

# ACHIEVING A DIVERSE, EQUITABLE, AND INCLUSIVE LEARNING CLIMATE

University of Washington School of Public Health (UWSPH)



## WHY WAS THIS STUDY DONE?

In the 2008-2018 UWSPH Climate Surveys<sup>1</sup>, the proportion of students, faculty, and staff who rated the climate as “very uncomfortable” or “uncomfortable” increased by 83%. However, the survey was unable to capture the reasons why respondents rated the climate as suboptimal.

This qualitative study aimed to complement the survey by depicting lived experiences of the climate in more depth and defining priority areas of improvement from the perspectives of students, faculty, and staff who represent our internal diversity. We were driven to do this work to help internalize the experiences that people are having in our school and to inspire those with power and resources to take action.

<sup>1</sup> University of Washington School of Public Health. (2018). UWSPH 2018 Climate Survey Results. Retrieved from [https://sph.washington.edu/sites/default/files/inline-files/2018-SPH-Climate-Survey-Report-Final\\_1.pdf](https://sph.washington.edu/sites/default/files/inline-files/2018-SPH-Climate-Survey-Report-Final_1.pdf)

## ABOUT THIS STUDY

This study was conducted by a collaborative team led by Marie-Claire Gwayi-Chore, DGH PhD Student and Renee Heffron, Associate Professor in Global Health & Epidemiology departments. Research coordinators Erika Lorenzana Del Villar and Lucia Chavez Fraire contributed amazing insight and facilitation talent and many members of the DGH-DEI committee were instrumental with logistical support and technical advice: Chloe Waters, Susan P. Mello, Ruanne Barnabas, Michele Andrasik, James Pfeiffer, and Jennifer Slyker.

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For the full report or more information, contact: Dr. Renee Heffron, DGH: [rheffron@uw.edu](mailto:rheffron@uw.edu).

## INTRODUCTION

The climate greatly affects student experiences and capacity to maximize learning. In March-May 2019, members of the UW Department of Global Health (DGH) committee on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) led a qualitative study to assess the current UWSPH learning climate. In total, **17 focus group discussions** were conducted by external researchers including **24 faculty/staff** and **36 students** representing all UWSPH departments. Participants were recruited via school-wide emails, in-person classroom announcements, and print advertisements posted in UWSPH common areas. People interested in participating completed a confidential online form to indicate their role in SPH (leadership, faculty, staff, or student), and identity (race/ethnicity, gender identity, or sexual orientation). Participants were grouped according to their role and identity for more robust discussions. This process identified respondents with a variety of identities, in order to recruit people whose voices are not often heard. During focus groups, respondents recounted positive and negative experiences related to their roles and identities and suggested recommendations to improve the climate.

## THE GOOD NEWS AND THE BAD NEWS

### THE GOOD NEWS:

Participants collectively recognized an increased commitment to improve the climate via existing DEI initiatives.

“I think there definitely is an uptick of conversation and action around creating a more inclusive learning environment around diversity. UW at large put out a diversity roadmap. I know the school and departments have been working on how do we incorporate that in, not only to faculty recruitment, staff recruitment, and just everyday culture. – White faculty member”

### THE BAD NEWS (UNFORTUNATELY, THERE'S A LOT):

The main takeaway from this study is that a large majority of respondents recounted traumatic experiences related to their race/ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Respondents expressed varying levels of comfort with the UWSPH learning climate, shaped by these identities.

#### 1. Participants generally felt that a biased, hierarchical system exists within UWSPH and is very influential.

POCs, women, and LGBTQIA-identifying respondents expressed feelings that UWSPH operates within a structural hierarchy that perpetuates white, male, heterosexual, cisgendered, and/or class privilege. For many, this system is silencing, calling for conformity to survive.

“The reason why I don't speak up is because I don't want to -be perceived as...the one that's pushing too much for change or the one...that's difficult because I think the way to move up in this type of environment, in my opinion, is to conform. So, that means losing a piece of my identity, of my voice. – POC staff member”

#### 2. Participants expressed their experiences that UWSPH programs and curricula are “Western-centered” and narrowly reflective of cisgendered, heteronormative, and/or outdated scholarship.

“ In terms of Pacific Islander ... there are all these readings that have the category aggregated with API (Asian Pacific Islanders)...but...our health disparities are so different from East Asian people and Southeast Asian people...and they follow different narratives. And there's indigenous people who are Pacific Islander, or Oceanic, that don't get acknowledged in that space often either. - POC student ”

### 3. Participants identifying as a person of color (POC) commonly felt excluded and discriminated against either overtly or through microaggressions.

“ I was the only Hispanic person in my class and I was so afraid, and everyone was judgmental, that it was just so hard to feel comfortable and safe... [or] to even pay attention to what was being said...and feel enthusiastic about learning. - POC female student

Generally just dealing with having to be a person of color in this type of institution is just exhausting. It's just kind of tiring to have to constantly deal with these microaggressions and second-guessing yourself. It just takes up a lot of brain space, I think, and so sometimes after I've been in this type of situation, I'm just tired. I don't want to deal with anyone else anymore. - POC student ”

### 4. White participants expressed a range of levels of understanding about how their privilege can blind them to the differences in how their non-white peers are treated.

“ There are [discriminatory] incidences that you recognize, 'That wouldn't have happened to me.' - White faculty member ”

Additionally, white respondents noted how having students that are more outspoken, vigilant, and less tolerant of DEI-related infractions made them fearful of student interactions. They commonly recounted feeling inadequately prepared to handle such situations.

### 5. POC participants felt that the UWSPH faculty, staff, and student population lacks sufficient diversity.

“ Well, most of my professors are just old white men. I think that diversifying the professors would go a really long way, even if they don't change anything in the curriculum because I think that professors of color will bring a different perspective and talk about equity and things in a different way that would be helpful. - POC student ”

### 6. Female participants felt that there are misogynistic perceptions around gender roles and motherhood.

“ When I announced that I was pregnant with my second child, my mentor - in front of other people - said, 'Was it a failure of birth control? Because certainly, you would not have planned this.' It was amazingly inappropriate. - Female faculty member ”

### 7. Participants identifying as LGBTQIA labeled LGBTQIA issues as invisible: Respondents emphasized that gender-identity issues are not given adequate attention, and academic materials are exclusionary or insensitive to their sexual orientation.

“ And there was another data set where there were some individuals who had sex assigned at birth that was different than gender identity, and the professor chalked that up to being a data error... - LGBTQIA student ”

## WHAT'S NEXT?

Achieving an ideal learning climate - one that is comfortable, safe, inclusive, diverse, respectful, and open - involves constant, complex, demanding, and difficult work.

The study shows that marginalized groups continue to experience the UWSPH climate as uncomfortable, with racial or ethnic issues (especially white privilege) contributing the most discomfort for persons of color. Gender bias and heterosexism also causes discomfort particularly for women and LGBTQIA individuals. We hope participant suggestions for improvement lead to sustainable innovations in implementing the UWSPH's DEI road map. See the report for the full set of recommendations that participants provided.

## PARTICIPANTS SUGGESTED OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

### 1. Develop DEI competency through a robust training program

Faculty, staff, and students believe in the importance of UWSPH training on diversity, biases, microaggressions, race/class/gender, and fundamental DEI concepts.

### 2. Redesign a more inclusive curriculum that is attentive to the needs of all students, especially those within marginalized and underrepresented groups.

Of utmost importance was the development of an inclusive curriculum that acknowledges social justice aspects of public health and provides opportunities for active and meaningful learning regardless of background or identity.

### 3. Intentionally diversify the faculty, staff, and the student population.

There is a general view that diversifying the UWSPH population will improve the overall climate by making it more inclusive and safe.

### 4. Provide more academic, professional, emotional, and psychological support for marginalized or underrepresented groups.

Participants want to see UWSPH provide support for these groups by:

- a) creating more opportunities for underrepresented students to collaborate and/or network with faculty, advisors, or other students;
- b) improving mentorship opportunities for students;
- c) having more intentional events or programs that build community;
- d) providing mentorship for both junior faculty and staff;
- e) strengthening policies on maternity/paternity/parental leave, child care, and flextime, alongside the providing emotional and professional resources for parents in SPH (including student parents);
- f) strengthening the use and normalization of gender inclusive language.