

Fostering Inclusive Department Climates: A Workshop for Department Chairs at the University of X

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This evidence-based practice paper describes the development and implementation of an interactive workshop for department chairs focused on strategies to foster inclusive department climates at the University of Delaware (UD). Literature on the underrepresentation of women in STEM suggests climate is a key factor in women faculty's lower levels of job satisfaction and higher rates of turnover. Building on this scholarship, multiple research projects at UD motivate the need for institutional efforts to improve climate and the central role of department chairs in fostering inclusive climates. For instance, faculty climate surveys reveal relatively low levels of faculty satisfaction with department collegiality, and that effective chair leadership directly shapes job satisfaction for women faculty. A mixed-methods project on faculty retention demonstrates disproportionately high levels of turnover for women faculty of color, with respondents citing department climate as a key factor in their decision to leave the university. In this paper, we outline the research that led to the development of the workshop, detailing how research findings inform specific workshop content, including case studies. We discuss workshop structure, including the decision to offer the workshop by college/unit within UD, allowing us to bring together small groups of chairs for facilitated discussion and the sharing of experiences. We also address the role of deans in securing institutional commitment for the project, as well as initial evaluation results and plans for long-term evaluation. Finally, we highlight follow-up efforts to develop and disseminate new resources on fostering inclusive department climates, including a written guide that builds off strategies that emerged during workshop discussion, encouraging department chairs to learn from the experiences of colleagues across the university.

I. Introduction

In recent years, many institutions of higher education have implemented strategies to recruit and retain faculty from underrepresented groups, including women in STEM and faculty of color. Despite these efforts, women remain underrepresented in fields such as engineering [1], and faculty of color remain underrepresented across the academy [2]. This underrepresentation is compounded by social isolation, tokenism, and bias, all of which have been found to shape women's, and in particular women of color's, experiences in the academy [3] - [6]. It should come as no surprise, then, that faculty of color have lower rates of retention [7] and are more likely to report intentions to leave the academy for non-retirement reasons than are white faculty [8]. Similarly, women in STEM professions are more likely to leave their field than are women in other professions [9].

Research on faculty retention points to the importance of department climate for faculty satisfaction and turnover intentions [10]. For faculty in STEM fields, department climate has a particularly important role in turnover intentions for female faculty [11]. Collegiality matters, with factors such as incivility among colleagues leading to higher turnover [12]. Given the link between climate and faculty retention, work to assess and improve departmental climate should be at the forefront of efforts to create and sustain a more diverse faculty.

As recipients of an NSF ADVANCE Institutional Transformation (IT) grant, our team has built and sustained an institute focused on the development and dissemination of research-based initiatives surrounding faculty development, diversity, and positive departmental climates. One of our newest initiatives is a workshop for department chairs, titled “Fostering Inclusive Department Climates.” The workshop was designed to be applicable across disciplines but may be of particular interest to leaders of STEM departments seeking strategies to improve climate, promote inclusion, and retain faculty from underrepresented groups.

In this paper, we first outline the research that led to the development of the inclusive climate workshop for department chairs. We then discuss workshop logistics and workshop content, providing a high level of detail on workshop design so that stakeholders from other institutions will be able to assess whether elements of the workshop can be adapted to meet their needs. We then present initial workshop evaluation results and share plans for long-term evaluation to track shifts in faculty experiences and perceptions of climate. Next, we highlight follow-up efforts to develop and disseminate new resources on improving department climates, including a written guide that builds off strategies that emerged during workshop discussion. We end by sharing challenges and strategies to bolster support for large scale change efforts, such as engaging with deans to secure institutional commitment for the project.

II. Research Informing the Workshop

The inclusive climate workshop grew from two distinct research projects that informed our understanding of department climates at the university and highlighted the importance of department climate for faculty turnover. In summarizing these research findings below, we report general themes common across faculty, rather than limiting our analysis to STEM faculty. This choice is due to data limitations, including a small sample size of faculty of color, which makes disaggregation by discipline problematic. However, as previously described, the literature suggests department climate is a strong driver of turnover intention for underrepresented groups of STEM faculty. Our research supports this, as we find key variation in perceptions of climate and turnover intentions for women faculty and faculty of color.

First, our team has conducted biennial faculty climate surveys since 2014, allowing a longitudinal perspective on areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction among faculty. Survey results have consistently shown only moderate levels of satisfaction with department collegiality and other aspects of climate, with notably lower mean scores among women and faculty of color. For the latest climate survey, we moved from a custom survey developed by our team to the COACHE faculty climate survey, a national survey administered by the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University. A key feature of the COACHE survey is the ability to benchmark an institution’s results to those of a cohort of institutions that took the survey in recent years. When comparing our results to those of peer institutions, we found faculty at UD had relatively poorer perceptions of department collegiality than did colleagues at other universities, highlighting the need for intentional efforts to build an inclusive climate at the university.

A second stream of research from our team focused on understanding the factors that influence faculty turnover. This mixed-methods project combined quantitative analysis of faculty hiring and retention patterns with in-depth interviews of faculty. For the interviews, we sampled from

faculty that had recently left the university, those that had accepted retention packages, and a matched sample of current faculty. Key research findings included gender differences in broad areas of dissatisfaction among the faculty that exited the university, with non-inclusive department climate being a common factor cited by female respondents when discussing their experiences and their decision to leave. Additionally, we found disproportionately high levels of turnover among women of color faculty as compared to their colleagues. This led us to launch a second stage of research to further explore the experiences of women of color faculty. In subsequent interviews, respondents cited departmental climate as a key factor in their decision to leave the university. Notably, even current women of color faculty shared experiences of exclusion, microaggressions, and at times overt hostility within their departments. Our respondents reported feeling isolated within their departments, pointing to not only a lack of community, but a lack of mentoring and social support. Women who were particularly underrepresented in their departments often felt their professional job performance was over scrutinized or did not fit into colleagues' definitions of success. Within the broader concept of department climate, there were several additional areas of concern, including women of color's perceptions that their scholarly impact was discounted by colleagues, that their service activities were far greater than their assigned workload yet overlooked in faculty appraisals, and that their professional contributions were undervalued by their department and under rewarded by university reward structures. Some respondents felt tokenized in their service roles, reporting that they were asked to serve to lend "diversity" to a committee, but that their recommendations were not valued or acted upon.

The importance of department chairs in perceptions of climate is evident from both the faculty climate survey data, as well as our qualitative research on the experiences of women of color faculty. A path analysis of predictors of faculty job satisfaction based on climate survey data finds that for both women and men, effective chair leadership leads to greater career satisfaction via access to internal academic resources and collegial relationships [13]. The role of the chair is particularly important for women faculty, however, as perceptions of effective chair leadership directly shape job satisfaction for women faculty. Turning to our interview data, women of color in diverse departments reported that their relationship with their chair was a key source of satisfaction. Taken as a whole, our team's research makes clear the importance of departmental climate in faculty career satisfaction and faculty retention, particularly when it comes to underrepresented groups, such as women of color in the academy or women in STEM fields.

III. Workshop Design and Content

To begin to address department climate, we developed a workshop designed specifically for department chairs. In this section, we describe the format and content of the workshop in detail, with the hopes that other institutions can learn from our model, but also adapt these ideas to meet specific concerns that are most central in their efforts to foster inclusive department climates. As we've argued above, research to identify institution-specific climate concerns is an important first step in designing effective change efforts.

Our workshop was developed to be run in-person, and in small groups (<12 participants is ideal), with a focus on active discussion amongst department chairs. Based on our research and bolstered by social science literature on faculty job satisfaction, we argue department chairs are key stakeholders in the department climate change process. We made the decision to group

chairs by college when offering the workshop, with the hope that this would lead to groups of colleagues sharing similar challenges and perhaps even a distinct culture within their college. Also, chairs within the same college generally have a baseline level of rapport, which can lead to more open and engaged discussion. We designed the workshop to take 90 minutes in total, allowing time to “sell” the importance of inclusive climate, share research findings on climate at the university, and offer ample time for interacting and sharing ideas. Two members of our team traded off presentation and facilitation duties, while taking detailed notes to capture themes that emerged from workshop discussion. Participants received a folder with the case studies we discussed during the workshop and a 1-page handout summarizing best practices for faculty retention, including immediate small steps chairs can take to improve climate.

Module 1: Assessing Department Climate

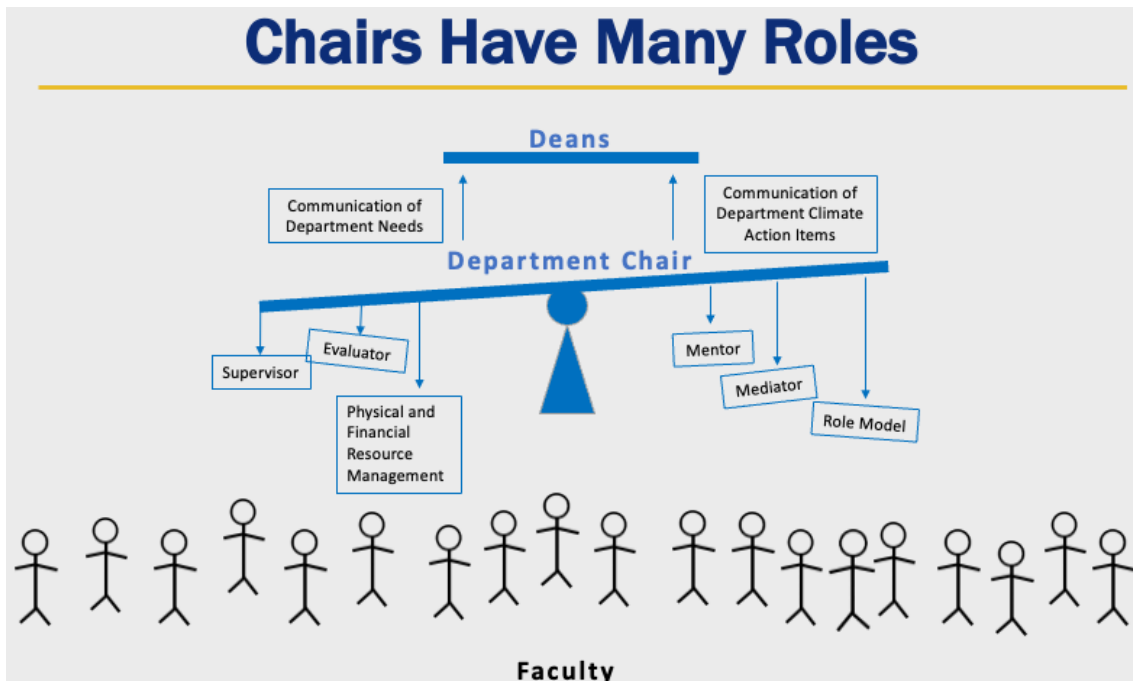
The workshop launches with a roughly 20-minute presentation defining workplace climate, sharing research into the benefits of inclusive climate, and highlighting key findings from our research on the climate at the university. We begin with a brief overview of the social science literature on workplace climate [14] as well as research on the elements of inclusive climate, highlighting how inclusive climate minimizes conflict and boosts morale for diverse teams [15]. We then map elements of inclusive climate—being fairly treated, being included in decision making, and feeling valued for who you are—onto aspects of faculty work experience and departmental life. For example, perceptions of fair or unfair treatment may apply to faculty-chair interactions around workload, salary, annual appraisal, promotion, or the allocation of resources to support professional success (e.g. lab and office space, research and teaching support, conference travel support). A key theme throughout these early slides is the importance of climate for faculty retention.

We then present our own research findings, first showing how our institution compares to other universities when it comes to faculty perceptions of department collegiality and other aspects of department climate. We then pivot to our broader project on faculty retention and the experiences of women of color faculty. For this part of the presentation, we rely on the rich data we gathered from in-depth interviews with faculty, which is particularly compelling and allows chairs to better understand the experiences of their faculty. For instance, we highlight how women of color who exit the university cite department climate as a key factor: “I would have said that the climate is chilly, passive aggressively hostile, with pockets of places where people are collegial” (Respondent 48). At the same time, women of color in a small number of departments report a negative climate at the broader university, but positive experiences within their department: “The university itself never felt like an especially welcoming place, but [my department] was an oasis” (Respondent 54).

We end our discussion of the research findings by focusing on how department chairs are central to key aspects of department climate. Chairs play several important roles, such as (1) setting an example for collegiality, (2) ensuring resources are equitably distributed, (3) engaging in clear communication & transparent decision making, and (4) helping people become integrated into the department. Our research bears this out, with many faculty pointing to their chair as central to their work experiences. In the words of one respondent, “the department chair is the most important person in faculty life” (Respondent 5). Finally, to transition from research into the interactive, discussion-based module of the workshop, we present an illustration of the

challenges department chairs face by providing a visual of the many duties chairs are expected to fill (see Figure 1). We use a scale that is weighted more heavily toward formal duties (faculty evaluation, supervising staff, physical and financial resource management) rather than “soft” duties (communicating department climate action items to the dean, serving as mentor, mediator, and role model in the department). Here we stress that while formal duties often dominate our attention, it is vitally important to also focus on “soft” things like climate.

Figure 1: Workshop Slide on Formal and Informal Duties of Department Chairs



Module 2: Solutions

The next part of the workshop is designed around interactive case studies and group discussion, which take roughly 60 minutes in total. The case studies we present were developed based on common faculty experiences gleaned from our interviews. We went back to several participants from the women of color research and reengaged them in conversations about department climate. Their generosity and guidance were invaluable in the development of our case studies. We took care to base the scenarios on events reported in our research, but to take creative liberty to keep the case studies broad enough to not be identifiable. Before finalizing the case studies, we shared them with our research participants to ensure we had captured the essence of their experiences. These case studies are scripted as brief skits and require workshop participants to actively engage as they act out their assigned role. While this often leads to laughter and light banter, it also serves to ensure all participants are paying close attention instead of multitasking.

Based on our early experiences piloting the workshops, three case studies is too much to be covered within the allotted time window, so we selected two to act out and discuss. The first case study begins a few minutes before the start of department faculty meeting. The chair is engaged in deep conversation with a small group of faculty while a relatively new faculty member enters

the room and is largely ignored. She is excluded from the conversation and when the chair makes an announcement of recent faculty successes, her accomplishments are not noted. The second case study centers on student complaints about an international faculty member, digging into how the chair engages with the faculty member to address these concerns. The third case study takes place at an annual faculty retreat where hiring plans are being discussed. One senior faculty member dominates the conversation and characterizes a colleague as a “diversity hire,” which quickly derails the meeting. After each case study, we have the group respond to a series of questions about (1) what went wrong, (2) whether they’ve encountered similar scenarios, (3) what the chair and other faculty could have done differently, and (4) how this kind of situation would have been handled within their own department. One team member facilitates the discussion while the other takes notes on a large easel pad at the front of the room. Taking notes serves to encourage participation, while also allowing us to capture the themes that emerge during discussion. The team member that facilitates the discussion encourages participants to share ideas, reiterates or restates key themes that emerge, and provides guidance when questions or disagreements arise. None of the case studies have clear “right” answers, so part of the process is to share ideas about what strategies might work within specific departments. For example, in the case study about the annual faculty retreat where a junior faculty member is called a “diversity hire” by a senior colleague, workshop participants had differing opinions about whether the chair should talk to the senior faculty member privately or instead chastise their behavior publicly.

Once the case study discussion is complete, the group is warmed up to think about inclusive climate and generally feels quite comfortable sharing, so we delve into their own experiences when it comes to fostering inclusive climate. We ask the chairs share (1) their biggest challenges when it comes to department climate, (2) the strategies they’re already tried to improve climate, including what worked and what didn’t work, and (3) any resources they need to improve the climate in their department. Again, this step generates lively discussion as participants reflect on whether colleagues’ strategies might work in their own department or could be adapted to better fit the culture or context of their unit.

Module 3: Implementation

The workshop ends with a call for all participants to take immediate steps to improve their department climate. The team shares four ideas for small steps that chairs can take, starting the very next day. These include: (1) practicing management by walking about, (2) taking varied small groups of faculty to lunch to encourage interaction, (3) preparing a response in advance for when a faculty member is disrespectful to colleagues, and (4) providing formalized opportunities for faculty accomplishments and successes to be shared within the department. We allow the group to generate additional ideas and then ask each chair to publicly commit to take at least one of these actions this semester. Our intention in asking for a public pledge is to encourage accountability among participants and increase the likelihood of follow through.

IV. Workshop Evaluation & Next Steps

Our first measure of workshop success is simply reaching a critical mass of chairs, deans, and other college leaders. We offered a total of six workshops over the course of the semester and had 53 participants, including 38 chairs, 4 deans, 4 deputy deans, and 7 members of deans’ leadership teams. We presented workshops for six of the seven main colleges at the university

and reached roughly 75% of all department chairs. In addition to the chairs’ workshops, we ran two similar workshops for directors of interdisciplinary graduate programs and for the leadership team of the graduate college, reaching another 17 people and bringing our total number of participants to 70.

Evaluation

To gauge reaction to the workshop, we sent a brief online evaluation survey to all participants within one week of the workshop. The survey had a 40 percent response rate, which is within the typical range for online surveys. Overall, workshop feedback was extremely positive (see Table 1). In the words of one chair, “I found this to be the most beneficial of any workshop or training that I had at UD in helping to understand my role and interactions in my department. The combination of case studies, discussion with fellow chairs, and viewpoints from the ADVANCE team are highly effective.” Participants were particularly appreciative of the opportunity to interact with other chairs and learn from their ideas: “Having the small group of chairs was very good. Too many chairs might have made it less valuable. The discussions after the case study role playing were excellent.”

Table 1: Post-Workshop Evaluation Results

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The research and case studies helped me understand the importance of department climate	0%	0%	54%	46%
The workshop provided useful steps I can take as chair to foster an inclusive climate	0%	0%	54%	46%
The workshop made me reflect on the climate in my own department	0%	4%	39%	57%
It was helpful to discuss the topic with other chairs	0%	0%	29%	71%
After the workshop, I feel better equipped to address disrespectful behavior in my department	0%	4%	57%	39%

A small number of the participants felt the case studies we worked through during the workshop were too obvious or were heavy-handed examples. These individuals suggested that we create new case studies that included more subtle examples of exclusion or implicit bias. Interestingly, however, many chairs commented that they had experienced situations similar to those illustrated in the case studies. Taken as a whole, this suggests that we could develop new case studies when we next offer the workshop, perhaps grouping chairs into “advanced” and “intro” levels, based on their level of familiarity with workshop content, or even the types of climate challenges that are most salient in their department.

For longer term evaluation, we have a range of follow-up research planned. First, we will compare the next wave of climate survey data to our previous results, paying careful attention to the experiences of women and faculty of color, as these groups have historically had lower levels of satisfaction with department climate relative to their colleagues. We also plan to hold focus groups with faculty on an annual basis for the next three years, which will allow us to efficiently gather additional qualitative data on faculty experiences across various subgroups of faculty. We

will also resurvey department chairs that participated in the workshop roughly one semester later, asking them to share any steps they have taken to improve department climate.

Next Steps

A primary goal of the workshop is to take ideas generated from department chairs from across the university and develop a resource outlining actionable steps to promote an inclusive department climate. After each workshop we transcribed the written notes generated during the group discussion into a master document. We coded key themes from this document and created a written resource that identifies common challenges chairs face when it comes to climate, as well as multiple ideas to address each challenge. We have disseminated this resource via email as well as in a new section of our ADVANCE website geared toward supporting department chairs. We plan to follow up with a series of targeted emails to chairs once or twice per semester where we remind them of the importance of inclusive climate and share strategies related to a specific topic that impacts climate, such as faculty-chair interactions around negotiating workload.

V. Challenges & Strategies

A key challenge in getting these kinds of institutional change efforts off the ground is engaging with campus administrators to build legitimacy and garner support. Previous attempts to engage with department chairs around similar topics were only moderately successful, and we found ourselves talking to the same core group of chairs across multiple events, with relatively low participation from several colleges. In the case of the inclusive department climate project, we actually generated the idea of the chairs' workshop while discussing our research findings with the deans, which ensured their continued support as we developed and launched the workshop. Throughout the process of presenting the workshops, we found participation among chairs was unusually high. This was likely because the dean's office in each college was responsible for coordinating the scheduling and RSVPs for their respective event(s). In some cases, deans or associate deans stayed for the full workshop, which added importance and urgency to the topic, as it demonstrated commitment at the highest levels within the college.

Reflecting on how we were able to successfully engage with the deans to garner support for our workshop, we likely benefitted from increased institutional attention to the experiences of faculty of color, as well as our decision to highlight qualitative research and share the stories and experiences of the women we interviewed. The ADVANCE team has been doing similar work for several years, but previous efforts were somewhat less successful. We organized a faculty of color roundtable in spring 2018 focused on engaging with deans around strategies for retention, mentoring, and development of faculty of color. We hosted another event in Fall 2020 focused on engaging with department chairs around retaining women of color faculty. Both events were well attended, but they resulted in limited opportunities to reengage with participants and far less energy and enthusiasm than we have seen with our current workshop. It should be noted that both previous events had a similar format, with panelists presenting and then answering questions from the audience, which is less interactive than our inclusive climate workshop. In the case of our current workshop, we first gained the attention of the deans when we presented our research at an event for faculty co-sponsored by the university's antiracism initiative. During the audience discussion that emerged after the presentation, several faculty raised concerns that our findings on the experiences of women of color faculty needed to be promptly addressed by university administrators. Two deans were at the event and publicly shared a desire to implement

immediate change efforts to improve departmental climate within their respective colleges. These deans offered to have our team present the research at a dedicated meeting attended by the full group of deans. At that meeting, the combination of quantitative research demonstrating high faculty turnover rates and qualitative research where faculty of color shared their stories, seemed particularly compelling. As a result of this meeting, the deans requested we develop a workshop for chairs and offered to help us roll it out across their respective colleges.

A key strategy we learned over the course of developing and implementing this workshop is the importance of tailoring the workshop to the audience. For two of our department climate workshops, we presented not to department chairs but to directors of interdisciplinary graduate programs and senior leadership in the graduate college. Our original case studies were centered on chair and faculty interaction, but we realized this new audience was likely dealing with somewhat different issues. We decided to create new case studies that would resonate with the day-to-day challenges this audience would be more likely to face. For case study four, we focus on a weekly research group/lab meeting where a PI voices somewhat unrealistic and unprofessional expectations of his graduate students, as well as a hands-off approach to student mentoring, even as one of his own students is struggling and at risk of leaving the program. Case study five centers on a meeting to discuss graduate admissions for an interdisciplinary program. This case highlights meeting dynamics and strategies to minimize bias in evaluation. Upon reflection, we might have included one or more of these new case studies at the original workshops with department chairs, as efforts to shape department climate should be attentive to not only issues faculty face, but also the experiences of staff and students. As one chair told us, “I think that this workshop was pretty much spot on [but] the emphasis seemed to be almost exclusive to faculty-faculty interactions. If the goal is overall department climate, I would incorporate aspects of faculty-staff and faculty-student interactions.” We plan to include these new case studies, as well as a resource on strategies to engage with students and staff in climate change efforts, on our new webpage for department chairs.

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