

# Salem State University Cultural Climate Study: 6 Years Later

Written and Compiled by Prof. Sophia Evett, Psychology

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## Executive Summary

In Spring 2016, Salem State University (SSU) partnered with Rankin & Associates Consulting to conduct a comprehensive cultural climate study. Partnering with the Salem State Climate Study Working Group, the survey was designed in Fall 2016 and data were collected in Spring 2017. Susan Rankin presented the results in October 2017. The Salem State Climate Study Implementation Team worked to facilitate efforts to process the findings of the study and help areas focus and implement policies, programs and initiatives in response to the Climate Study findings. A secondary analysis of the data was released in Spring 2019.

The key findings of the Climate Study and Secondary Analysis Report were that many students, faculty, and staff felt the cultural climate was welcoming and felt a sense of belonging. Employees also generally reported that they felt well supported by their immediate supervisors and colleagues. However, some members of the community had experienced significant exclusion or mistreatment and felt that the response to those experiences was unsatisfying or inadequate. Many employees felt unsupported and untrusting of senior leadership and half of employees said they were considering leaving SSU. Many respondents who experienced unwelcome sexual harassment or conduct failed to report their experiences. And over a third of our students experienced significant challenges meeting the financial demands of their basic needs (food, housing, etc.).

In summer 2023, a call was put out for submissions of initiatives, projects, and policies that may have been connected with the results of the Climate Study. The compilation that follows was derived from the specific responses received as well as information culled from annual reports, Polaris posts and the SSU website.

A number of new or revised staff and graduate assistant positions and faculty fellowships have been created. The Office of Inclusive Excellence has reorganized and championed significant programming and policy changes. Internal communications were examined and revised to be more accessible and informative. Programming and support systems (such as Employee Resource Groups) were created or modified to support employees and students from minoritized identity groups. Bias and diversity training and curriculum development have become institutionalized. The Bias Incident Response System was overhauled. Numerous programs and processes have been established or modified to enhance morale and improve the sense of community. The Covid-19 Pandemic also drove changes to our Information Technology (IT) system, course modalities, and community engagement. Some of these changes have made our community more accessible and welcoming.

While many changes and initiatives have been implemented, challenges and obstacles were also present. Primarily, many people reported that addressing the results of the Climate Study was not prioritized by leadership or adequately supported with resources and guidance. Staff and faculty turnover of key community members in this area has exacerbated this problem. There may be some resistance to a new Climate Study as they are costly and demand time and attention. Effective communication and assurance that the findings will be used to implement changes and improvement will be essential.

## Campus Climate Study

In Spring 2016, Salem State University partnered with Rankin & Associates Consulting to conduct a comprehensive cultural climate study. At the time, several local and national factors were shaping the campus climate here and at universities across the country. Nationwide protests were responding to racial violence, including the deaths of Michael Brown (Ferguson, MO), Freddie Gray (Baltimore, MD) and the shooting at a predominantly Black church in Charleston, SC. The presidential election season was underway between Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump. Our own grassroots organization Black, Brown, and Proud was calling for greater attention to racial injustice, improved representation in curriculum, faculty and staff, and other concerns. Staff and Faculty were still talking about the 2009 layoffs. Salem State had been significantly developing campus properties (e.g., central campus, the temple, and the Weir property) while deferred maintenance issues in older buildings and other financial decisions continued to surface. In that context, Patricia Maguire Meservey, the President's Executive Council, and the Salem State Board of Trustees determined that a Cultural Climate Study would help us better understand the experiences of students and employees at Salem State. Rankin and associates defined Cultural Climate as "current attitudes, behaviors, and standards of employees and students concerning the access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities, and potential."<sup>i</sup>

### Process and Timeline

The Climate Study Working Group was co-chaired by Rebecca Comage Latin (Director of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs) and Sophia Evett (Professor of Psychology) and consisted of representatives from across the campus, including faculty, administration, staff, students, union and non-union members, all major areas, and all schools within the college. The working group worked with Rankin and Associates to develop the survey questions, organize focus groups for preliminary input, and conduct the survey itself.

### Timeline

- Spring 2016: Formation of Climate Study Working Group
- Spring 2016 – Fall 2016: Survey developed; IRB approval
- Spring 2017: Data collected using anonymous online survey, with tabling, email invitations, survey parties, and other recruiting events
- Fall 2017: Release of detailed report, executive summary, and slideshow; Dr. Susan Rankin held open community forums to present results
- Spring 2018: Formation of Climate Study Implementation Team
- Summer 2018 – Spring 2019: Secondary Analysis – data analysis and write up
- Spring 2019: Release of Secondary Analysis Report; May 2019 Professional Development Series "Leadership Toward Inclusive Excellence: Reframing the Narrative" with Dr. Damon Williams to process results and begin developing action plans

## Climate Study Results

### Response Rate

31% overall response rate

- 79% of Staff (n=201)
- 77% of Administrator (n=247)
- 45% of Faculty (n=393)
- 28% of Undergraduate Students (n=1920)
- 21% of Graduate Students (n=325)

### Areas of Strength

- High levels of comfort – 75% reported feeling comfortable or very comfortable with cultural climate
- Faculty reported high levels of feeling valued by departments, chairs, colleagues, and students
- Staff felt supported by supervisors, and 63% said SSU was a good place to work
- Students felt valued and that they had good role models
- Graduate students reported good advising, clear expectations in programs, high quality experience

### Initial Concerns from Study

- Significant transient student numbers (1% of students without reliable housing) and high % with difficulty affording food and housing (35-40%)
- Failure to report sexual assault (over 80% of victims)
- People reported experiencing exclusionary conduct based on identifiable characteristics (race & ethnicity/ position status in university/ gender identity); many of these were dissatisfied with the university follow-through after reporting the incident
- Overall comfort was high, but lower for students and faculty of color, LGBTQ community members, and community members with a disability
- Issues around work fatigue and sense of value with roughly 50% of faculty and staff seriously considering leaving SSU in the near future

### Secondary Analysis Project 2018-2019

- Additional analyses conducted by Prof. Ashita Goswami with write up from members of the Climate Study Implementation Team
- Perceptions of students, faculty, staff, and administrators organized by whole campus and by smaller domains: colleges, major divisions in university, separating undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, AFSCME, APA and non-unit:
  - Overall campus climate
  - Experience of exclusion and unwanted sexual contact
  - Feelings of being valued

- And for students: their perceptions of success

## Initiatives, Projects, Policy Changes Aligned with Study Results

In its core mission and purpose, Salem State is dedicated to serving an economically and culturally diverse student body and to preparing students to be effective global citizens. As such, diversity, equity, and inclusion have long been at the heart of our goals and values. The Climate Study helped to give voice to the places where we were not living up to those goals and values. Many of the initiatives described below might have come about without the Climate Study, but they are aligned with the study results. The connections to the Climate Study may or may not have been made explicitly as they were implemented. And some got their start before the study was conducted. But the results of the study serve as validation for their importance and may have helped bolster the justification or the allocation of resources.

In summer 2023, a call was put out for submissions of initiatives, projects and policies that may have been connected with the results of the Climate Study. The compilation that follows was derived from the specific responses received as well as information culled from annual reports, Polaris posts and the SSU website.

## Considerations to Keep in Mind

As we consider the content that follows, a few things should be kept in mind:

- The list that follows is by no means comprehensive. Some people may not have been able to respond to the call for input due to the timing and circumstances at the time of this report.
- Many key players directly involved in the Climate Study Working Group, the Implementation Team, and other community members active in Diversity and Inclusion are no longer at the university. Some programmatic initiatives may have been discontinued because of their departure, or the programs may have been institutionalized but were not submitted in response to the call for this report.
- The downward trend in enrollment, the Covid-19 pandemic, budget cuts, the faculty contract action to "Work-to-Rule" and other circumstances may have impacted programs, staff resources, and communication about any relevant items.

Thus, this report should be seen as a snapshot as we consider a new Climate Study and what we will want to assess.

## New Positions/Offices/Teams

While some of these positions were already in place, the Climate Study supported continuing or even expanding the role that existed prior.

- Chief Diversity Officer expanded to Vice President of Inclusive Excellence (this position was established before the study with the inaugural VP in Fall 2016. In the last 7 years, 5 people have served in the role: 2 hired for the position, and 3 as interim).

- Establishment of the Office for Inclusive Excellence (IE) and the IE Framework. The goal of an inclusive excellence framework is “to advance greater intentionality in diversity and inclusion work in U.S. higher education by providing useful guidance in making excellence inclusive.”<sup>ii</sup>
- Director of Education and Training in Inclusive Excellence. (Note: this role has been vacant for two years. The search for a new director was ongoing at the time of this report.)
- Assistant Vice President of Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and Minority Serving Institution (MSI) initiatives (new in 2023).
- In 2018, Salem State became a campus affiliate of the National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI). The NCBI trained team of staff and faculty assist with campus wide training and bias response.
- The Provost has created a created a faculty fellow program to support strategic academic initiatives. Faculty fellows provide professional development, support students, and engage in professional service such as governance committee work. Much of the work of faculty fellows contributes to the cultural climate on campus. Several fellows are directly affiliated with the Inclusive Excellence Office and/or the Center for Justice and Liberation (CJL):
  - Faculty Fellow for Diversity and Inclusion
  - Faculty Fellow for DPDS (General Education category) (this was later merged with D&I fellow)
  - Faculty Fellow for Latinx Student Success
  - Faculty Fellow for Emerging HSI Initiatives (new in 2023)

### Policies and Communication

Our communications processes were specifically called out in the Climate Study and subsequent forums. People reported that they did not know how decisions were being made, what events were taking place, or how students were being informed of policies and programs. In addition, several areas revamped policies to be more inclusive and to encourage better work-life balance. The Covid-19 pandemic demanded revamping of many policies that had lasting benefits even after many returned to campus.

- The university hired consultant Jackson, Jackson & Wagner in Fall 2017 to determine challenges and make recommendations to our internal communications systems.
- New marketing information was developed to promote Minors in DEI during admissions and advising.
- Inclusive Excellence Webpage was developed and updated.
- Informational Technology Services (ITS) revised its internal meeting structures to ensure a non-exclusive climate and gain more input from across the department.
- ITS upgraded the wireless network to improve user experiences across the campus addressing a frequent student complaint.
- ITS, Human Resources (HR), governance committees, and the PEC worked to develop processes and policies to allow remote work, temporarily following the pandemic shut down, and then

more permanently as offices reopened but many employees continue to work partially or fully remote.

- In response to an Office of Civil Rights inquiry into website accessibility, various parties at the university worked to meet the requirements for sight-disabled students to be able to successfully navigate the university website.

### Student Policies/Initiatives to Create Welcoming and Inclusive Environment

Since the Climate Study, a number of initiatives and changes in policy have been established to promote a more inclusive and welcoming climate for students.

- The university updated its Chosen Name, Pronoun, and Gender Identity Policy in May 2023.
- First Year Seminars and Learning Communities – Over the last several years, SSU has offered several first-year seminars geared toward particular identities (e.g., women of color, men of color). A few years ago, these were structured as Learning Communities with co-enrolled courses, but that effort has not been sustained in part due to departures or role changes of key faculty. In addition, the number of such seminars has been reduced because of the lack of available faculty to take them on despite the fact that these identity-based FY seminars are particularly helpful for students from marginalized identities.
- Evaluation of residency determination related to admissions and tuition/fee policies and procedures for non-citizen students of different statuses – to bring policies and procedures related to application process, admissions, and appropriate tuition rates in line with recommendations from the Board of Higher Education to reduce obstacles for all students regardless of immigration/visa/citizenship status.
- Legal services and Institutional Advancement worked to educate and implement appropriate and lawful structures for diversity and gender-based scholarships.
- Revisions to the IT help-desk process and “Ask the Viking” have made it easier for students to get IT support and needed information.

### Support for Members of Minoritized Groups

Several areas of the university reported on initiatives to better support faculty, staff, and students to promote retention and create a sense of belongingness. Many of these programs specifically targeted minoritized identity groups.

- Offices of IE and Human Resources worked together to create and support employee resource groups (ERGs) for the following employee categories: Black employees, Asian-American employees; Women; LGBTQIA; Family Caregivers; and Latinx employees.
- In summer 2020, IE held a series of Healing Circles for the Black Community in the wake of racial justice uprisings following the death of George Floyd and other episodes of racial violence.

- The university created Brave Spaces and opportunities for dialogue in response to the “hate preacher” who repeatedly visited campus, loudly castigating members of the community, particularly targeting LGBTQ+ people.
- IE and CJL have provided resources and spaces to come together after various incidents either local, national, or international. For example, after the devastating surge of Covid-19 in India, in response to Asian directed hate crimes, after bigoted graffiti directed at our Latinx community, in the wake of distressing videos of police brutality against Black men, and so on. These spaces provide opportunities for grief, outrage, kindness, and support.
- Annual Conference opportunities such as Women’s Leadership Mastermind Program; AAC&U Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Student Success Annual Conference.

### Training

Training has always been an important focus at Salem State University with new employee orientation programs, faculty learning communities, and annual professional development opportunities for employees on Opening Day, during winter and summer sessions, and May conferences. Forums following the results of the Climate Study repeatedly raised the desire for comprehensive training in inclusion, bias awareness, and diversity. Some of these training opportunities have been implemented specifically in response to the Climate Study, others are simply aligned with improving the cultural climate on campus and an Inclusive Excellence Framework.

- Summer 2020 Understanding Whiteness and White Supremacy Training.
- Annual workshops for faculty focused on curriculum/classroom – decentering Whiteness, understanding bias, building inclusive academic communities; JEDI (Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) summer faculty institutes.
- HR and NCBI team developed and implemented new faculty/staff “Welcoming Diversity” orientation program in partnership with North Shore Community College.
- HR and IE trainings for staff and faculty such as the “Simple Practices” series.
- SSU contracted with the SUNY Student Conduct Institute to provide cutting-edge training on Title IX matters to employees and students.
- Residence Life engaged in IE framework training for all staff.
- University Leadership engaged in Safe Schools Implicit Bias Training in 2023.
- Substantial resources added to Canvas to support and train faculty in technology and effective teaching practices, particularly for online courses.

### Bias Response

An improved bias response system was under development at the time of the survey, but many respondents in the survey expressed dissatisfaction with how bias incidents had been handled. The bias response system was substantially revised, and a new online reporting system was implemented to make responsiveness more effective and efficient and include bias incidents occurring online and off-campus.

## Curriculum Changes

A number of changes to the curriculum have been made in response to the concerns raised by Black, Brown, and Proud, the President's Advisor Committee on Diversity, as well as changes in best practices, changes in faculty interest and expertise and student demand. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic required abrupt changes in format and structure of courses.

- Effective Fall 2018, Salem State established the new General Education Requirement of a DPDS Course (Diversity Power Dynamics and Social Justice). This requirement was in development before the Climate Study but is consistent with goals and concerns that arose from the study.
- Many departments (including CRJ, EDU, IDS, PSY, MCO, NUR, World Languages, and SWK) developed new courses and revised existing courses for the new DPDS requirement.
- Development of DPDS Seal for programs of study and exploration of Graduate Certificate in Diversity and Inclusion.
- The pandemic stimulated massive revision in teaching formats – ITS, CTI, the Provost's office, and many faculty members helped their colleagues redesign courses and provided technical support for new course formats: synchronous online (students and faculty meet together online), hybrid-synchronous (combination of in-person and online meetings), and Hyflex (some students are present in-person while others join online). These new formats have continued even as the pandemic has subsided. Many faculty and students recognize how offering varied formats creates a more inclusive educational space – with some benefiting from the online options and others preferring in-person opportunities.

## Community Building

Following the Climate Study, HR and other areas of the university examined existing events and processes to promote employee appreciation. The pandemic created unique challenges as people shifted to remote work, physically distanced offices, masking, variations in personal health and risk, etc. Many events were changed or added to accommodate CDC and MA guidelines.

- HR coordinates many employee appreciation events and supportive resources for employees:
  - Annual Holiday Party
  - Performance Recognition Program
  - Viking Employee Fest
  - New Online Wellness Platform (Bright)
  - Welcome Back/Opening Day Breakfast
  - President's Coffee Hours
- IE, CJL, and Student Life support heritage months which include many open community events designed to bring people together and foster community:
  - Hispanic, Afro-Latino/a/e/x Heritage Month
  - LGBTQ+ Pride Month
  - Black History Month
  - Women's History Month
  - APIDA Heritage Month

## Data Collection and Assessment

In light of the Climate Study and the MA Department of Higher Education focus on equity and racial justice, many areas within Salem State have been examining data broken down by race/ethnicity to determine if there are success and opportunity gaps as a function of race/ethnicity.

- Members of the SSU Racial Equity and Justice Institute Team (REJI) have looked at race and ethnicity differences in retention and graduation rates finding that our Black/African American students were doing better than other groups of students in their 6-year graduation rates.
- The School of Social Work conducted an intentional analysis of departmental courses with emphasis on outcomes for BIPOC students.
- Bertolon School of Business inquired about assessing gaps in experiential learning opportunities for underrepresented student groups with a goal of increasing invitations and encouragement to participate in such opportunities.

## Challenges and Obstacles

The above list is impressive in scope and is also incomplete. Much has been going on over the last six years to work towards a more welcoming and inclusive campus community. Nevertheless, many people also shared substantial challenges and obstacles. Here are some of the concerns that were specifically raised in response to the request for input or were raised to the CSIT when it was actively doing its work.

## Vision, Leadership, Sustaining Practices

- While significant resources were allocated to conduct the Campus Study, there was not a clear vision for addressing the issues raised along with the allocation of resources to create or sustain initiatives and programs across the campus.
- There is a general sense that staff and faculty of color and/or working in the domain of equity and inclusion have departed at a high rate, and replacement searches have been delayed or unsuccessful.
- Although some initiatives were effectively institutionalized (e.g., NCBI orientation workshops; Bias Response System; faculty fellowships; DEI staff positions), other initiatives that occurred were not continued from year to year (e.g., many professional development opportunities for faculty and staff were one-time programs, and student success resources have been reduced for budgetary reasons).
- Covid-19 and turnover of staff and faculty have disrupted continuation of programs and initiatives (e.g., professional development programs that were postponed due to the pandemic; overburdened and departing staff/faculty of color in FY learning experiences and other high student contact roles).
- There have been repeated calls for an Equity Audit that has not been conducted.

- Diversity and social justice initiatives that occur outside of IE and the CJL have sometimes been discouraged as “falling out of our area” or someone else’s responsibility. Some initiatives such as the FYRE program experienced less engagement when they selected a book that specifically focused on equity and inclusion which resulted in an increased burden on those who remained engaged.

### Resources, Budget, Staffing

- Inadequate support is available to help departments/schools improve effective outreach to students from underrepresented identities to increase involvement in high impact practices such as experiential learning opportunities.
- Insufficient staff are available to assess and revamp processes and policies to create a more welcoming environment for marginalized/underrepresented/underserved students.
- Additional data are needed to assist with cultural climate: reasons for employee turnover (e.g., exit interviews); summaries of Bias Incident Reporting System; factors encouraging people to stay.
- Staff and faculty furloughs, contentious contract negotiations, and personnel cuts to the budget have taken a toll both on the ability to mobilize on issues raised by the Climate Study and on the climate itself, particularly concerning feelings of belonging and being supported by the University and its leadership.

### Communication

Over the last six years, I have repeatedly heard that nothing came of the Climate Study. While the Climate Study may have played a guiding role in shaping programs and policies, public or widely available communications have often not made explicit connections to the Climate Study. This failure became particularly apparent as I tried to compile this report.

- Very few initiatives, policies, and programs have been framed or communicated as addressing concerns raised by the Climate Study.
- Much of the information about the original Climate Study, the Secondary Analysis Report, presentations to the Board of Trustees, and at the 2019 Professional Development Workshop are hard to locate on the Salem State website or in Polaris.
- In response to my requests for this report, several people argued that they had not sensed prioritization of addressing the concerns of the Climate Study and/or had not been asked by their leadership to examine and address the concerns raised in the study in their own areas of the university.

### Conclusion

Much important work is taking place at Salem State University with regard to working to create a welcoming and inclusive community. Some of this work is more effectively institutionalized, with momentum and systems that will help to keep things progressing. At the same time, there are significant challenges and obstacles that will no doubt surface in the next Climate Study. One of the biggest

challenges with the first Campus Climate Study was that the results were so extensive that it was difficult to glean the core findings and prioritize actions. In addition, we did not have systematic mechanisms to identify Climate Study related initiatives and the outcomes of those initiatives. Finally, because of overlap between the Climate Study findings and other strategic goals and visioning (e.g., DHE Equity Strategic Framework; the Viking Success Collaborative, the SSU Strategic Plan), the role of the Climate Study was often secondary or merely implicit. Thus, tracking action and progress were difficult.

Nevertheless, it is clear from this report that much of the Salem State community has been working hard to improve our cultural climate and maintain areas of success. It will be valuable to see where progress has been made and where problems continue or have worsened since the last Climate Study. There may be some resistance to a new Climate Study as they are costly and demand time and attention. It will be essential for leadership to outline in advance the process and systems that will be in place to help implement and communicate any changes and improvements that result from the findings.

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<sup>i</sup> Rankin, S. & Reason, R. (2008). Transformational tapestry model: A comprehensive approach to transforming campus climate. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 1(4), 262-274.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.nacweb.org/diversity-equity-and-inclusion/best-practices/inclusive-excellence/>