

A Comparative Assessment of Approaches to Studying Institutional Climates for Political Learning and Participation in Democracy

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Abstract

In 2018, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' American Democracy Project (ADP) and Tufts University's Institute for Democracy & Higher Education (IDHE) formed a 3-year partnership to explore two approaches to studying institutional climates for political learning and participation in democracy. The goals were to repeat IDHE's qualitative approach to examining climates through case studies conducted by a team of outside researchers and to test a second approach—an internal institutional self-study pursued with IDHE guidance. We review these methods and offer a comparative assessment of their efficacy for studying an institution's political climate, as well as a brief summary of the qualitative case studies' findings. We conclude that (1) qualitative case studies of political climate are powerful assessment tools and (2) the self-study method with external guidance or coaching holds promise for scalability and potential to effect campus change but faces significant obstacles to successful implementation.

Keywords: campus climate, political learning, democracy, qualitative case study

From 2018 to 2022, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' American Democracy Project (ADP) and Tufts University's Institute for Democracy & Higher Education (IDHE) formed a 3-year partnership to explore approaches to improving campus climates for student political learning and engagement in democracy. Years I and II involved identifying campus liaisons to the project, establishing campus coalitions for planning and implementation, participating in virtual learning exchanges involving liaisons from each campus, meeting face-to-face multiple times, ongoing coaching, and assessments of the institutions' political campus climates. Year II and into Year III were dedicated to campuswide dialogues and planning based on the results of the assessments, but given obstacles, this timeline was extended. This article addresses the process of the project; the findings were published in an open-source venue, the *eJournal of Public Affairs*, in 2021 (Thomas et al., 2021). IDHE had developed and tested a protocol involving a team of

researchers traveling to each campus to conduct focus groups and interviews using a common focus group protocol and coding and analysis scheme. Although these qualitative case studies proved to be effective in fleshing out structural, procedural, normative, and attitudinal characteristics common to institutions with robust levels of student political participation, they were resource intensive. The goal was to pilot this process to catalyze institutional change to advance political learning and engagement among participating ADP campuses. Here, we sought to explore

1. whether IDHE's political climate assessment process is replicable and can be scaled up to reach more campuses and
2. whether steps beyond the assessment phase—dialogue, planning, and action—are effective in strengthening student political learning and participation in democracy.

We also considered details that might affect or improve the process, such as the roles of coalitions, institutional leaders, and on-

campus researchers and whether a multi-campus, cohort model (with virtual ongoing coaching, skill-building webinars, and reflection) strengthened the project. We involved academics outside IDHE in the hope of identifying individuals who might join a research team as needed. We also sought to inform the field through presentations and publications.

We begin this article with a rationale for the initiative and a brief examination of higher education's democratic mission, followed by a review of the literature on studying organizational culture and campus climates. We then describe the two methodologies: the process of having outside reviewers collect and analyze the data vis-à-vis a process of self-evaluation. We also report on the findings from an assessment we conducted of the research methodologies. Because the research methods from the original studies have been reported previously (Thomas & Brower, 2018), we focus more on the process of self-study. What we found is (1) when performed well, the qualitative climate assessment process is an effective approach to assessing and strengthening campus climates for political learning and engagement in democracy; (2) this model is replicable with methodological changes and proper support; and (3) the cohort, multicampus model strengthened the work and provided support for campus liaisons. Finally, at the end is a brief overview of some of the findings from the studies themselves.

Higher Education's Historic Democratic Purpose

U.S. higher education has a long yet ambivalent relationship with democracy. The first colonial colleges were established "to ensure a continuity of religious and civic leadership" (Hartley, 2011, p. 27). Historian Frederick Rudolph wrote about the public purpose of the early colleges, "A commitment to the republic became a guiding obligation of the American college" (Rudolph, 1962, p. 61). Founding Fathers Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin advocated for a strong education system and founded the University of Virginia and what became the University of Pennsylvania respectively. Jefferson (1903/2010) explained that "whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government; that whenever things get so far wrong as to attract notice, they may be relied on to set them to rights" (p. 253). Then, 60

years later, this role was affirmed and expanded through the Morrill Act of 1862, which established land-grant colleges and universities dedicated to the public needs of individual states.

Perhaps the clearest articulation of the importance of higher education to American democracy was made following World War II and the atrocities associated with fascism and the rise of Nazi Germany. President Harry Truman established the President's Commission on Higher Education, which identified higher education as democracy's "necessity." The commission's report stated,

The principal goals for higher education . . . are to bring to *all people of the Nation* [emphasis added] . . . education for a fuller realization of democracy in every phase of living . . . [and] education for the application of *creative imagination and trained intelligence to the solution of social problems and to the administration of public affairs* [emphasis added]. . . . Education is the foundation of democratic liberties. Without an educated citizenry alert to preserve and extend freedom, it would not long endure. (President's Commission on Higher Education, 1947, pp. 8, 25)

The Truman Commission report catalyzed changes ranging from the establishment of the community college system to the GI Bill providing free higher education to the nation's armed forces.

Despite the Truman Commission's clear mandate, colleges and universities largely avoided the political dimension to civic life. In the late 1990s, reacting to Robert Putnam's (1995) concerns about declines in social capital, captured in the image of Americans' preferring to "bowl alone" rather than in leagues, thousands of campuses responded with programs in volunteerism, service and service-learning, and stronger community-university partnerships. Nonetheless, civic learning and engagement remained steadfastly apolitical. Years later, researchers concluded that these approaches, although helpful for providing students with an increased understanding of civic life, failed to provide students with the skills and values needed to engage in and influence democracy (Finley, 2011, p. 3).

These shortfalls were supported by data. According to the 2013 survey from the Harvard Institute of Politics (2013), 53% of college students engaged in community service, whereas only 11% engaged with government, political organizations, or issue activism. Then, in 2014, IDHE's findings from the 2014 National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) data revealed that fewer than one in five of the nation's graduate and undergraduate students voted (Thomas, et. al. 2019). Higher education is finally taking seriously a long-standing but never fully embraced charge to educate for a more deliberative democracy. The movement to advance dialogue, deliberation, and discussion-based teaching grew exponentially in response to concerns over growing political polarization, persistent exclusionary policies and institutional practices, poor public problem-solving, and the phenomenon noted by the Pew Research Center that Republicans view not just the party but the people who identify as Democrats in an increasingly negative light (Pew Research Center, 2022). Colleges and universities increasingly serve a more diverse population of students, providing one of the best opportunities for people to develop cultural competencies and learn the arts of discussion and collaboration.

Campus deliberation, dialogue, and discussion-based teaching have grown significantly since around 2006. Research at Harvard University established discussion as a powerful teaching and learning tool (Christensen et al., 1991). Education on civic learning clearly demonstrates that discussion of controversial issues in the classroom enhances civic learning and produces positive benefits on skills, knowledge, and dispositions (Campbell, 2005; Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2014; McDevitt & Kioussis, 2006; Thomas & Brower, 2017). For these reasons, the researchers for this study designed it to advance skills in dialogue while simultaneously exploring the role of dialogue on campus.

The nation faces what President Biden identified in his January 2021 inaugural address as "cascading crises": a violent attack on our democracy and the peaceful transfer of power, as well as on truth, a raging virus, growing social and economic disparities, systemic racism, global climate change, and declining trust in government and other institutions, including higher education. Experiencing increases in hate speech,

extreme partisanship, and the presence on or near campuses of White nationalists and other extremist groups, colleges and universities are now asking what they should be doing differently.

Colleges and universities have the academic freedom to either embrace or avoid political learning, speech, and controversy. Given the potential financial implications of angering a partisan state legislature, trustee, or donor, or fear of violence, remaining apolitical has some appeal. Yet the policy questions facing this nation, particularly over racism and discrimination, extremism, climate change, immigration and DACA, gun violence, and more are deeply cultural in nature. Many reflect tensions over growing ethnic and racial diversity. Although most Americans (66%) say that diversity is good for the nation, the same number (66%) live in communities with little diversity, and they are satisfied with that reality (Horowitz, 2019). The need is to affect democracy not just as a form of governance but as a culture, as a way people interact and solve public problems. Colleges and universities are arguably microcosms of democracy; thus, college campuses are ideal opportunities for people to *practice* living in an inclusive democracy.

This effort is nothing short of a paradigm shift for U.S. higher education, away from apolitical engagement and into support for student political learning, activism, leadership, discourse, and participation. Much has been written about the difficulties of effectuating institutional change in higher education. The purpose of this project was to explore an approach to effectuate change specifically in an institution's climate for political learning and engagement in democracy.

Research History and Design

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) supports a subset of 250 institutions that engage in the ADP. ADP campuses commit to preparing students with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences they need to be informed, engaged members of their communities (AASCU, n.d.). IDHE at Tufts University's Tisch College of Civic Life is an applied research center that studies postsecondary student political learning and institutional engagement in democracy. In 2018, ADP partnered with the IDHE to collaborate on a multiyear initiative designed to improve

student political learning and participation in democracy. As part of this multiyear initiative, 12 ADP campuses agreed to work with IDHE to study their campus climates for political learning and engagement in democracy.

Prior to this project, IDHE had conducted 10 political climate studies using focus groups and interviews. Those research methods and findings have been previously reported (Thomas & Brower, 2017, 2018). The ADP-IDHE project augmented that original research by exploring whether campuses could work with a set of instructions and coaching by IDHE to engage in a self-assessment process. Additionally, we wanted to explore whether individuals at the participating campuses could develop the expertise to conduct climate studies at other institutions or, alternatively, could coach new cohorts of campuses through the process. If that was possible, we wanted to know what tools and support they would need. Finally, perhaps most importantly, we wanted to ensure that the climate studies catalyzed institutional change, rather than just gathering data, which had been the case in IDHE's original 10 studies.

Qualitative Research Methodologies

Facilitating sustainable change in complex organizations like colleges and universities has been a subject of study for several decades. Organizational change experts challenged the idea that problems in organizations stemmed from poor leadership or employees. Instead, problems often lie with the culture of the organization, which affects decision-making, behaviors, and programming. We subscribe to a circular change process like those of learning organizations (Senge, 1990), a process of planning, assessment, discussion, implementation of new initiatives, and then, after time, assessment of those new initiatives. The assessment focuses on the campus climate as an early step in the change process (Thomas & Brower, 2018).

Campus climate studies tend to be conducted via statistical surveys (see, e.g., Harper & Hurtado, 2007, whose meta-analysis of racial campus climate studies found that 75% used quantitative methods; Morrow et al., 2000). Surveys certainly have much to recommend them. In comparison to collecting data through interviews, observation, and/or focus groups, a survey can cover a greater breadth of topics (Morgan, 1996;

Morrow et al., 2000). Furthermore, surveys pursue statistical research benchmarks like large and representative samples that generate confidence in results. Qualitative research methods tend to reach low numbers of participants and can incur substantial costs (Brodigan, 1992). However, qualitative research has other benefits and has been used effectively in campus climate studies. Harper and Hurtado, for example, used focus groups with 278 participants to examine racial climate across five campuses, developing substantial thematic findings (see also Harper & Quaye, 2007 and Solórzano et al., 2000). Furthermore, Morgan (1996) noted that although surveys can attain a greater breadth, focus group research specifically can achieve greater depth, a view echoed by Morrow et al. According to Maxwell (2013), qualitative research is suited for the following “intellectual goals”:

1. Understanding the meaning, for participants in the study, of the events, situations, experiences, and actions they are involved with or engage in . . .
2. Understanding the particular contexts within which the participants act, and the influence that this context has on their actions . . .
3. Understanding the process by which events and actions take place . . .
4. Identifying unanticipated phenomena and influences . . . [and]
5. Developing causal explanations. (pp. 30–31)

Assessing causality, Maxwell said, is approached differently by qualitative researchers who are more interested in examining the process of how one variable impacts the other, whereas quantitative researchers focus on “whether and to what extent” variance in one variable affects another (p. 13).

IDHE has found qualitative campus climate research to be productive and powerful. The conceptual framework for the original case studies was influenced by Bolman and Deal's *Reframing Organizations* (1991; originally published in 1984, now in its 7th edition), which identified four analysis frames necessary to consider for organizational change: (1) structural, defined as formal roles, organizational charts and hierarchies, policies, technology, physical spaces; (2) human, defined as needs, feelings, skills,

limitations, attitudes, and beliefs of the people within the organizations, not just leaders and managers; (3) political, defined as resource allocation, power sharing and decision making, compromise and coercion, coalitions; and (4) cultural, defined as the norms, symbols, and history that shape the institution. The methodology and results have been presented at the Association for Higher Education annual conference and published (Thomas & Brower, 2017, 2018). The campuses in the original set of case studies were selected for their unpredicted high or low voting rates. This assessment served as an important step toward identifying campus structures, norms, behaviors, and processes that created environments supportive of student political participation. Based on the emerging findings, IDHE also published recommendations for strategies for increasing and improving student political learning and participation in democracy (Thomas et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2020).

As reported in Thomas and Brower (2017), IDHE concluded that colleges and universities can improve their climates for political learning and engagement in democracy by strengthening the following: (1) social cohesion, defined as how the institution builds a sense of shared responsibility within the campus community, student well-being, strong faculty-student relationships, and social networks for personal and collective engagement; (2) diversity, inclusion, and equity as realized practice, defined as how the institution uses diversity, particularly based on social identity, political ideology, and lived experiences, to educate for equity and inclusion within and beyond the campus and to advance social cohesion across differences of perspective, identity, and ideology; (3) pervasive, high quality political discussions, defined as how the institution embeds political discussions into the classroom or student experience more broadly, including promoting respect for the open exchange of ideas and consideration of dissenting or unpopular views; (4) student agency and voice, defined as how the institution treats students as colleagues and partners in addressing institutional and local community problems through collaborative governance and decision making; and (5) active student political engagement, defined as how the institution enables political action and student involvement with government structures (e.g., voting, campaigning) and policymaking (advocacy, activism, lobbying).

The campuses in this study were chosen by ADP. First, ADP hosted an open call and reception in July 2017 at a conference for academic affairs officers. Thirty-five academic affairs officers attended and learned about the opportunity. ADP then selected from the 35 campuses, first inviting a set of campuses that had previously participated in ADP's Political Engagement Project. Additional campuses were selected based on their interest, size, location, and diversity of student body. All participating campuses were state colleges or universities: four-year institutions that usually offer bachelor's and master's degrees and are supported primarily by public funding from the state's taxpayers. This study involved institutions in the following states: California, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, Virginia, and Utah. They ranged in size from 4,000 students to nearly 24,000 students.

Campuses received an invitation explaining the project and expectations of each participating institution. In total, 12 campuses agreed to participate in this multi-year initiative. Year I would be dedicated to coalition building and planning, virtual learning exchanges involving liaisons from each campus, and climate assessments. Year II would be dedicated to campuswide dialogues and planning based on the results of the assessments.

For comparison purposes, the research team conducted two climate studies, on campuses selected for their unique student bodies, using the original approach involving a team of outside researchers collecting, analyzing, and reporting the data and findings. The remaining 10 campuses worked with IDHE's guidance and each other as part of a learning exchange to conduct self-studies. IDHE guidance consisted of monthly webinars, one-to-one coaching, face-to-face meetings, and training. IDHE also provided resources such as the focus group protocol, a codebook, and templates for analyzing data. At the end of the assessment phase, campus teams (or in the case of the external studies, the research team) created reports of the findings from that assessment. Although individual reports are confidential, most agreed to share them within the 12 campuses, and all have agreed to share aggregated findings without attribution to an individual campus.

Participating institutions were required

by ADP to provide support for the project. Provosts and chief academic affairs officers were to launch the project, identify liaisons who would coordinate efforts, and establish a coalition of faculty members, staff, and, in some cases, students who would convene regularly, review progress, and help recruit participants necessary to a qualitative methodology. Institutions were also asked to participate in virtual and face-to-face learning exchanges where liaisons could exchange ideas, troubleshoot challenges, and work with IDHE. ADP also supported a part-time coordinator who helped IDHE plan the webinars and face-to-face meetings and served to troubleshoot when needed. Institutions received a stipend to cover travel and other expenses. IDHE hosted 24 group webinars covering important aspects of the project, checking in with campuses, and facilitating cross-institutional learning exchanges, as well as five smaller, optional coaching sessions on coding and analysis. The 12 campuses met face-to-face at three conferences where IDHE ran workshops and campus liaisons exchanged ideas. For each of these sessions, IDHE planned relevant content, including tips on building coalitions, sustaining coalitions, equity considerations, facilitating focus groups, note taking, using a rubric to organize the data, coding demonstrations, analysis charts, training on dialogues, and troubleshooting. The opportunities to come together in person proved to be the most valuable; these were the best forums for hands-on training, and they gave us the chance to energize participants. Each session's materials and resources are collected in a shared Google Drive folder for campuses to access. All webinars were recorded so that coalition members on the campuses could view them.

External Study Campuses

Two climate studies were conducted by a team of external researchers that consisted of two researchers from IDHE, another researcher from a participating campus, and a fourth researcher from ADP. The IDHE team trained the two researchers who had not been part of the original 10 case studies. The team collected the data in 2018, using a combination of focus groups and interviews. The focus groups and interviews were recorded. Each involved two people, one to facilitate and the other to take notes. After most of the focus groups, the facilitator and the note taker worked together to

complete a rubric that captured the themes and insights. They also wrote memos to the file for each focus group or interview. In total, the team conducted five student focus groups, four faculty focus groups, one staff focus group, one focus group with the coalition, and six administration interviews at one institution, as well as five student focus groups, four faculty focus groups, one staff focus group, one focus group with the coalition, and three administration interviews at the other institution.

After the focus groups and interviews were complete, researchers used NVivo software to code all the data from both campuses. Once this process was complete, the research team analyzed the data. The team met three times to draw findings from their analysis. The coding and analysis process lasted 2 months. When the team had settled on key findings, IDHE prepared reports for these campuses. One was organized in a strengths and challenges format, and the other was organized according to the conceptual framework that serves as the foundation of the codebook. We prepared them with different designs in order to serve as possible templates for other campuses. These reports were delivered to the campuses at the end of December 2018, and then IDHE held meetings with each campus to discuss the findings.

Self-Assessment Campuses

While the research team worked on external study institutions, the 10 remaining campuses worked to build their coalitions; identify researchers who could facilitate focus groups; identify note takers; recruit participants to the focus groups; and complete the process of collecting, organizing, coding, and analyzing the data, and writing their own reports. Several of the campuses recorded and transcribed the focus group discussions; others used note takers and analyzed the notes. Two of the 10 self-study campuses were unable to complete the process, although their liaisons continued to participate in webinars and meetings. The remaining eight campuses completed the data collection process, but only seven of eight completed their analysis and reports, which have been shared with the group. Combined, the eight self-study research teams conducted 110 focus groups with a total of more than 750 participants. This extraordinary amount of data led to key findings and reports for the campuses.

Findings on the Efficacy of the Process

Evaluation Results

From May 2019 to June 2020, we collected data to evaluate the process of the project itself. In May 2019, campus liaisons were asked to fill out a survey, and nine campuses responded. In June 2019 we conducted a first round of focus groups at the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement conference and then conducted a second round of focus groups via virtual meetings in June 2020. All campuses participated in the focus groups. Although nearly all campus liaisons concluded that self-study is a viable method for campus climate research, these conclusions were not without caveats, including the need for more institutional support and a process guide like the researchers at IDHE used, described more below.

Successes

Generally, campus liaisons reported that the self-assessment process brought together people who did not usually interact, led to the discussion of issues that were not usually discussed, and uncovered important insights about their institutions. Liaisons reported the following:

- “This was helpful. We found a lot of good things out. It was rewarding. It was difficult. It needed a lot of energy. But it got a lot of stakeholders together who would never have gotten together.”
- “The information we got was rich. I don’t know how else we would have been able to get it. The mix of people you requested was nice . . . it was good to get all the voices together.”
- “The process itself was an intervention. It connected people. It seeded buy-in.”

Campuses were successful building and maintaining a coalition with a diverse mix of faculty, staff, students, and some administrators. They also found the guidance and resources provided by IDHE useful and spoke positively of their opportunities to discuss the project with other campuses and with ADP and IDHE. On the research process, overall, all participants reported that it was useful, with four saying it was “extremely” or “very” useful. Finally, every

campus had a champion or two who led the project, and seven of the nine campuses that finished indicated high levels of institutional support.

Overall, campuses found this project valuable. Through the assessment phase, they discovered crucial insights into their political climates that helped them build a foundation for political learning, discussions, and participation. Perhaps most significantly, the process itself—using guided focus group discussions to collect data—matched the goals of the initiative and modeled a process for discussing difficult issues campuswide. In other words, the medium matched the message, as discussed further in the Conclusion section. Participants also reported valuing the opportunities for discussions with their colleagues at other campuses and benefiting greatly from the coaching by ADP and IDHE. This collaborative work has proven encouraging as a method for assessing an institution’s political climate.

Challenges

Generally, challenges identified included

1. the project was resource-intensive: The time and labor required to complete it successfully exceeded the capacity of many if not most of the campus participants;
2. the project was too long: Delays in the project due to delayed Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals, losses of resources, and turnover caused interrupted momentum and precipitated the loss of support; and
3. the self-study research was too difficult without experienced researchers already part of the campus community: Campus teams received extensive coaching on research methods, but the campuses that handled this the best were those with access to experienced qualitative research professionals.

These challenges interrelate, and correcting one might not be enough if the others are not also corrected. Some of these challenges were a result of internal changes at ADP and IDHE and changes in the methodology of the research. Two of the original researchers left their positions in the middle of the project and had to be replaced, which slowed the process. Also, because the campuses were participating as investigators and not just

as objects of study, we had to apply for and receive IRB approval at each of the 12 different campuses, which set the entire project back by at least 6 months. Finally, these delays contributed to what we identify as the central obstacle to the project's success: the lack of resources and institutional support. Many campuses complained that their provosts did not provide the ongoing support necessary to sustain the work. One liaison summarized a view expressed by many: "I think there is a disconnect between our administration and this project—buy-in, understanding, value, certainly resources, outcome, and deliverables." One liaison described the project as a "heavy lift, no doubt about it . . . a monster lift." A liaison at a successful campus said they were in an "advantageous position" because they had buy-in and leadership from an established dialogue center and institutional research office that offered both expertise and people to ease the burdens of the project. Some of these challenges simply reflected that the self-study method was difficult. Only two liaisons at the self-study institutions said the research process was "somewhat easy." Two said it was "somewhat difficult" and the rest were in between. This was one of the most negative responses in the evaluation survey we conducted with the members. Many campuses had difficulty implementing the recommendations suggested by the IDHE team. For example, all liaisons noted that they faced challenges to convening the focus groups and recruiting participants. One liaison said that "just getting people to attend focus groups is like pulling teeth." IDHE had provided many tips for recruiting focus group participants, such as soliciting support from senior leaders, establishing a diverse and broad coalition whose members could recruit for them, and kicking off the project in a celebratory and highly visible way to help with recruitment. IDHE had also suggested that focus groups be served food and that they be scheduled at times when groups were already meeting. Operationalizing this advice was difficult. It required logistical support and a person who had the time to do it. As one liaison expressed, "This is a sliver of our responsibilities on campus. . . . Just having somebody to try to keep on top of things is already a lot." One campus team member suggested "streamlining around the focus group protocols, and particularly, you know, the different protocols for the different groups, sometimes they seem to align, and then sometimes they didn't, very

well." Five of the eight self-study campuses reported challenges to coding notes, and five reported challenges to analyzing coded data. (Liaisons have volunteered to work on the focus group protocol as well as the coding and analysis process to shorten the length of the focus groups and streamline the process.)

IDHE stressed from the outset the importance of establishing and maintaining a coalition that reflected diversity in terms of the people and programs on campus. The coalition's role was to guide the process, make recommendations for improvements, help recruit participants to focus groups, and advocate for the project. IDHE supported substantive involvement by coalition members, for example, by offering them professional development opportunities and having them help review and analyze the data. IDHE also recommended that the coalitions be viewed as permanent, not temporary, and charged with long-term responsibility beyond this project for examining and improving student political learning, diversity and inclusion, and voting. Campus teams also had access to resources so that liaisons could engage in a process of self-reflection and improve their collective capacity for engaging in controversial issue discussions across differences of social identity and political ideology. Campuses that already supported coalitions prior to the start of this initiative were able to maintain them throughout. Those that started from scratch, meaning most of the campuses, were less successful at maintaining the interest and involvement of the coalition members.

None of the institutions were able to complete the self-assessment process within one year, as originally envisioned, and all needed two academic years, although some were completed in three semesters. This prolonged duration was a problem in two ways. First, the campuses that were assessed by the outside research team were left waiting for the others to catch up. Second, liaisons reported that it was exhausting and that they had difficulty maintaining the interest of the coalition, other people on campus, and even institutional leaders. Liaisons strongly suggested that, if repeated, the data collection process would have to be more streamlined and efficient. Only one campus liaison suggested that the data should be collected quantitatively, which reinforces the literature we cited above on methodology: Surveys are easier

and shorter, but they often have a low response rate and do not provide the nuance of qualitative research.

Some liaisons suggested that had the institutional leaders provided more financial support, they might have been able to work faster. One liaison pointed to the circular nature of the problem: “We keep saying, time and money, time and money. If there is a way to do it faster, limitations due to time and money are eased.”

Finally, two campuses stalled early in the project and were unable to perform their assessments. Each case is different, but both suffered from team and leadership departures and a perceived lack of resources to organize focus groups and interviews. One took on the project in the midst of budget cuts that removed administrative support, particularly from the office that originally committed the institution to the process, and infrastructure. The campus liaison believed that this lack of support doomed the project from the start.

External Study Versus Self-Study

On the surface, both the external study and self-study campuses made similar progress in their campus climate assessments. Thus, campus self-study is clearly possible. However, important caveats remain, and differences between the processes should be considered.

First, the self-study campuses, while structurally independent, received significant coaching and guidance from IDHE and each other. During the most intense parts of the data collection and analysis phases, campus teams attended monthly online webinars and were offered ad hoc coding and analysis sessions to train them in this IDHE-designed study. That demand for resources has implications for replicability and scalability. Second, the external study campuses’ reports were completed long before the self-study campuses finished theirs; this result has implications for the ability to maintain project momentum, a challenge that campuses identified. Third, the success of each self-study was dependent upon the structure of the coalition and the faculty and staff who volunteered to help. For example, those with qualitative researchers on the team seemed to have an easier time completing the focus groups, coding, analyzing, and producing reports. That type of variance must be considered if

self-study is to work as a replicable process. Finally, that two campuses were unable to make progress alongside the other eight speaks to the risk of project failure in the absence of institutional support and stability.

An external study by a team of researchers seems preferable from a process standpoint in that the research process was easier and quicker. It should be noted, however, that campus teams valued the opportunity to use the research process itself to improve campus climate; bringing people together to discuss important issues, they said, was a successful aspect of the project that they valued. It is unclear how that inherent benefit in the self-study process changes when an external team conducts the research. Overall, an evaluation of the process led us to conclude that assessing campus climate through qualitative studies uncovered important findings and, when performed well, proved preferable to survey methods, not only because of the possibility for robust findings but also because the process itself facilitated improvements in the political climate by bringing people together for productive discussions.

Campus Climate Findings in Summary

Nine campuses generated reports from campus climate assessments; in this section, we will present a brief summary of those findings to demonstrate the interesting data that these studies can produce. Prominent themes emerged. Although no phenomenon is universal to all campuses, some themes crosscut several campuses. As previously described, the assessment process was based on a 10-campus series of campus climate studies conducted by IDHE 2014–2016. Those studies were designed around a conceptual framework that examined institutions through four “frames”: (1) structural—policies, departments, programs, and physical spaces; (2) political—internal and external factors that shape institutional governance and decision-making; (3) cultural—shared norms, values and principles, history, symbols, and symbolic events; and (4) human—composition, behaviors, competencies, and knowledge. Below we present brief summaries of the conclusions.

In the structural frame, most of the campuses reported having an institutionalized

commitment to civic engagement, but they were mostly apolitical in nature. Generally, campuses reported more support for community service or service-learning than for political engagement. Thus, the structures reflect thin commitments without the roots necessary for good habits of dialogue. Most campuses reported that political learning and participation were not embedded across the curriculum or campus. Although most of the campuses reported a growing or established commitment to diversity and inclusion, the commitment was alternately described as “shallow” or “slow” or was characterized by gaps (e.g., faculty hiring). Four of the campuses said they lacked an infrastructure for dialogue or political discussions.

In the political frame, many campuses reported being hierarchical and “rule-bound” with regard to institutional governance. Many also reported facing pressures from local or state politicians or religious organizations. Some campuses reported that student activism was met with reticence or resistance, largely due to institutional image concerns. Many campuses expressed the view that the national political scene and the tone of the 2016 election had had a lasting effect and that these conditions made talking about politics more difficult. For example, faculty members reported that they were not sure how to have conversations about elections when, at the same time, students reported that political conversations were happening only in classrooms. If faculty are not managing these conversations well and classrooms are the only place where they are happening, that is a vulnerability.

For the cultural frame, two groups of students complained either that they felt unwelcome on campus or that they could not express their opinions freely due to the campus culture: politically conservative students and historically marginalized groups. Faculty members reported that they avoided talking about politics at all on many of these campuses. Another interesting cultural finding was that many campuses reported a culture of politeness or an underlying aversion to risk, which affected the climate for political discussion. Many of these campuses reported deep connections to the local communities and a strong sense of stewardship that played out in reciprocal relationships and partnerships. One varying perspective was the level of political

engagement: Some reported robust electoral and other political engagement from students, whereas others reported a culture of avoidance of anything political.

Finally, for the human frame, faculty across the campuses expressed the view that they were ill-equipped to navigate political topics or to facilitate political discussions in their classrooms. Students agreed, reporting that too many professors were unprepared to lead discussions involving politically charged topics.

Conclusion

1. When performed well, the qualitative climate assessment process, followed by multistakeholder campus dialogues, is an effective approach to assessing and strengthening campus climates for political learning and engagement in democracy. Not only does the assessment process produce compelling insights and reveal areas needing attention (summarized in the preceding section), it also catalyzes programmatic (institutional) and attitudinal (individual) changes. Campuses reported that the data collection method of focus groups itself fostered discussion, raised awareness, and generated interest in democracy. Participating campuses reported that the project will continue beyond the end of the grant, with more campus dialogues and efforts to address challenges that were identified through the assessment phase.

2. This model is replicable with methodological changes and proper support. The political climate assessment process works when an outside team conducts the research or when a campus has in-house, experienced qualitative researchers to conduct the self-study. Campuses using external researchers and with a strong internal research team moved quickly through the processes, finishing all but the final phase a full year ahead of the other campuses. We believe that external researchers working with on-campus researchers (or training experienced facilitators) will reduce the time for data collection and analysis to under 2 months. This proposed procedure points to a need for continued participation by IDHE researchers.

Institutional leaders and respected “change agents” on a campus matter. The process works better when presidents or provosts provide consistent support and encouragement and the work is supported by a strong

coalition, a coordinating team, experienced researchers, and effective organizers.

3. The cohort, multicampus model strengthened the work and provided support for the campus liaisons. It also reinforced an ethos of discussion, collaboration, and community. This model is replicable with all types of institutions. That said, the campus liaisons needed more face-to-face meetings and trainings. Regular, face-to-face convenings for reflection and training—at least twice per year—would improve the process.

Overall, we are encouraged by the power of the method when robustly supported and implemented in full. As a result of this pilot, we can streamline the process to one year, allowing us to scale up. We propose the following timeline:

- Planning, coalition building, IRB approvals (3 months)
- Campus climate assessment (data collection, analyses, and reporting; 3 months)
- Campus dialogues (3 months)
- Planning for interventions, documenting, final reports (3 months)

To succeed, this approach would first need a clear memorandum of understanding,

and instructions for participating campuses. Adherence to this memorandum would cut the planning process to 2 months. As a result of this pilot, we now know more about what institutional leaders, coalitions, project coordinators, and researchers need to do. We know how to expedite the IRB process, one of the sources of delay. We have also streamlined the focus group protocols and data analyses processes. Second, the process requires a larger qualitative research team: Through this pilot, we identified several individuals who could become IDHE “associates,” providing the possibility of regional expansion without having to permanently expand IDHE’s size. Third, campuses wanting to perform a self-study would need IDHE’s ongoing coaching, support, and materials. Campuses would also need to dedicate time for on-campus researchers, coordinators, and liaisons. Using a combination of IDHE and campus researchers, the in-person focus groups could be completed in as little as a week, depending on the size of the institution. Finally, funding would be required for both IDHE and the campuses to support external and internal researchers to conduct the climate study, convene, and participate in ongoing coaching and trainings, including facilitation training. We envision support coming from an outside foundation with a match required of each campus.



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