

How to Assess the Campus Climate for Religious Diversity

College campuses often reflect diverse religious, spiritual, and secular identities. Understanding how students and employees perceive their campus climate related to such diversity is important in ensuring inclusive learning environments, actualizing institutional commitments to diversity, and enacting informed change. This resource can be used by those who want to collect information about how students and/or employees understand their campus contexts as these relate to religious diversity.

The following information will enable you to plan for an assessment of your campus climate for religious diversity. It covers the major steps of the assessment planning process, providing information that is useful to consider in executing an effective assessment.

The workbook is divided into three steps with specific questions to answer. You can use this resource as a structure for group work related to collecting information about your campus climate. You can complete the questions all at once, or you may wish to take more time to discuss the information with others.

Planning your interfaith assessment: A brief overview

This resource provides information related to the following three steps involved in planning an effective assessment project (Henning & Roberts, 2016):

- **Step 1:** Develop your assessment question (what you will ask in order to learn about specific aspects of your campus climate)
- **Step 2:** Determine the information you need to collect to answer your assessment question
- **Step 3:** Develop a strategy to execute a campus climate assessment

Before you begin...

The assessment of your campus climate should never be done by only one or two individuals. If you have not already done so, coordinate the assessment of your campus climate in partnership with others at your institution by forming a group, committee, or taskforce that includes a diversity of faculty, staff, and students with reference to positions on campus and other characteristics (e.g., religious and secular identities; Rankin & Reason, 2008). This is important for building consensus, understanding and executing the assessment in comprehensive and inclusive ways, and using the findings to inform institutional change.

Step 1: Develop your assessment question

By now, you should have already written your assessment purpose statement using the [What Should I Assess? First Steps for Effective Interfaith Assessment resource](#). If you have determined that the purpose of your assessment is to understand perceptions of your campus climate related to religious diversity, the next step is to develop a specific assessment question. Your assessment question guides exactly what you will assess. It asks a question that the information you will collect will answer.

In order to develop your assessment question, follow the prompts below.

1. Who is your audience?

The assessment of the campus climate involves collecting information about how various individuals on campus perceive certain aspects of their environment. Given that colleges often bring together diverse religious, spiritual, and secular identities, it is critical to understand how various individuals on campus experience such diversity. The assessment of your campus climate might include students, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni. Learning about how these different groups perceive various dimensions of the campus climate allows campuses to:

- Develop or adjust institutional policies and practices based on the experiences and needs of students and employees
- Understand strengths and capitalize on those in creating new and offering ongoing interfaith programming
- Understand challenges facing different groups on campus
- Center experiences of underrepresented groups

Whose perceptions about the campus do you want to understand? _____

2. In which parts of the campus are you interested?

There are several definitions of campus climate since there are many different aspects of campus to consider. This resource utilizes Milem, Chang, and Antonio's (2005) campus climate framework since it explains specific aspects of a campus that influence the educational benefits of diversity. Applied to interfaith work, the specific dimensions of a college campus outlined by Milem and colleagues (2005) stand to promote or hinder the educational benefits that are possible when interacting across religious differences. The assessment of your campus climate could, therefore, collect information that includes the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of various individuals on campus related to these areas:

Religious, spiritual, and secular diversity on campus

- Perceptions about the extent of religious, spiritual, and secular diversity among enrolled students as well as hired faculty and staff
- Satisfaction with the religious, spiritual, and secular diversity present on campus

Psychological dimension of interacting across differences

- Perceptions about positive (e.g., supportive, accommodating, accepting) and negative (e.g., divisive, insensitive, tense) aspects of campus experiences
- Attitudes held toward particular groups on campus



Interactions across religious, spiritual, and secular differences

- Number of interactions within one's own group and across religious, spiritual, and secular differences
- Quality of interactions within one's own group and across religious, spiritual, and secular differences
- Engagement in structured or informal interfaith opportunities

Organizational and structural context

- Perceptions of campus policies and practices as these relate to religious diversity
- Inclusion of religious diversity within curricular and co-curricular spaces
- Budget allocations toward interfaith efforts

History of inclusion or exclusion of diverse groups on campus

- Perceptions that policies, practices, and attitudes have evolved over time to include diverse religious, spiritual, and secular identities
- Perceptions of resistance toward including diverse religious, spiritual, and secular perspectives

About which aspect(s) of the campus climate do you want to learn? _____

3. Writing your assessment question

Now you can write your interfaith assessment question by filling in the information below.

How do _____ experience the campus climate in relation
(insert answer to #1)

to _____ ?
(insert answer to #2)

Tip

Individuals often experience their campus environments differently. Depending on what is motivating the assessment of your campus climate (e.g., particular concerns raised, incidents on or off campus, shifting demographics, changes in institutional policies), it could be useful to learn whether perceptions of the climate differ across particular characteristics.

Examples of such characteristics include religious/secular/spiritual identities, other demographic categories, role/location on campus, time at the institution, level of engagement in training, and level of interaction across differences. If you are interested in learning whether there are different perceptions of your campus climate across particular groups/characteristics, you should add this as an additional assessment question.

Step 2: Determine the information you need to collect to answer your assessment question

Once you have a specific assessment question, you need to determine the information required to answer that question. It is useful to think about the information you need to collect for an assessment in terms of information already known about your campus climate AND information needed.

What do you already know?

Your campus may already have some information about individuals' perceptions of the campus climate as this relates to religious diversity. Often, campuses already have useful information that could help answer an assessment question or at least provide a good starting point to understand what is motivating an assessment of the campus climate. For instance, you may be able to access recent institutional reports and other materials (e.g., campus newspapers or other media) that can illuminate salient themes related to your campus climate for religious diversity.

In addition, check with your campus institutional research and/or co-curricular assessment areas to learn if your campus has participated in any of the following:

- **[Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey \(IDEALS\)](#) or the [Values, Interfaith Engagement, and Worldview Survey \(VIEWS\)](#):** IFYC works with research partners to offer opportunities for campuses to participate in these larger-scale surveys that collect information about the campus climate for religious diversity.
- If your institution has completed the **[Campus Interfaith Inventory \(CII\)](#)** you can use the results to understand the areas on campus successfully addressing religious diversity, areas for potential improvements, and practices on campus that are particularly effective.
- **The Diverse Learning Environments Survey and Staff Climate Survey:** These are widely used surveys campuses use to understand their climates for diversity.
- **The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE):** These are widely used surveys that include items and add-on modules that help institutions understand students' engagement and their perceptions of inclusiveness and cultural diversity on campus.
- **Collected data from focus groups, interviews, or previous assessments of the campus climate:** Institutional task forces, committees, or other groups are often interested in periodically collecting this type of information. Check with those who oversee efforts related to diversity/equity/inclusion, religious/spiritual life, multicultural student affairs, and institutional research to learn whether your campus already has information.

Collecting information about your campus climate

If your campus has not collected information about student and/or employee perceptions of the campus climate for religious diversity, it is a good time to start doing so. Also, if it has been some time and/or there are situations on or off campus that could influence individuals' perceptions of their environments, it is useful to collect new information. You can utilize a variety of methods to collect information about individuals' perceptions of the campus climate. The following three methods are common approaches:



Surveys are relatively easy to administer and complete, and they can ask about a variety of aspects of the campus climate in relatively little time. It is possible—preferable, even—to hear from larger audiences when using surveys. There are large-scale national surveys (for example, the ones mentioned on p. 4) that provide in-depth reports and consultation to discuss your campus results. Institutions can also develop their own surveys to customize campus climate measures. While surveys are useful ways to collect information, students and employees may feel over-surveyed. Additionally, a primary goal of surveys is to understand general themes and trends across campus. Sometimes, this type of general overview can obscure the experiences of minoritized groups.

Focus groups offer opportunities for small groups of individuals to share in-depth information about their experiences and perceptions of campus. The small-group setting can provide diverse perspectives on any given aspect of the campus climate. However, you cannot guarantee that participants will keep the information that is shared confidential since multiple individuals are involved. This may influence participants' willingness to share information. Additionally, group constitution and dynamics may influence what is shared and by whom.

Interviews offer opportunities for an individual to share rich descriptions of their experiences and perceptions of campus. Interviews offer privacy so participants may be more inclined to share information. Individuals' responses often provide more nuance than possible with surveys since responses are in participants' own words. However, interviews are more time-intensive in terms of the number of sessions required and the transcription of notes/recordings. Additionally, the number of interview participants is relatively low. Some audiences prefer results based on larger numbers of participants, so this is something to consider.

Creating your own survey?

Check out IFYC's [Survey Item Bank](#) and [Constructing Surveys: A Tip for Interfaith Educators](#) for assistance.

Running a focus group?

Use IFYC's [Conducting Focus Groups: A Beginner's Guide](#) for assistance in developing your focus group script.

How do I decide which type of information to collect?

Given the various ways to collect information, you will need to decide which is most useful. Choosing the type of information to collect for your assessment is easier when you consider your assessment purpose and the feasibility of gathering each type of information.

Remember your assessment purpose

Your assessment purpose explains what is driving your interest in the assessment, what you hope to learn from such an assessment, and how the assessment findings could be used. It is useful to consider these last two aspects in selecting the type of information to collect for your campus climate assessment.

What do you want to learn from your assessment? Choose the type of information that can best answer what you hope to learn. For instance, do you want to be able to understand many different aspects of the campus climate for religious diversity? Surveys that include several types of items and scales may be more conducive and take less time. Is it more useful for you to gain an in-depth understanding of why individuals perceive the campus climate in a particular way? Interviews or focus groups can often provide this level of detail and use participants' own words and lived experiences.

How do you think you could use your assessment results? Remember your assessment purpose is also informed by those with whom you could share your assessment findings. What information is most useful for particular audiences? For instance, are administrators interested in understanding how your campus compares to peer institutions along a variety of climate measures? If so, participating in a larger-scale survey that offers these types of comparisons is useful. Alternatively, if particular situations on campus are motivating the desire to assess your campus climate, it may be beneficial to talk in depth with particular groups of individuals to learn more—through their own words and experiences—about their perceptions and the impact of these situations on their campus experiences. Often, there is a variety of audiences with whom we can share assessment findings.

Feasibility

In addition to considering your assessment purpose, the information you choose to collect should be feasible for those doing the assessment and for the individuals who will be assessed. A comprehensive campus climate assessment collects a variety of information about the campus—surveys as well as interviews or focus groups, for instance (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008). It is possible to arrive at different conclusions about individuals' perceptions of their campus environments depending on the method used to collect information (Allan & Madden, 2006). For instance, generalizing too much from survey data (e.g., reporting averages or reporting entire groups' responses) can obscure the experiences and perceptions of minoritized groups. Attempting to generalize data collected from interviews or focus groups works against the aims of these methods, as their purpose is typically to provide rich, specific descriptions of particular experiences and perceptions rather than generalizable themes.

Often times, insights from interviews and focus groups help explain the *why* behind particular survey findings, providing important nuance and individual voices. Other times, initial interview and focus group findings can illuminate important themes that may inform the survey selected to be used. While it is possible—even recommended—to utilize various methods to collect information on the campus climate, read on for important issues to consider.

Interfaith assessment must be feasible for those doing the assessment. For instance, in selecting the type of information to collect, considering the cost, time, and expertise required to develop a data collection tool (e.g., survey, or interview/focus group script), collect the data, and analyze and interpret the data collected are all important.

Assessment should also be feasible for those being assessed. Do you think students or employees are willing and able to provide particular types of information? How easily can the information be collected from them? Does gathering particular types of evidence make it easier/more difficult for particular individuals to participate?

4. Will you need to collect new (or additional) information for your assessment?

If so, list the specific types of information (e.g., survey results, interviews, focus groups) you will collect for assessment:



Step 3: Develop a strategy to execute a campus climate assessment

Now that you've created your assessment question and considered the type(s) of information you want to collect to answer that question, the following information prepares you to execute your campus climate assessment.

Prepare the campus for this assessment

- Decide who you will invite to participate in the assessment. In addition to deciding between students, alumni, faculty, and/or staff, you will need to decide whether to invite all eligible participants or select smaller samples of these groups to participate. Discuss with your institutional research area the benefits and drawbacks of various approaches, namely as these relate to the type(s) of information you want to collect.
- Effectively communicate and market the assessment to those you will invite to participate. Decide from whom the invitation to participate in the assessment will come, discuss using incentives, and clearly explain how the results of this assessment will be used on campus (Rankin & Reason, 2008).
- Time your assessment appropriately. Be mindful of the academic schedule (i.e., midterms, finals, breaks) and other busier times on campus. If you are using a survey, talk with your institutional research area to determine the best time to administer this to avoid conflicting with other institutional survey efforts. If you plan to interview/use focus groups, consider the time of day that is more conducive to longer, in-depth conversations.

Develop a plan for analyzing and interpreting your assessment findings

Once you collect the information—or data—you need to answer your assessment question, someone will need to analyze the data and interpret the assessment findings. This makes the data understandable, and therefore usable in answering your assessment question. Consider the following as your group plans your assessment:

5. What will be required in order to analyze your assessment data?

6. Who will analyze your assessment data? List those individuals here:

7. When will these data analyses happen?



While analyzing assessment data is necessary in order to answer your assessment question, the interpretation of your findings is critical in sharing and ultimately using your assessment findings. Evidence does not speak for itself! You need to interpret your data to actually answer your assessment question and encourage folks to act on the findings.

Develop a strategy for sharing and using your assessment findings

Finally, a key part of interfaith assessment involves sharing assessment results and using these findings to implement informed change on campus. Sharing and using assessment results are two different components of the interfaith assessment process. Considerations related to both components are described below.

What is the value of sharing assessment results? We want to share our assessment results with others for a few reasons. First, if we seek to do assessment for purposes of understanding and improving our campus climates for religious diversity, sharing our assessment findings with others often allows for different perspectives on how to best improve. Second, in terms of accountability and transparency, assessment findings provide important information for others to understand what is working well on your campus, any areas of opportunity, and how the campus might address those. Interfaith assessment is a powerful way to tell the story of your campus.

How can we most effectively share assessment results? In thinking through the most effective way to share your assessment findings, consider two aspects. First, who are your different audiences? Second—based on your audiences—what are the most appropriate ways to share your findings?

Who are your audiences for sharing assessment findings? In sharing your assessment findings, it is important to consider various audiences so that your findings are communicated in the most useful way possible. You should customize how you share assessment results based on the various audiences with whom you anticipate sharing your results.

Remember that faculty, staff, and students can all benefit from learning about your assessment findings. Given this, key questions to answer in developing a strategy to share your results include:

- What are the most important implications of your findings as they relate to these specific audiences?
- What actions can various audiences take with your assessment findings?
- What level of communication is appropriate for particular audiences, and how does that influence what we share?

What are useful methods for sharing assessment findings? Finally, once you have understood the importance of sharing your assessment results and with whom you will share your findings, considering how to share your information is useful. Different methods of sharing your information are more appropriate for particular audiences. Consider the following in thinking through how you will report your findings:

Assessment Reports

- Organize and synthesize a lot of useful information for different audiences.
- Prepare reports with specific audiences in mind.
- Consider comprehensive reports as well as brief and focused versions for particular audiences.



Presentations

- Discuss your findings with your own colleagues, broader divisional staff, faculty, and even colleagues at other institutions.
- Deliver the information in a more interactive format than reports, but still consider your different audiences.
- Emphasize the actions various audiences can take as a result of your assessment findings.

Web/Virtual Spaces

- Post your assessment findings to various institutional websites for easy access.
- Use interactive features on websites that allow visitors to learn about the assessment findings of most interest.
- Use social media to communicate brief snippets related to your assessment findings, namely to students.
- Use infographics as a way to explain your assessment findings more visually.

Other Modes

- Reach staff, faculty, students, alumni, and/or the general public through newsletters, newspapers, and institutional magazines.
- Highlight assessment in action through institutional assessment summits, conferences, or other events.
- Celebrate a broader culture of assessment at your institution by sharing various assessment findings, implications, and informed decision making.

How do we use assessment results? Now that you have learned the importance of and strategies for sharing your assessment findings, considering the various uses of your assessment findings is also critical. A central purpose of assessment is to implement informed change. In other words, assessment requires us to use the findings we generate to inform potential changes or improvements to specific aspects of the campus environment. Assessment findings about the campus climate involve many areas on campus and should connect with institution-wide efforts. In thinking through how you can use your campus climate assessment findings, it is useful to understand the types of decisions that can be informed with assessment results:

Setting campus-wide priorities

- Establish or refine institutional priorities related to religious diversity on campus
- Inform strategic planning efforts (i.e., what's working well, what needs improvement?)
- Revisit institutional policies related to religious diversity (e.g., accommodations, housing, student organizations, curricular requirements)
- Inform resource allocation, including fiscal, physical, personnel, technological, and knowledge/skill resources (e.g., training and professional development)

Co-curricular and curricular planning

- Identify new spaces on campus where interaction across religious difference can be prioritized (e.g., new student orientation, residential education, existing diversity efforts)
- Modify learning outcomes and offerings to address specific areas of need
- Make specific improvements related to how programming is delivered

Retention and engagement efforts

- Identify areas of need for particular student or employee groups
- Make informed improvements that welcome and support diverse groups

Institutional reporting

- Report your assessment findings as part of your institutional accreditation efforts, as accreditation processes want evidence of the systematic collection of information (i.e., assessment) AND the utilization of findings to make improvements (i.e., assessment)
- Share assessment findings with off-campus partners (e.g., service-learning or community-based learning sites) who contribute toward students' intercultural development

Make the assessment of your campus climate an ongoing process

Like the assessment of any aspect of your institution, the assessment of the campus climate should be a continuous process. After the initial assessment, subsequent assessments should be done regularly for two main reasons (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008):

- Recall that the main purpose of climate assessments is to make informed changes on campus. If your institution is using assessment findings to do this, it is critical to continuously collect information to determine the effectiveness of those efforts. For instance, your institution could establish a cycle that collects information about the campus climate every three years. Or those coordinating the assessment of your campus climate could select distinct religious/secular communities to invite to focus groups each year to learn about their perceptions of and experiences on campus.
- The populations within our institutions and surrounding communities can change over time. This can impact the frequency and quality of interactions across difference as well as the expressed norms in our campus contexts. In order for your campus to be responsive to these potential shifts, it is useful to continuously collect information from students and employees on how they understand their campus contexts.

Conclusion

In partnership with others, you are now ready to plan your institution's campus climate assessment. We encourage you to start with the answers you provided in this workbook and discuss the benefits, drawbacks, and considerations related to aspects of your assessment. We encourage you to check out the other [IFYC assessment resources](#) for additional information related to interfaith assessment.

References

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