to implementing a campus climate survey, often due to concerns that results may affect public relations at a time when these schools are already vulnerable to negative stereotypes and perceptions (i.e., reporting school-based victimization may lead to a poor view of the school as a whole). It is important to assure school administrators that information on victimization and climate will benefit the school by allowing a more complete picture of campus climate and proactively addressing a potential issue. Additionally, many MSIs and community colleges have a limited research infrastructure (e.g., few dedicated institutional research staff, lack of an Institutional Review Board) due to lack of material (financial) resources. In such cases, conducting climate surveys may require working with external research partners or doing a climate survey with a network of similar schools, to leverage resources across schools.

MSIs and community colleges will also need to assess whether the "typical" administration process (e.g., a web-based survey with students recruited via e-mail) will be feasible or culturally relevant at their school. If a large proportion of students do not use a campus e-mail address, do not have access to the internet when off campus, or feel more comfortable giving feedback in a discussion style setting, then it may be preferable to use another recruitment strategy or even an alternative data collection approach (e.g., focus groups or other qualitative techniques). Schools serving a large percentage of students who have limited English language proficiency may need to make the survey available in other languages. Finally, because students at MSIs and community colleges may have unique privacy concerns or questions about how their data will be used, schools should closely involve students in decisions about how to go about administering the survey in a way that encourages participation and buy-in from students.

## Conclusion

Climate surveys are invaluable tools for assessing student experiences and perceptions about sexual misconduct at institutions of higher education. Although many existing resources for conducting climate surveys are readily available, adaptations to the survey content, administration procedures, or both may be needed at MSIs and community colleges to address practical and cultural concerns specific to the student populations they serve. Adapting survey content and administrative procedures to suit specific student populations can help ensure that a climate survey accomplishes its goals and produces high-quality data.

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