**The Campus Climate Focus Group Research Project**

**Executive Summary**

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**Introduction:**

The Campus Climate Focus Group Research Project (CCFGRP) was initiated at the request of the Campus Climate Committee (CCC), a Presidential advisory group composed of faculty, students, administrators, and staff. This study examines campus climate at San Jose State University based on data collected from thirteen focus groups composed of administrators, faculty, staff, and students. The initial impetus for this study came from findings of the 2006 Campus Climate Survey conducted by the CCC. As is common practice in social science research, this research project was designed as a “follow-up” study to offer a deeper understanding of the survey results (Morgan 1996). The primary goal of this research project was to explore experiences of campus climate through the lens of race, gender, sexuality and rank. Data collection began February, 2009 and ended November, 2009. The thirteen groups included in this study were: African American, Asian American, International, Latino, LGBT, and White students, and African American, Asian American, Latino, LGBT, and women faculty and staff, lecturers, and administrators.

**The Context:**

Campus climate is an issue central to the strategic planning of most universities. While universities have always been concerned with creating welcoming and safe environments for students and faculty, the (relatively) recent influx of women and men of color, white women, and GLBT persons onto college campuses, makes this concern even more central to the educational mission. Results from the SJSU 2006 and 2009 campus climate surveys indicate that, “Most faculty, staff, and student report somewhat favorable or favorable perceptions of campus climate at SJSU.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This is indeed good news for a campus as diverse as ours with respect to people of different genders, abilities, races, cultures, and sexual orientations. However, results from the survey data also indicated that among faculty, staff and students: 1) women describe the general climate as more “sexist” than men, 2) gay, lesbian, or bisexual persons view the climate as more “homophobic” than heterosexual persons, and 3) people of color experience discrimination based on race more than white people. [[2]](#footnote-2)

The goal of the Campus Climate Focus Group Research Project was to explore, in more depth, the experiences of those groups of people for whom our campus falls short of our goals for inclusivity. This report, and the willingness of campus members to read it and take seriously the experiences described herein, is another indicator of the dedication and commitment of the members of our campus community.

**Report Findings:**

San José State University is a very large campus with the various departments and divisions being likened to micro-climes. The politics of race, gender, rank, and sexuality vary depending on the local context of these micro-climes. Local context varies by demographics (what people are present), by power structures, by available resources, by disciplinary context (e.g. male-dominated verses female-dominated disciplines), and by environmental factors. While information at this local level might be compelling, given the confidentiality extended to participants, these analyses will not extend to this level of analysis.

In other words, this is not an “investigation” of racism, heterosexism, sexism, and power relations at SJSU. This study is not about finding those spaces on campus where these isms reside; indeed (as the report demonstrates) they are everywhere. Instead, the objective here is to convey a deeper sense of how these phenomena manifest on a daily basis, such that current members of the campus community will be able to recognize and confront campus climate issues in situ.

The CCFGRP contains two main reports: one concerning faculty, staff, and administrators, and one focused exclusively on students. Each report contains a table of contents, a brief introduction, discussion of methods, and six individual reports on the experiences and perceptions of campus climate from the perspective of members of specific identity groups.

**Report Highlights:**

* Themes of campus climate for Asian Pacific Islander faculty and staff: 1) cultural misunderstanding and discrimination, 2) recruitment, retention, and promotion issues, and 3) motives for staying at SJSU.
* Shaping the campus climate for women faculty and staff: 1) gender discrimination and sexism, 2) workload and family responsibilities, and 3) physical safety on campus.
* SJSU Latina/o staff and faculty identified key areas where institutional racism operates to shape the way we do business at SJSU: a) through the response to “diversity,” b) during the hiring and promotion process, c) and in the perception of Latino/a students.
* Tasked with the responsibility of talking about their experiences as white students at SJSU, five main themes emerged; 1) race means nothing, but diversity is everything, 2) “diversity” does not mean white, 3) the stigma of whiteness, 4) “reverse” racism, and 5) the segregation of campus life.
* Areas of concern for Vietnamese/Vietnamese-American students, 1) Vietnamese representation and campus diversity, 2) language and writing issues, and 3) making connections and building community.
* Themes related to the campus climate experienced by Latino students: 1) reclaiming community, reclaiming history, 2) being Latino in the classroom, 3) recruitment, retention, and graduation.
* The concerns expressed by International students encompassed three main topics: 1) the SJSU bureaucracy: completing the paperwork, 2) campus connections: feeling valued and finding community, and 3) racial mapping in the classroom.
* Shaping the campus climate experience of African-American/Black students: 1) negotiating negative stereotypes, 2) being Black on campus, and 3) building relationships in diverse communities.
* The main themes shaping the lives of LGBT faculty and staff at SJSU are 1) institutionalized/ structural heterosexism, 2) micro climates of homophobia, and 3) the politics of ‘coming out” or not.
* Administrators express deep frustration at the lack of resources available to assist faculty through problems that arise. This dissatisfaction with their limited authority, while evident in their relationships with faculty, was even more central to their concern for students.
* LGBT students identified four central themes concerning campus climate: 1) initial heterosexist experiences on campus, 2) encounters with homophobia , 3) “coming out” dilemmas on campus, 4) and encounters with transphobia.
* Four central themes emerged from this discussion of campus climate for African American/Black faculty and staff: 1) structural diversity 2) institutional racism, 2) everyday racism, 3) and feeling valued.

**Recommendations:**

This report is offered as an educational tool for administrators, faculty, staff, and students. Though the perspectives expressed in this report indicate that we have work to do to make this campus truly welcoming for all who are here, the findings also indicated an amazing amount of willingness to see this work accomplished. The students, staff, faculty, and administrators who participated in this study did so with the objective of making SJSU truly accessible for all persons. This first step in creating a *more* accessible environment is to understand – from another’s perspective – how that environment is currently experienced. We encourage all persons reading this report to pay careful attention to your own reactions to the stories contained herein. Pay special attention to those places where you find yourself the most “defensive,” “resistant” or “shocked” by what you read. Often the most emotionally evocative passages indicated areas we need to work on. We encourage MPPs, managers, Chairs, and various campus faculty, staff, and student organizations to plan a meeting centered on an open discussion of one or more of the focus group reports.

“*To commit ourselves to the work of transforming the academy so that it will be a place where cultural diversity informs every aspect of our learning, we must embrace struggle and sacrifice. We cannot be easily discouraged. We cannot despair when there is conflict. Our solidarity must be affirmed by shared belief in a spirit of intellectual openness that celebrates diversity, welcomes dissent, and rejoices in collective dedication to truth.” (bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom 1994:33)*

1. Citation for campus climate survey 2006 – page one. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Citation for campus climate survey – 2006 or 09 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)